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Ferrari more of a threat than Red Bull, says Lando Norris

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FOOTBALL

Familiar foes Al Rayyan, Al Hilal set for ACL Elite clash

'AL RAYYAN'S PREPARATIONS HAVE GONE WELL. THE ATMOSPHERE WITHIN THE TEAM IS EXCELLENT'

By Sports Reporter/AFC
Al Rayyan

It will be a meeting of familiar foes when Qatari giants Al Rayyan welcome Saudi club Al Hilal to the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium for their AFC Champions League Elite opener today.

The two sides have previously met eight times on the continental stage and Al Rayyan coach Poya Asbaghi yesterday confidently said his team is ready for their clash against Al Hilal.

"Al Rayyan's preparations have gone well. The atmosphere within the team is excellent and there is great enthusiasm and a desire to perform at our best in this continental tournament," coach Asbaghi said yesterday during a press conference.

"We know Al Hilal's strengths, so we will try to neutralise their threats and we will demonstrate that on the field," Asbaghi said.

"We have performed well in our recent match against Al Shahaniya in the domestic league, but continental competition is different. We know we must play with a different defensive organisation than the matches we play in the domestic league in order to build attacks, maintain good possession of the ball and ensure that the opponent does not dominate," Asbaghi added.

"We respect our opponents and they have great abilities. There are many strengths such as the Serbian striker Alexander Mitrovic, as well as Salem al-Dawsari, and we have a great deal of knowledge about all Al Hilal players. Everyone in our team hopes to perform to their best ability in this continental tournament, which includes an elite group of great players," Al Rayyan coach said.

Asbaghi praised the new system



Al Rayyan players break a sweat during a team training session ahead of the AFC Champions League Elite match against Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan, Qatar, yesterday.

of the continental tournament, noting that it provides an opportunity for teams in the West and East regions of the continent to play 'more matches and gain significant experience.'

Al Rayyan, who will be making their 12th appearance at the top tier of Asian club football, will be eager to better their previous best of a Round of 16 appearance in the 2022 edition of the AFC Champions League.

They will, however, be required to be at their best after a relatively slow start to the Qatar Stars League 2024/25 season where

they are currently sitting fifth, six points adrift of pacesetters Al Duhail SC.

Al Rayyan's Belgian player Julien De Sart said during a press conference yesterday: "We are facing a big challenge and this type of match is very important for Al Rayyan in order to play with a high level of competition."

The former Gent player added: "We must play with a good defensive style and tighten control over their most important strengths. We aim to please our fans in this continental tournament, which includes many distinguished

players who have great experience of playing in Europe."

Al Hilal coach Jorge Jesus said during a press conference yesterday: "The Asian competition will launch with a new form, which makes it a different challenge for us. We will face a tough team that has outstanding players, and we will strive for victory. The competition becomes harder than before for all the teams due to the participation of all foreign players."

Al-Dawsari of Al Hilal said: "We seek to continue our leadership in the Asian titles. Our target is to win the first game. In Al Hilal,



Al Rayyan coach Poya Asbaghi (right) and player Julien De Sart attend a press conference ahead of the AFC Champions League Elite match against Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal yesterday. Pics: Noushad Thekkayil



Al Hilal coach Jorge Jesus and player Salem al-Dawsari attend a news conference at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan yesterday.

we have to bear all pressures as a champion and a competitor team in all championships."

Al Hilal have enjoyed a flying start to their Saudi Pro League 2025/25 campaign, Saturday's 3-0 win against Al Riyadh making it four wins on the trot.

Seeking a fifth Asian title, Al Hilal - appearing on the continental stage for a record 20th time - will be determined to make up for falling in the semi-finals of the AFC Champions League 2023/24 to eventual winners Al Ain FC of the UAE.

MATCH REPORT

Al Sadd, Al Ain share points in thrilling tie



Al Sadd striker Akram Afif celebrates his goal against UAE's Al Ain during their AFC Champions League Elite clash at Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium yesterday. (@AlSaddSC)

www.the-afc.com
Al Ain

United Arab Emirates' Al Ain left it late to secure a 1-1 draw against Qatar's Al Sadd in a thrilling AFC Champions League Elite 2024/25 opener at the Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium yesterday.

Faured striker Akram Afif gave Al Sadd the lead in the closing stages of the first half, before Matias Palacios equalised for AFC Champions League 2023/24 winners Al Ain in the 80th minute for a share of the points.

Both sides wasted early chances with Al Sadd's Afif pulling his shot wide in the third minute, while Al Ain's Soufiane Rahimi miscued a volley two minutes later.

Al Ain threatened again in the 11th minute when Rahimi beat the offside trap, only for his shot to bounce off the left post before he was denied again by Al Sadd keeper Meshaal Barsham in the 21st minute.

Al Sadd came close to breaking the deadlock in the 20th minute, Afif timing his dummy run before setting up Mohamed Camara for a powerful strike that forced a save from Khalid Eisa.

Barsham kept Al Sadd in the game with a string of fine saves, including parrying away a dangerous effort from Matias Palacios in the 29th minute.

The breakthrough finally came a

minute into added time, when Afif weaved his way through the Al Ain defence.

His initial effort was blocked by Fabio Cardoso, but the rebound fell kindly for the Al Sadd captain, who calmly slotted the ball into an empty net.

Al Sadd started the second half on the front foot with Paulo Otavio setting up Rafael Mujica, who pulled his effort just wide, while Al Ain played in patches, with Fabio Cardoso, Kodjo Laba Kaku Romero all missing their chances.

The Qatar champions came close to doubling their advantage in the 64th minute after Otavio opened up play on the left before teeing up Mujica, whose effort bounced off the bar.

With 10 minutes remaining, Al Ain equalised through Palacios, whose initial effort was blocked before the Argentine midfielder struck a long range shot which took a deflection before settling into the back of the net.

Al Shorta, Al Nassr in 1-1 draw

Iraq's Al Shorta held Al Nassr of Saudi Arabia to a 1-1 draw in their opening AFC Champions League Elite 2024/25 League Stage match in Baghdad yesterday.

Missing Cristiano Ronaldo and Aymeric Laporte, Al Nassr found the going tough at Al-Madina International Stadium and in the end, had to settle for a point. It was a nervy start for the Saudi side with goalkeeper Bento's

misplaced pass going straight to Bas-sam Shakir but luckily for Al Nassr, Mohamed Simakan managed to block the Al Shorta midfielder's shot.

Luis Castro's men recovered to strike the first blow in the 14th minute after Sultan Al Ghannam latched onto Otavio's delightful pass, with the Al Nassr captain calmly picking his spot in the bottom corner.

The home side found their way back into the game in the 24th minute when Mohammed Dawood benefited from a mix-up between Simakan and Salem Al Nadjji to plant a precise shot into the top corner. Al Shorta were then awarded a penalty in the 40th minute after Simakan blocked Dawood's run, however, it was changed to a free-kick after a VAR check deemed the infringement occurred outside the box.

Al Nassr started the better of the two sides in the second half, a first-time pass from Sadio Mane in the 50th minute found Anderson Talisca in space and the Brazilian's shot required a fingertip save from Ahmed Basil.

Talisca again caused concern to Al Shorta's defence when his powerful long range shot took a deflection off Abdurazzaq Qasim to leave Basil stranded, only for the ball to sail narrowly wide.

In another ACL Elite clash, Iranian football powerhouse Esteghlal last night beat Qatar's Al Gharafa 3-0 at Shohada Shahr-e Qods Stadium.

SPOTLIGHT

Athletics legend Coe vies with six rivals for IOC presidency

70-YEAR-OLD THOMAS BACH IS STEPPING DOWN NEXT YEAR AFTER 12 YEARS AT THE HELM

London
Reuters

World athletics chief Sebastian Coe, multi-millionaire and Olympic newcomer Johan Eliasch and Zimbabwe's Sports Minister Kirsty Coventry are among seven candidates for next year's International Olympic Committee presidency election, the IOC said yesterday.

IOC Vice-President Juan Antonio Samaranch, son of the late former IOC president, international cycling chief David Lappartient, Prince Feisal al-Hussein of Jordan and international gymnastics federation head Morinari Watanabe are also in the running to succeed current president Thomas Bach.

The 70-year-old German is stepping down next year after 12 years at the helm. The election will be held at the IOC session in ancient Olympia, Greece in March 2025.

The candidates will all present their programmes, behind closed doors, to the full IOC membership in January 2025.

The IOC, with 111 members currently, is in charge of the Olympic Games and the multi-billion dollar industry linked to the world's biggest multi-sports event.

Bach's departure comes with the organisation in a financially robust position, having secured \$7.3bn for the years 2025-28 and \$6.2bn already in deals for 2029-2032.

The president is elected to an eight-year first term with the possibility of a second term of four years, if re-elected.

Coe, 67, only joined the IOC in 2020 after a rocky relationship between World Athletics and the IOC over Coe's ban of Russian track



International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach (left) and World Athletics President Sebastian Coe during the medal ceremony after the women's marathon final at Stade de France, Saint-Denis, France, on August 11, 2024. (Reuters)

and field athletes almost a decade ago following the country's doping scandal.

A former Olympic champion with a wealth of experience in the sports world, Coe was previously head of the London 2012 Games and the British Olympic Association.

He is also a former Conservative Member of Parliament.

Coventry, 41, is the only woman running for president and the former Olympic swimming champion, who is Zimbabwe's most decorated Olympian, could become not only the first female president but also the first from Africa. All IOC presidents have been men, with eight of the nine from Europe and one from the United States.

The 62-year-old Eliasch, head of the International Ski and Snowboard Federation (FIS), only joined the IOC in July, with the Swedish-born British businessman's candidacy a surprise for some.

Prince Feisal, 60, is a member of the IOC executive board, having joined the organisation in 2010, while Spaniard Samaranch, with considerable IOC experience in his six years as vice-president, headed the co-ordination commission for the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics.

"The IOC and Olympic movement have made enormous strides over the past decade under the leadership of Mr Bach," said Samaranch in a statement.

"The IOC now needs a new leader with deep experience of the

Olympic movement who can help steer it through this period of upheaval."

UCI chief Lappartient has been a rapidly rising figure within the sports world after joining the IOC in 2022.

The Frenchman also is in charge of e-sports within the IOC, having helped seal a 12-year deal with Saudi Arabia earlier this year for the Olympic e-sports Games.

Japan's Watanabe, 65, has headed the gymnastics federation (FIG) since 2016, having been re-elected twice since, and is his country's first ever candidate for the IOC presidency. Under current rules members have to step down when they reach 70, the IOC's age limit, unless they are given a four-year extension.

LIST OF CANDIDATES FOR TOP IOC JOB

Lausanne: A total of seven candidates are running for the presidency of the International Olympic Committee with the winner replacing outgoing president Thomas Bach at elections in March 2025 in ancient Olympia, Greece.

Prince Feisal al-Hussein
Age: 60
Country: Jordan
Entry into the IOC: 2010
Prince Feisal heads the Jordan Olympic Committee and has been an IOC executive board member since 2019. An Executive Board member of the Olympic Council of Asia, Prince Feisal has also held several posts at the Royal Jordanian Air Force.

Sebastian Coe
Age: 67
Country: Britain
Entry into the IOC: 2020
An Olympic track and field champion and head of World Athletics, Coe also led the organisation for the 2012 London Olympics. A former Conservative Member of Parliament, Coe is also involved in sports consultancy and is a former head of the British Olympic Association.

Kirsty Coventry
Age: 41
Country: Zimbabwe
Entry into the IOC: 2013
An Olympic swimming champion and Zimbabwe's most successful Olympian, Coventry is Zimbabwe's Sports Minister. She is the only woman among the candidates and the only one from Africa.

Johan Eliasch
Age: 62
Country: Britain
Entry into the IOC: 2024
The wealthy Swedish-born entrepreneur with a variety of business interests has headed the international skiing federation since 2021. He only joined the IOC in July at its session in the Paris Olympics.

David Lappartient
Age: 51
Country: France
Entry into the IOC: 2022
A rising figure in world sports administration. He heads the international cycling body, UCI, and is in charge of e-sports within the IOC, having helped seal a 12-year deal with Saudi Arabia earlier this year for the Olympic e-sports Games.

Juan Antonio Samaranch
Age: 64
Country: Spain
Entry into the IOC: 2001
The son of the late former IOC president, Samaranch has considerable IOC experience and influence in his six years as vice-president and 23 as a member. He headed the coordination commission for the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics.

Morinari Watanabe
Age: 65
Country: Japan
Entry into the IOC: 2018
Watanabe has headed the gymnastics federation (FIG) since 2016, having been re-elected twice since. He is the first Japanese to run for the IOC presidency.

MOTORSPORT

Team QMMF posts fourth consecutive victory in endurance races this year

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Team QMMF achieved its fourth consecutive victory in endurance races this year with the latest win posted at the Barcelona circuit in Spain (September 14 to 15).

Team Qatar, consisting of Abdullah al-Khelaifi, Ghanem al-Ali, Ibrahim al-Abdulghani, and German driver Julian Hanes, travelled to the Barcelona circuit last week to participate in the 24-H endurance race.

This came right after their win in the 12H race at the Spa-Francorchamps circuit just a week earlier, which gave the team strong momentum and morale to aim for

another good result in Barcelona.

With the presence of QMMF President Abdulrahman bin Abdullah al-Mannai, and the Federation's Executive Director, Amro al-Hamad, who came specifically to support the Qatari drivers, the team proved to be a strong contender during the qualifying sessions by securing the third position in the 992 AM category on the starting grid. As the race began on Saturday, the Qatari team quickly moved into second place and then into first place in their category.

Through the night, the team continued to shine, demonstrating the experience of their four drivers who alternated driving and gave their all in such a gruelling race.

Despite facing some mechanical issues during the night, they



managed to maintain first place by dawn, thanks also to the efforts of all the members of the "HRT" team, including mechan-

ics, engineers, and administrators. Their strategic pit stops and well-executed plan allowed them to complete the race and secure



first place in the 992 AM category at the finish line. This achievement marks a new milestone for Qatar and Qatari motorsport, as

the team clinches their fourth consecutive win this year after previous victories in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Spa-Francorchamps.

CRICKET

Hosts Sri Lanka recall batsman Fernando for New Zealand series

Reuters
Colombo

Sri Lanka recalled top-order batsman Oshada Fernando to their 16-member squad announced yesterday for their two-Test series against New Zealand, while Nishan Madushka was left out.

Fernando last played for the Test team against New Zealand in March 2023 but has forced his way back after a strong showing for the Sri Lanka 'A' side against their counterparts from South Africa this month with scores of 122 and 80.

Opener Madushka endured a tough time in Sri Lanka's 2-1 Test series defeat in England, managing only 24 runs in four innings.

Sri Lanka left out bowlers Kasun Rajitha and Nisala Tharaka and brought in wicketkeeper-batsman Sadeera Samarawickrama.

Dhananjaya De Silva's side will take on New Zealand in two matches at Galle as part of the International Cricket Council's World Test Championship cycle. The first match, which will span



Sri Lanka's Dinesh Chandimal (centre) attends a practice session at the Galle International Cricket Stadium in Galle ahead of their first Test against New Zealand. (AFP)

six days with a rest day in between, will start tomorrow.

SRI LANKA SQUAD
Dhananjaya De Silva (captain), Dimuth Karunaratne, Pathum Nissanka, Kusal Mendis, Angelo Mathews, Dinesh Chandimal,

Kamindu Mendis, Sadeera Samarawickrama, Oshada Fernando, Asitha Fernando, Vishwa Fernando, Lahiru Kumara, Prabath Jayasuriya, Ramesh Mendis, Jeffrey Vandersay, Milan Rathnayake.
Coach: Sanath Jayasuriya

AUSTRALIA PUT PACER BEARDMAN ON STANDBY FOR ENGLAND ODIS

London: Australia have placed Mahli Beardman, a 19-year-old pacer with just six overs in senior professional cricket behind him, on standby for this month's one-day international series away to England, team management announced yesterday. Beardman was named player of the match after taking 3-15 in just seven overs as Australia thrashed India by 79 runs in February's Under-19 World Cup final in South Africa. But he has played just one List A (limited-overs) game for Western Australia, finishing with figures of 1-42 against New South Wales in the Marsh Cup last November. Beardman will now join the Australia squad in Nottingham as the 50-over world champions prepare for the first of a five-game ODI series against England at Trent Bridge on Thursday.

"PRETTY SURREAL, SO UNEXPECTED"
"It's pretty surreal, just so unexpected," Beardman said from Perth Airport before departing for the UK. "I started the morning off with a little message from Tony (Dodemaide); I didn't think it was real to be honest, I thought it might have been one of the boys pranking me. "But I gave him a call back and got talking and he said come over to England to train and be around the squad," he added. Australia have already seen injuries blight their pace attack during the T20 leg of their tour, with Nathan Ellis, Riley Meredith and Xavier Bartlett all affected, and they are also wary of adding too much to the workload of senior fast bowlers Josh Hazlewood and Mitchell Starc.



Left-armer Ben Dwarshuis, who has already played for Durham and Northern Superchargers in English domestic cricket this season, and Cooper Connolly, who had been due to leave after the drawn T20 series with England, have also been added to Australia's ODI squad. "There will be opportunities for guys throughout the series, no doubt," captain Mitch Marsh told cricket.com.au following the drawn T20 series. "Five games in 11 days, we'll have to juggle a bit, but guys will get opportunities and a lot like the T20 series, we're really excited by that."

Australia ODI squad v England: Mitch Marsh (captain), Sean Abbott, Alex Carey, Cooper Connolly, Ben Dwarshuis, Jake Fraser-McGurk, Cameron Green, Aaron Hardie, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Marnus Labuschagne, Glenn Maxwell, Matthew Short, Steve Smith, Mitchell Starc, Adam Zampa. **Reserve:** Mahli Beardman

MOTORSPORT

Ferrari more of a threat than Red Bull, says Norris

'THEY ARE PERFORMING WELL AND THEY SEEM LIKE OUR CLOSEST COMPETITION AT THE MINUTE'

Reuters
London

Lando Norris pointed to Ferrari as a bigger threat than Red Bull after his McLaren team roared to the top of the Formula One constructors' standings for the first time in more than a decade.

Oscar Piastri's impressive victory and Norris' fine fourth place with fastest lap, from 15th on the grid, in Azerbaijan on Sunday catapulted McLaren 20 points clear of faltering champions Red Bull.

Ferrari, who had Carlos Sainz crash out with Red Bull's Sergio Perez on the penultimate lap while fighting for third, were the second highest scorers with Charles Leclerc runner-up from pole.

The Italian team, whose last constructors' title was in 2008, are third overall and now only 31 points adrift of the reigning champions.

"Coming into these three races we've got now - Monza, here and Singapore - we knew our main contenders would be Ferrari," said Norris, second overall and now 59 points behind Red Bull's Max Verstappen with seven races remaining.

"They've been our strongest competition lately... between Carlos and Charles, they've been two guys who've been performing well and putting us under pressure."

Leclerc won in Monza, after McLaren had locked out the front row of the grid, and then secured pole position in Baku for the fourth year in a row.

Singapore is next up and Sainz won there last year, with Norris second.

"They are performing well and they seem like our closest competition at the minute. So from a constructors' point of view, we're probably more worried about Ferrari than we are about Red Bull," the Briton told Sky Sports television.

McLaren's return to the top of a championship they last won in 1998 marked another major milestone in an already surprising season.

Red Bull had led the standings for 55 races, dating back to early 2022.

The transformation from the start of the year, let alone 2023 which already seems another age, has been astonishing and sent statisticians thumbing through the record books for comparisons.



McLaren's Lando Norris in the pits at the Azerbaijan Grand Prix inside Baku City Circuit, Baku, Azerbaijan, on September 14, 2024. (Reuters)

Last year Red Bull won a record 21 of 22 races and McLaren, who last won a constructors' title in 1998, finished fourth and 558 points behind.

Four teams - McLaren, Red Bull, Ferrari and Mercedes - have won at least three races each this season, something that last happened in 1977.

There have also been seven different race winners, the most since 2012. On Sunday rivals from three teams raced nose-to-tail for the lead around the Baku street cir-

cuit, slipstreaming and correcting through corners like racers of old.

Yet Red Bull started the season where they left off, with dire predictions of another title parade.

Norris was eighth and 48 seconds behind winner Verstappen in the Bahrain opener. After round five in China, Verstappen had won four and McLaren were 99 points behind Red Bull. Then Norris won in Miami and, in a year without major rule changes, the gaps closed. The last time McLaren were top was after Kevin Magnussen and Jenson Button finished a rogue second and third in the 2014 Australian season-opener in Melbourne, their only podiums of that year.

McLaren scored more points than anyone in 2007 but were stripped after a spying scandal. The team's sole title of the 21st century remains Lewis Hamilton's 2008 drivers' crown.

"The team are giving us a car that can go out and win," said Norris. "Think back to the first race of the year, we were behind Mercedes. And now we are a long way ahead of them. We have done an amazing job to catch Red Bull. To be out-scoring and outpacing them and to be the top team in F1 is something we should be very proud of."

GOLF

Americans endure long wait for Solheim Cup win

AFP
Gainesville, United States

US captain Stacy Lewis could feel the tension rise as match after match the Americans struggled late on Sunday before finally capturing their first Solheim Cup since 2017.

Two ties and two losses to Europe came and went before Lilia Vu landed her approach inches from the 18th pin and tapped-in for birdie and a Cup-clinching half-point in the US women's 15.5-12.5 victory.

"That was the longest hour and a half of my life. I'm not going to lie," Lewis said. "That last hour of matches on 16 and 17 and 18, it just felt like it was never going to end. Just really nerve-wracking. You felt pretty helpless. The last 30 minutes or so were pretty rough."

The joy of winning after Europe kept the Cup following last year's 14-14 draw in Spain was worth the wait.

"I'm so proud of this team," Lewis said. "They fought through some adversity this week and played some unbelievable golf. I'm proud that they get this moment to celebrate."

Lewis praised her players for tenacity and fortitude in tension-packed situations.

"Grit. That's what this event is about," Lewis said. "It's about toughness. It's about grit. The golf is just so good on both sides that it's one putt, one shot here and there, and that's what brought us here."

Lewis recalled crying on the plane ride home from Spain last year. "It didn't really hit me until I got on the airplane," Lewis said. "I just lost it and I started crying."

I was like, we did all this work for these girls to play to a tie and that was literally the only moment.



From that point on it was right back to work because I (didn't) want that to happen again.

"To watch them celebrate and to see Lilia pull off that shot in that moment was just really special."

A worried Vu birdied to win 17 and 18 to tie Swiss Albane Valenzuela.

"I felt like in the middle of the match the wheels were kind of falling off," Vu said. "Somehow birdied 17 and was able to hit it really close on 18."

Top-ranked Nelly Korda, a six-time LPGA winner this year, got her first Solheim Cup triumph.

"This was probably the most fun I've had on a golf course ever," Korda said.

"Just the team, environment, the caddies. Everyone was so in-

credible. We all vibed really well off each other.

"This is probably the most I've laughed and the most I've fist pumped ever on a golf course. It was just an amazing week and a dream come true."

Lauren Coughlin rallied from 3-down to tie Sweden's Maja Stark and went 3-0 in foursomes and four-balls to equal the best US rookie effort.

"I had an absolute blast," she said. "It was a very special week."

Lexi Thompson, who plans to retire at season's end, got her third win in seven Cup appearances.

"It was very special," she said. "It meant the world to me just to be here and to be part of this team."

Ninth-ranked Rose Zhang, 21, went 4-0 this week and echoed

the good atmosphere.

"I just felt so comfortable with everyone," Zhang said. "It was good vibes all week."

Megan Khang was 3-0 this week after going 3-0 with a draw in 2023.

"To go undefeated for both Solheims, it has been incredible and a dream come true," Khang said.

Lewis said it was strange to have her "unfinished business" over.

"I don't know what I'm going to do next week now," she said.

"I hadn't thought past this moment. I've got to get my daughter back to school on Tuesday, but past that, I don't know what's next."

Mindful of a celebration about to begin, Khang said, "But that's Tuesday. And it's Sunday!"

HORSE RACING

New Century extends winning run with Group 1 title at Woodbine

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Winner of the Listed British Stallion Studs EBF Stonehenge Stakes at Salisbury when last seen, the British-trained New Century (Kameko) landed the Group 1 title at Woodbine, Maryland, USA this weekend.

Sporting the silks of owner Qatar Racing Limited, New Century was having his first go at Group level. Trained by Andrew Balding, the two-year-old is entered in the Gr.1 Futurity Trophy Stakes at Doncaster next month.

Ridden by Oisin Murphy, New Century was help up in rear of the field.

With Dream On (Not This Time) going clear entering the final straight, the two British challengers gradually closed on the leader. New Century began to assert inside the final 100m. Al Qudra (No Nay Never) despite a good defence finished second. Dream On took third.

Bred by The Potent Embrace Partnership, he is out of Potent Embrace (Street Cry), who is out of a multiple Gr.3 winner Karen's Cap (War Chant), and is half-sister to Gr.3 winner Passion And Glory (Cape Cross).



TENNIS

Sinner hires Djokovic's ex-fitness coach

AFP
Rome

Jannik Sinner has hired Novak Djokovic's former fitness coach Marco Panichi in the wake of the world number one being cleared despite testing positive twice for a banned substance.

"Welcome to the team," Sinner wrote on social media yesterday alongside a photo of himself with fellow Italian Panichi and newly-recruited physiotherapist Ulises Badio.

The pair replace Umberto Ferrara and Giacomo Naldi respectively who Sinner parted ways with before his US Open triumph, after the two positive doping tests in March.

Sinner had explained that the slight traces of clostebol had originated from a spray used by a member of his staff to treat a cut finger.

The International Tennis Integ-

rity Agency (ITIA) accepted the explanation leading to a furious backlash from players including Australian Nick Kyrgios.

Panichi notably worked with compatriot Fabio Fognini, German Angelique Kerber and China's Li Na, before being part of Djokovic's team from 2019 to earlier this year.

Swiatek to miss Korea Open, Pegula out with injury

World number one Iga Swiatek has pulled out of the Korea Open due to fatigue, tournament organisers told reporters. Defending champion and US Open finalist Jessica Pegula has also pulled out from the WTA 500 event in Seoul with a rib injury.

Poland's Swiatek, who won the French Open in June and took bronze in the Paris Olympics before losing to Pegula in the US Open's quarter-finals, had also withdrawn from last month's Canadian Open citing fatigue.

Korea Open will take place between Sept. 16-22.

Pettersen proud but unsure of Europe captain return

Gainesville, United States: Suzann Pettersen is uncertain about making a return as Europe's Solheim Cup captain but is proud of what she has achieved even though she hasn't beaten the United States. The Americans held off a late Europe fightback for a 15.5-12.5 victory on Sunday at Robert Trent Jones Golf Club, taking the trophy for the first time since 2017 after a draw last year in Spain. Asked if she would return as captain should she be asked, Pettersen said she didn't know.

"I cannot answer that question. I have no idea. This is the end of my term as far as I know and I haven't been promoted," Pettersen said. "Just feeling kind of a part of that player body has gotten me up every morning wanting to make this as good of an experience for all of them." The 43-year-old Norwegian, a two-time major winner, said she has given her all to advance Europe's team culture to a next generation. "I've done my best. I've tried my heart out and I've tried to pass on the values I picked up from

my previous captains," Pettersen said. "We have a great culture on the European side and it has been nice helping, recruiting new monsters into this team." They include Swiss rookie Albane Valenzuela and German rookie Esther Henseleit, the Paris Olympic runner-up. "We have Albane, Esther, we have people coming from behind who are ready to take on these big tasks, these big challenges," Pettersen said. "I'm really proud of that." Europe will host the next edition in 2026 at Bernardus in the Netherlands.



MAN CITY FIGHT TO AVOID SEVERE SANCTIONS AS 'TRIAL OF THE CENTURY' BEGINS

London: Manchester City will fight to avoid potential expulsion from the Premier League for financial breaches as sport's "trial of the century" began yesterday. Premier League champions City have been charged with 115 alleged breaches of the competition's financial regulations. City deny any wrongdoing and have said they have a "comprehensive body of irrefutable evidence" to clear their name. But if they are found guilty, they could face a range of punishments, including a severe points penalty or even be kicked out of the Premier League. Everton and Nottingham Forest were both hit by points deductions last season for single breaches of the league's profit and sustainability rules.

With City winning eight league titles since 2012, including six of the last seven, a guilty verdict could prompt a slew of compensation claims from rival top-flight clubs. City's financial affairs have come under regular scrutiny since their takeover by Sheikh Mansour's Abu Dhabi United Group in 2008. If the verdict goes against City, there is potential for strained diplomatic relations between the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates, where Mansour is a deputy prime minister. The hearing, which is not a court case, will be heard by an independent commission and could take 10 weeks to complete. City's legal team were photographed arriving at London's International Dispute Resolution Centre for the start of the hearing

yesterday. David Pannick from Blackstone Chambers, who is City's lead barrister, was seen on his way into the venue close to St Paul's Cathedral in central London. A verdict is not expected to be announced until 2025, with City likely to appeal if they are found guilty. Of the 115 charges, 80 are for breaches of the regulations between 2009 and 2018, while a further 35 relate to failing to cooperate with the Premier League's investigation. The root of suspicion comes from leaked documents published by German outlet *Der Spiegel* back in 2018. E-mails purportedly sent between City executives showed the club had allegedly inflated sponsorship revenue from Abu Dhabi state-

controlled airline Etihad and telcoms firm Etisalat by disguising direct investment from the Abu Dhabi United Group as income. Other documents claimed to show off-the-books payments to then manager Roberto Mancini via consultancy fees from a club in Abu Dhabi. City have already defended their position in one case after overturning a two-year ban from the Champions League by UEFA at the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in 2020. CAS found most of the alleged breaches of overstating sponsorship revenue were either not established or "time-barred" because they fell outside the five-year statutory limit for prosecution. No such time limitation clause

exists in the Premier League case, although City remain confident of avoiding sanctions. "I know what people are looking for, I know what they are expecting. I know it because I have read it for many years but I've said everyone is innocent until guilt is proven. So we will see," City manager Pep Guardiola said last week. Aymeric Laporte was a serial title winner with City before moving to Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr and the defender claimed Guardiola's players were reassured there was nothing to worry about during his time at the club. "When I was there and the news broke, the sporting director (Txiki Begiristain) and the CEO (Ferran Soriano) came and told all the players and staff that we can all be very calm because not one rule

has been broken by Man City," Laporte told *Mail Sport*. However, a guilty verdict could bring an end to Guardiola's glorious reign, which includes winning City's first Champions League crown in 2023. The Spaniard, who is into the final year of his contract, has steadfastly backed City's owners but previously said he would walk if they had not been honest with him. "If you lie to me, the day after I am not here," said Guardiola in 2022. Severe sanctions would raise doubts over the future of City's cast of star players, including prolific striker Erling Haaland. Should City prove their innocence, the Premier League will stand accused of being a soft touch outcome overruled by the deep pockets of state-backed clubs.

PREVIEW / CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Mbappe boosts Madrid's hopes ahead of opener

The defending champions take on German side Stuttgart today

AFP
Madrid

The format may be new, but few would bet against the winner staying the same.

As if record 15-time winners Real Madrid's Champions League prospects were not great enough already, superstar striker Kylian Mbappe's arrival makes Los Blancos the most daunting team in the competition.

German side Stuttgart have the honours of facing the reigning kings of Europe in the opening week of the competition, travelling to the Santiago Bernabeu today.

Madrid defeated Borussia Dortmund in last season's Wembley final to claim the trophy for the sixth time in the last 11 years.

Coach Carlo Ancelotti, the most decorated manager in the history of the tournament with five triumphs, has not yet found the perfect set-up to get Mbappe firing from open play, but few doubt he will.

The 25-year-old had arguably his best game for the club in the 2-0 win over Real Sociedad on Saturday in La Liga, threatening the Basque side with his pace and connecting well with Vinicius Junior in attack.

Mbappe scored, albeit from the penalty spot, and he is looking forward to his Champions League debut in Madrid's resplendent white.

"It will be very important for me - as I said on the first day, I came to Madrid to live these type of nights," explained the striker.

"I am very focused on what we have to do, the Champions League has changed a lot, it's a new competition, and we have to win to start well."

The new-look structure has thrown up ties for Madrid at home against Dortmund, in a rematch of last season's showpiece, and away at Liverpool, whom they defeated in the 2022 final.



Real Madrid's French forward Kylian Mbappe (centre) attends a training session on the eve of their UEFA Champions League match against Stuttgart VFB at the club's training facilities of Valdebebas, in the outskirts of Madrid, yesterday. (AFP)

First come Stuttgart, continuing a streak of German opponents for Los Blancos, after they faced Bayern Munich in the semis before Dortmund in London.

Los Blancos have played one European game already this season, defeating Atalanta to win the UEFA Super Cup in August, with Mbappe scoring on his debut.

Madrid defender Antonio Rudiger came through Stuttgart's youth system and played in the first team for four seasons.

Ancelotti has problems in midfield with Eduardo Camavinga, Dani Ceballos, Jude Bellingham and Aurelien Tchouameni out injured, although the Italian was hopeful the latter two could take part against the Germans.

While Madrid's shiny new toy Mbappe is drawing much of the attention, Ancelotti has plenty

of stars at his disposal with the talent to turn defeats into draws and draws into victories, something of a penchant for the club, particularly under the lights in Europe.

Bellingham was Madrid's key player for the first half of last season, making an immediate impact on his arrival from Dortmund.

Brazilian forward Vinicius was vital in the home straight, netting a brace in the semis against Bayern and scoring again in the final.

The forward has struggled to find his best level at the start of the season but his coach will show plenty of patience.

"We love him here because although right now he's not at his best, nobody can forget that with Vini we have won two Champions Leagues," pointed out Ancelotti last week.

Mbappe says he is working on his on-pitch relationship with Vinicius, with both netting penalties in the win over La Real.

"We try to find each other in training to create the connection and help the team," continued Mbappe.

"He's a great player and I'm happy to play with him in Real Madrid - what's important is goals, not who takes the penalties."

Mbappe has three La Liga goals from four games this season, including two penalties, while Vinicius has two, both from the spot.

Once the two forwards are firing on all cylinders in open play Madrid's already sizeable chance of winning the Champions League yet again will grow further still.

FOCUS

Captain Van Dijk urges Liverpool to hit back after Forest defeat



Liverpool's Virgil van Dijk during training ahead of the Champions League match at Liverpool Training Centre yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
London

Virgil van Dijk has urged Liverpool to hit back after their "unacceptable" defeat against Nottingham Forest as the Reds prepare to start their Champions League campaign.

Just days after their shock 1-0 loss to Forest in the Premier League, Arne Slot's side begin the new Champions League format with a trip to AC Milan today.

After winning the first three games of the Slot era, Liverpool were brought down to earth with a bump by Forest at Anfield on Saturday.

Liverpool captain Van Dijk wants the defeat to serve as fuel to beat Milan and quickly get their campaign back on track.

"We have a very good group that really understand that it was unacceptable and are disappointed," the Dutch centre-back said.

"We all know everyone can do better and we have to show that on Tuesday and that is what we focus on."

"We have been through losses and difficult moments together and I think we have to stay calm

and we will stay calm. Hopefully if there are no injuries happening then rhythm is always a good thing.

"We need the whole squad and we know after the international break it will be a game every three days so we need everyone in their best shape and best form."

Liverpool had looked impressive in their wins against Ipswich, Brentford and Manchester United. They managed to avoid conceding a goal in any of those games, before Forest forward Callum Hudson-Odoi finally breached Van Dijk's defence at the weekend.

Asked what they had to do to prevent the defeat impacting their early-season momentum, Van Dijk said: "Keep going and keep working and make sure the performances don't go in that direction."

"We all know how the atmosphere can change but that is also part of the influence from outside which could affect you. "I can't wait to be out there hearing the Champions League tune and leading out the boys."

"A club like Liverpool needs to be in the Champions League and we are finally back and let's go out there and put in a much better performance as it is needed otherwise you are going to have an issue."

SPOTLIGHT

Villa take on Young Boys of Switzerland

AFP
London

Forty-two years after being crowned shock European champions, Aston Villa return to the Champions League ready to upset the established order again.

Villa's 1982 European Cup final triumph against Bayern Munich still ranks as one of the most remarkable conquests in the history of the competition.

Just five years ago, it was impossible for Villa fans to dream of repeating that kind of iconic victory with their team languishing in English football's second tier.

But, revitalised by boss Unai Emery since his arrival in 2022, Villa unexpectedly finished fourth in the Premier League last season to secure their first Champions League appearance since the 1982-83 campaign.

Emery's side make their long-awaited return to Europe's elite club competition against Young Boys in Switzerland today, before a mouth-watering reunion with Bayern at Villa Park on October 2. As well as the Bayern clash, it is fitting that Juventus will visit on

November 27 after the Italian side extinguished Villa's last European Cup campaign in the 1983 quarter-finals.

The explosion of joy which greeted confirmation of Villa's Champions League qualification released decades of pent-up frustration at their steep decline since that epic shock victory against Bayern in Rotterdam.

"Nobody expected us to be there but we believed in ourselves and believed in our dream," Villa defender Lucas Digne said, while teammate Diego Carlos added: "After more than four decades we are back in the Champions League!"

Prince William, a noted Villa fan, gave the royal seal of approval, saying: "We are Champions League! A historic season and an amazing achievement."

Now Emery has to ensure Villa do not suffer the kind of hangover that haunted Newcastle last term, when their first Champions League campaign for 20 years ended in a group stage exit that derailed the rest of the season.

Emery has the track-record to suggest he will not be phased by juggling the exhausting demands of Premier League and Champions League action.

Bayern set sights on dream home Champions League final

Berlin: Bayern captain Manuel Neuer said yesterday his side were fully focused on the Champions League season, with this year's final to be held at Munich's Allianz Arena. "Something big is coming," Neuer told reporters ahead of today's opening clash with Dinamo Zagreb at home. "The most important thing is the final in Munich. We want to go there and everything else is secondary. We know what this final means to the city, the fans and the players. Our motivation is simply very high." Six-time European champions Bayern come into the season after their first trophyless campaign in 11 seasons, with Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen winning a league and cup double. In the Champions League, Bayern were eliminated in the semi-finals by eventual winners Real Madrid, who beat Borussia Dortmund 2-0 at Wembley to lift the trophy. Neuer and fellow Bayern veteran Thomas Mueller, who

both won the 2013 and 2020 Champions League finals, are the only two players in the squad to remember the 2012 home final, which they lost on penalties to Premier League side Chelsea.

Mueller went on social media yesterday, telling followers "the road to Munich starts tomorrow. I'm very excited. Let's enjoy the best football in Europe."

Manager Vincent Kompany, set to coach his first match in the Champions League, told reporters "the fans can dream". "The most important thing

for me is that we show it on the pitch. We have a difficult game tomorrow. The important thing is that we play well and win tomorrow."

Bayern have won every one of their Champions League openers since 2002 when they lost 3-2 to Deportivo La Coruna, which was the prelude to their first and only group stage elimination.

Meanwhile Bayern Munich must do their best to replace injured defender Sacha Boey in their Champions League opener against Dinamo Zagreb, coach Kompany said. The French right back underwent meniscus surgery in his left knee after being injured in training on Sunday and will be sidelined for several weeks, the club said. "We have our thoughts of how to replace Sacha tomorrow and we have solutions."

Manuel Neuer, the Bayern Munich captain, addresses a press conference ahead of his team's Champions League match against Dinamo Zagreb. (@FCBayernEN)

