

To subscribe
GULF TIMES
Newspaper
Please call
444 666 35



TENNIS | Page 3

Djokovic to face Sinner in Shanghai Masters final



FOOTBALL | Page 4

Saudi players cannot live in the past, warns coach Mancini

To advertise here,
PLEASE CALL
444 666 21

Sunday, October 13, 2024
Rabia II 10, 1446 AH

GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

Samson ton powers India to T20 series sweep after record total

Page 2

SPOTLIGHT

Women's F1 Academy race to be part of Qatar Grand Prix

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Whilst the world's most elite Formula 1 drivers will soon descend on Lusail International Circuit (LIC) for the Formula 1 Qatar Airways Qatar Grand Prix 2024, another support race debuting some of the world's youngest and brightest female talent is also set to enthral racing fans at this winter's three-day motorsport extravaganza.

The Formula 1 Academy - a highly-competitive racing series for young women aged between 16 and 25 years old - will visit Qatar as part of the FIA Formula One World Championship. The global gateway initiative is committed to driving change by breaking down barriers to F1 entry and increasing the number of female drivers in motor racing, helping to propel them to the highest echelons of the sport.

It also showcases the exceptional talents of these young athletes, who bring an added layer of on-track excitement to fans and spectators, bolstered by Formula 1's unique global platform.

As the penultimate date of Formula 1 Academy's hotly-anticipated six-round series, it will take place at LIC from Friday, November 29 to Sunday, December 1 having previously visited circuits in Saudi Arabia, Miami, Spain, the Netherlands and Singapore - before coming to a thrilling finale at Yas Island, UAE this December.

With fifteen drivers made up across five teams - Rodin Motorsport, Prema Racing, MP Motorsport, Campos Racing and Art Grand Prix - the young women all compete in an identical 165-horsepower open-wheel Formula 4 race car. They hail from



Formula One's all-female F1 Academy series uses 1.4 litre-engined Tatuus F4 cars with a top speed of 240kph.

countries right across the globe including Brazil, France, Germany, Netherlands, Philippines, Switzerland, Spain, United Kingdom and USA.

Sisters Hamda al-Qubaisi (22 years old) and Amna al-Qubaisi (24 years old), from the United Arab Emirates, are representing the GCC and wider Middle East.

The Formula 1 Academy weekend takes place across three days: Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Each round will commence with up to two free practices lasting up to 40 minutes each, giving drivers valu-

able time on track to gain an understanding of the straights and chicanes that LIC presents. They will then compete in one 30-minute qualifying session to set the grid for the two 30-minute races. Each driver's fastest lap will set the grid for race 1 and the second fastest lap will set the order for race 2.

Leading the driver standings as the series heads into its fifth round is the UK's Abbi Pulling with 190 points, followed by France's Doraine Pin in second place (119 points) and the USA's Chloe Chambers

in third place (89 points). Rodin Motorsport is leading the teams' grid with 225 points, followed by Prema Racing and Campos Racing in second and third place respectively.

Joining Formula 1 Academy at LIC this year will be another thrilling support race from the FIA Formula 2 Championship, a high-octane one-make single-seater event with 22 identical cars, which allows drivers to showcase their prowess in front of a Formula 1 audience.

Together, they promise to enhance the

overall excitement of the on-track action at LIC this winter meaning fans can enjoy not double, but triple the fun.

The Formula 1 Qatar Airways Qatar Grand Prix 2024 will be the nail biting penultimate race before the season comes to a thrilling conclusion in Abu Dhabi on December 8.

For racing fans who want to witness first-hand the brightest and newest racing talents in motorsport can secure their tickets - Day and weekend passes at <https://tickets.lscs.qa>

QSL CUP

Wakrah beat Umm Salal to stay perfect

Shamal left to rue a late penalty miss after draw with Gharafa

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Wakrah continued their perfect run in the QSL Cup as they defeated Umm Salal 2-0 for their third straight victory at Al Khor Stadium yesterday. The win took their points tally to nine consolidating their top spot in Group B.

Moayad Hassan handed the Blue Wave a lead in 24th minute with Ayoub Assal wrapping up the win with a strike in stoppage time.

Defending champions Umm Salal stayed second on the table with six points.

Earlier, Al Shamal were left to rue a late penalty miss as Al Gharafa shared the spoils in a 1-1 draw at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium.

Al Gharafa goalkeeper Khalifa Ababacar Ndiaye made a superb save in the 85th minute as he dived to right and then turned about to stop another kick off the rebound by substitute Mahdi Salem to deny Al Shamal the advantage.

In the 73rd minute, Fabricio Diaz scored from the spot for Al Gharafa to draw parity after Suhaib Gannan had put Al Shamal in the front in the 38th minute.

While Al Shamal were more attacking of the two sides in the match, they lacked in finishing against a challenging Al Gharafa defence.

Al Shamal went up the lead after Omar Mohamed grabbed a long ball in the midfield and passed it down left for Gannan to run into the box before moving right to beat an advancing goalkeeper and a defender.

Later, in the 69th minute, Gannan made a fine move to provide Omar with a good chance, but his kick failed to beat the goalkeeper.

Five minutes later, Al Gharafa's Saifelddeen Fadalla was felled inside the danger zone by Al Shamal's Mowafak Awad and the referee called for a penalty which was coolly scored by Diaz.

Soon, Omar Mohammed again was in the striking zone for Al Shamal, but this time his kick just went wide of the left post.

Another opportunity was presented to Al Shamal as Dami Traori fouled Al Gharafa's Mahdi Salem inside an empty danger area. But Mahdi's spot kick and second shot on rebound



Al Wakrah's Moayad Hassan (centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring team's first goal.

were both stopped by Ababacar - who made a total of five saves to his counterpart Oumar Barry's two in the match.

The solitary point from the result took Al Shamal's tally to five points in third place in the group standings, while Al Gharafa with one point stayed fifth, below Al Khor on goal difference.

Group A is led by Al Duhail ahead of Al Arabi on superior goal difference as both the teams have registered nine points each. Al Rayyan are third with 7 points followed by Al Ahli (four points). Qatar SC are fifth on two points pushing Al Shahania on the bottom with a better goal difference.

HATHAB

Cherif and al-Qadi emerge victorious



Ambassador of Qatar to Azerbaijan Faisal bin Abdullah Hamad al-Hanzab presents the award to Big Tour winner Cyrene Cherif.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Cyrene Cherif and Ghanim al-Qadi won the Big Tour and Open Class titles respectively in the second round of the Longines Hathab Qatar Equestrian Tour Championship at the indoor arena of the Qatar Equestrian Federation yesterday.

Cherif, riding bay gelding Triple T Calamando Blue, topped the Table A. Against the clock - No jump off (145cm) Big Tour class flawlessly, clocking 57.97 seconds to win a prize of QR33,000. Hamad Nasser al-Qadi astride bay mare Stella finished second in 58.36 seconds (4 penalties) for a prize of QR26,500.

Cherif also claimed the third place, this time riding chestnut mare Van Gallettana Z to finish in 59.50 seconds with 4 penalties for a prize of QR18,000. Ambassador of Qatar to Azerbaijan Faisal bin Abdullah Hamad al-Hanzab crowned the winners of Big Tour.

In the Open Class Table A. Two Phases Against the clock (120cm), Ghanim Nasser al-Qadi excelled on bay mare Chanel D'Altenbach returning clear and fastest rounds of 36.59 and 15.96 seconds respectively to win the top podium place and QR6,250.

Finishing second was Hus-sain Saeed Haidan who rode dark

brown stallion D Saucedo clocking 34.76 and 16.25 seconds in the two rounds. He was awarded QR5,000. The third podium place went to Jaber Rashid al-Amri, who finished in 39.92 and 17.09 seconds respectively in the two rounds with grey stallion Canavaro De Muze (E.T.) for a prize of QR3,750. Longines Hathab Tournament Director Faisal al-Kahla honoured the Open Class winners.

The Qatar Equestrian Tour - Longines Hathab, supported by The Social & Sport Contribution Fund (Daam) comprises 14 legs and will run until May 2025.



Longines Hathab Tournament Director Faisal al-Kahla honoured the Open Class winners.

CRICKET

Samson ton powers India to series sweep after record total

Samson, who made 111, put on 173 runs for the second wicket with captain Suryakumar, who hit 75

AFP
Hyderabad

Opener Sanju Samson's blistering century helped world champions India hammer Bangladesh in the final T20 yesterday to sweep the series 3-0 after they posted the format's highest total by a Test-playing nation of 297-6.

The hosts went past Afghanistan's 278-3 against Ireland in 2019. The Indian total is the second highest in all T20 internationals after Nepal's 314-3 against Mongolia at last year's Asian Games in China. Samson hit 111 of 47 balls - his first T20 international ton - studded with 11 fours and eight sixes after India elected to bat first in Hyderabad.

In reply, Bangladesh managed 164-7 to go down by 133 runs in what was former skipper Mahmudullah Riyad's last T20 for the nation. Mahmudullah made eight before he fell to speedster Mayank Yadav and walked off with a smile and pat on the back by India skipper Suryakumar Yadav.

"We achieved a lot as a team," said Suryakumar. "I want to have selfless cricketers. We want to enjoy each others' success. We are having some fun."

Najmul Hossain Shanto's Bangladesh, who came on the India tour at the back of a two-Test sweep in Pakistan, were outplayed by the hosts as they lost the earlier Test series 2-0. "We didn't play our best cricket," said Najmul. "We didn't execute our plans as a batting unit in all the three matches. We should believe in ourselves that we can compete."

Samson, a wicketkeeper-batsman, stood out and named player of the match as he hammered leg-spinner Rishad Hossain for five straight sixes in an over en route to his ton in 40 balls. He put on 173 runs for the second wicket with Suryaku-



India's Sanju Samson (right) is congratulated by captain Suryakumar Yadav for his innings after his dismissal during the third and final Twenty20 match against Bangladesh in Hyderabad yesterday. (AFP)

mar, who hit 75 off 35 balls but his knock was overshadowed by his partner's blitz and the mammoth total.

Samson finally fell to Mustafizur Rahman and walked back to a standing ovation by the weekend crowd. Suryakumar fell in the next over by Mahmudullah, who an-

nounced his retirement from the format ahead of the second match.

But there was more punishment in store for Bangladesh as new batters Hardik Pandya, who struck 47 off 18 balls and Riyan Parag, who made a 13-ball 34, kept up the charge with regular boundaries. India sur-

passed their previous best total of 260-5 against Sri Lanka in 2017 as they scored at nearly 15 runs an over.

Samson said his focus was always to stick to the basics of batting and take it one ball at a time. "The dressing room energy from the boys out means a lot - they have a

lot of happiness for me and that I did well. It can get frustrating knowing what you can do out there, and I have also felt I can do much better," he said.

"But by playing so many games I know how to deal with pressure and my failures because I have failed a lot. I just focused on the process and knew that I would do well. Playing for your country that pressure was there but I wanted to perform and wanted to show. But I still kept it basic and wanted to take it by one ball," added Samson.

Bangladesh were never in the chase but wicketkeeper-batsman Litton Das, who hit 42, and Towhid Hridoy, unbeaten on 63, attempted to put up a fight. Leg-spinner Ravi Bishnoi took three wickets including Litton and Najmul in his four overs.

Pandya was named player of the series for his 118 runs, one wicket and five catches in the three matches. Pandya lauded the team environment for giving him good space to execute his skills to the best. "The kind of freedom the skipper and coach have given is fantastic for the whole group. At the end of the day if you can enjoy the sport you can get the maximum out of yourself. When the dressing room is enjoying everyone's success you feel like doing it more. Body has been fantastic, God has been kind to always come up and help me out. The process continues, nothing changes, good days or bad days. I thought shots like my shot over cover in the last over don't come often but when they come it gives a lot of confidence," Pandya said.

India's Test team, led by Rohit Sharma, will now host New Zealand in a three-match series starting next week with the opener in Bengaluru.

BRIEF SCORES

India 297/6 in 20 overs (Sanju Samson 111; Tanzim Hasan Sakib 3/66) **beat Bangladesh 164/7 in 20 overs** (Towhid Hridoy 63*, Ravi Bishnoi 3/30) by 133 runs.

Sri Lanka seeks to match success in West Indies T20s

Dambulla, Sri Lanka: After celebrating victories in Test and ODIs, Sri Lanka hopes to extend its run of success to T20s, with their first showdown against the West Indies set to begin today.

Sri Lanka ended a 27-year dry spell by winning an ODI series against India, celebrated a Test win in England after a decade, and notched their first series win over New Zealand since 2009. The West Indies are third in the global T20 rankings, while Sri Lanka languishes at a modest eighth.

But a series win could shake things up, with the first of three opening at home at Dambulla. "We've turned the tide in Test and ODI cricket, and now it's high time to bring that same fire to T20s," skipper Charith Asalanka told reporters. "If you look at our recent series, we've been playing below par. We've tweaked a few

strategies and are rebuilding the squad with an eye on the next World Cup in two years."

Sri Lanka confirmed the return of hard-hitting middle-order batter Bhanuka Rajapaksa, marking his comeback since January 2022, roped in as a replacement for former captain Dasun Shanaka. "Bhanuka's the kind of guy who can clear the ropes at will, especially in those crunch death overs," Asalanka said. "He's got a wealth of T20 experience, and can keep his cool when the heat is on."

The remaining two T20s against the West Indies, also at Dambulla, will be played on October 15 and 17. The T20 series will be followed by a three-match ODI series at Pallekele. They face a depleted West Indies, who are missing key batters like Nicholas Pooran, Shimron Hetmyer, all-

rounder Andre Russell, and spin ace Akeal Hosenin.

Despite their depleted roster, West Indies captain Rovman Powell radiated confidence. "We're a solid T20 team," he said. "We've got two T20 World Cups under our belt, and we're always aiming higher," he added. "Our strength lies in our power hitters, and we're banking on them. In this format, it is adapt or perish... the team that catches on quickly has the edge."

With Sri Lanka set to co-host the next T20 World Cup alongside India, Powell said it was key to learn the conditions - even though the big event is two years away. "This series is a golden opportunity to acclimatise", he said. "Sri Lanka is no pushover; they play fierce cricket. It'll give us a good gauge of where we stand and what to expect."

SPOTLIGHT

South Africa, New Zealand boost T20 World Cup semi-final hopes



South Africa's Marizanne Kapp (right) celebrates with teammates after taking a wicket against Bangladesh.

AFP
Dubai

South Africa and New Zealand cruised to one-sided victories to edge closer to the Women's T20 World Cup semi-finals yesterday although their tournament destiny lies in the hands of formidable rivals. After limiting Bangladesh to just 106-3 in 20 overs in Dubai, South Africa reached their target with 16 balls to spare to win by seven wickets.

With three wins and one defeat, they sit top of Group B with six points. However, 2009 champions England, with two wins so far and with two games still to play, are likely to secure one of the semi-final spots.

That would leave South Africa and West Indies vying for the last place. West Indies, the 2016 champions, have four points but a better net run-rate than South Africa although the Caribbean side have to face England in their concluding pool game on Tuesday.

Earlier in Sharjah, New Zealand trounced winless Sri Lanka by eight wickets, chasing down a 116-run target with 15 balls to spare. New Zealand have four points from three games but remain third in Group A behind India, also on four points, and defending champions Australia who have a perfect six points from three outings. India face six-time winners Australia

today before New Zealand complete their group campaign against Pakistan tomorrow.

Player of the match Tazmin Brits steered 2023 runners-up South Africa to victory with a steady 42 off 41 balls, an innings which featured five fours. Anneke Bosch made a run-a-ball 25 before Marizanne Kapp (13 not out) and Chloe Tryon (14 not out) saw their side home.

Bangladesh won the toss and chose to bat but lost opener Dilara Akter off the second ball for nought. The Asian side struggled to make any headway against the South African attack. Sobhana Mostary top-scored but her 38 took 43 balls with skipper Nigar Sultana making an undefeated 32 from 38 deliveries. Kapp claimed 1-10 from her four overs of medium pace while Nonkululeko Mlaba finished with 1-11.

Off-break bowler Mlaba has enjoyed an impressive tournament with the ball and has nine wickets from four games, making her the leading wicket-taker. "There's a lot of intent and emotion there," said Bangladesh captain Sultana after a tournament which brought them just one victory - an opening day win against Scotland.

In Sharjah, New Zealand limited Asian champions Sri Lanka to 115-5 in 20 overs. Georgia Plimmer, a 20-year-old opener, then hit 53 before captain Sophie Devine smashed the only six of the match to take her team to 118 for two with 15 balls left.

Devine said the White Ferns did not discuss run rate before starting their chase. "We know that winning the game was the most important thing," she said. "We will see how results play out tomorrow and we have our final game against Pakistan and by that point we'll know exactly where we stand and what's going to be required."

Captain Chamari Athapaththu opened and made the top score of 35 as her Sri Lanka team passed 100 for the first time in the tournament. Despite scoring at almost a run a ball, Plimmer hit only four fours and had to run for most of her 53 on a day when temperatures hit 39 degrees Celsius. Amelia Kerr, who hit 34 to follow her two wickets, and Devine, who made 13, sped New Zealand to victory with a late flurry of boundaries.

BRIEF SCORES

Sri Lanka 115-5 off 20 overs (Chamari Athapaththu 35, Harshitha Samarawickrama 18; Leigh Kasperek 2-27, Amelia Kerr 2-18) **lost to New Zealand 118-2 off 17.3 overs** (Georgia Plimmer 53, Amelia Kerr 34 not out; Sachini Nisansala 1-14, Chamari Athapaththu 1-8) by eight wickets **Bangladesh 106-3 in 20 overs** (Sobhana Mostary 38, Nigar Sultana 32 not out; Marizanne Kapp 1-10, Nonkululeko Mlaba 1-11) **lost to South Africa 107-3 in 17.2 overs** (Tazmin Brits 42, Anneke Bosch 25; Fahima Khatun 2-19) by seven wickets

CYCLING

Pogacar emulates icon Coppi with fourth straight Il Lombardia triumph

AFP
Como, Italy

Tadej Pogacar won Il Lombardia for the fourth time in as many years yesterday to equal a record streak of victories set by cycling great Fausto Coppi over seven decades ago. World champion Pogacar capped an astonishing year in which he also claimed a Tour de France and Giro d'Italia double by matching Coppi, who won five times in total, including four victories between 1946 and 1949 at the last "Monument" of the season.

Pogacar made his widely predicted move on the decisive Colma di Sormano climb, 48.5 kilometres from the end of the 255km "Race of the Falling Leaves" whose course had been modified following heavy rain and landslides in northern Italy. After being guided through the race by his strong UAE support team Pogacar surged to his second victory in as many races since donning the rainbow jersey in Zurich a fortnight ago with a trademark solo attack.

"It was a big day for us, a long race, a hard race and it was all dependent on our team so we did a super good job and I'm super happy to win with the team," said Pogacar. "We planned it like this... I knew that if I had a decent gap there, I can come to the finish."

The 26-year-old finished over three minutes ahead of double Olympic champion Remco Evenepoel who returned to the site of his horror crash from four years ago which left him with a fractured hip when he plunged into a ravine. Pogacar was already the first ever cyclist to win the triple crown of the Tour, Giro and worlds with at least one Monument victory in the same season.

And yesterday's triumph, his 25th in 2024, gives the Slovenian star a good claim to have had the greatest ever season in the history of road cycling. Pogacar began his campaign in Italy eight months ago by storming to the Strade Bianche with an 81km



charge and topped that by nearly 20km on his way to world championship glory in Switzerland.

Between those two wins, Pogacar claimed a second Liege-Bastogne-Liege and six stages in each of his victories at the Tour and Giro, while also winning the Tour of Catalonia, the Montreal Grand Prix and last weekend's Giro dell'Emilia.

Those triumphs have made him the heir not just to seven-time Grand Tour champion Coppi but also Eddy Merckx, the greatest to ever sit on a bike. No one since Merckx's heyday of the 1970s has anyone expressed the sort of dominance Pogacar has over the rest of the field this year.

Pogacar has only been beaten twice this year, at Milan-San Remo where he finished third, while his seventh place at the Quebec Grand Prix was his worst finish of the season.

TENNIS

Djokovic to face Sinner in Shanghai Masters title clash

'I have to expect the toughest encounter of the tournament'

AFP
Shanghai

Novak Djokovic battled through "an incredible fight" with Taylor Fritz yesterday, shrugging off physical discomfort to win 6-4, 7-6 (8/6) and set up a blockbuster Shanghai Masters final with world number one Jannik Sinner. Earlier the Italian beat Tomas Machac 6-4, 7-5, ensuring in the process that he will finish the year at the top of the rankings.

"I won't be a favourite on the court, but hopefully I'll be able to come out physically fresh enough to challenge him for what may be a long match," said Djokovic of today's final. "I have to expect probably the toughest encounter of the tournament, and I have to be ready for it."

Sinner said playing Djokovic would make the final "even more special". "It's going to be a very tough one, it's one of the biggest challenges we have in our sport," he said.

Djokovic has now beaten the United States' Fritz at each of their 10 encounters. The Serb broke the 26-year-old US Open finalist in the fifth game to win the first set in 38 minutes. But the second set lasted twice as long, and was a much more tense affair, as the players sent each other scrambling across the court in a series of thrilling rallies.

The 24-time Grand Slam champion called it an "incredible fight". "He could have easily won the second set... In the tiebreak it was really anyone's game, (but) I feel like I was never giving up," Djokovic said.

In the second set, after an almost 13-minute fifth game eventually held by Fritz, Djokovic bent over in exhaustion, breathing heavily. The world number seven missed a good chance in the eighth game when he failed to convert a break point, with Djokovic recovering to hold. "I just never really came up with what I needed to come up with in a lot of big moments and the big points," said the American.

Djokovic came from 3-5 down in the tie-break to level and then win after three unforced errors from Fritz. The 37-year-old, who has been wearing a brace on his right knee and has been having trouble with his left one too, had to take a medical time-out for his left leg towards the end of the second set. However, he said after the match none of the issues were serious.

After physio, "I could move freely and run



Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates after winning his semi-final match against Taylor Fritz of the US at the Shanghai Masters yesterday. (Reuters)

and sprint, which is good news," he said. "I guess at this age you kind of have to expect that each match something different happens physically."

The 23-year-old Sinner has been top of the world rankings since June and after his ruthless semi-final victory will stay there until at least the end of the season, the first Italian to do so. "It was only a dream just to become number one... Now finishing (the year there) is also a different feeling," the Italian said. "It's a good feeling. I'm very happy to achieve this. It was an amazing season for me and it's not finished yet," he said, adding that for now he was "focused on tomorrow".

Sinner's meeting with Machac got off to an

electric start when the Czech broke in the first game of their semi-final. The 33rd-ranked Machac was looking to repeat his giant-slaying of Thursday, when he knocked out world number two Carlos Alcaraz in straight sets.

But two-time Grand Slam champion Sinner kept his cool to break back in the fourth, then claimed the tenth game to clinch the set. In the second set neither was able to break serve until the 12th game, when the Italian hit a winner to book his place in the final.

"It was very tough... he is playing with so much confidence and he can hit a ball really hard, and is serving very well," said Sinner. "I tried to stay there mentally... I'm very happy about how I'm fighting at the moment."

SPOTLIGHT

Sabalenka downs Gauff in three sets to reach Wuhan final

AFP
Wuhan, China

Top-seeded Aryna Sabalenka fought back from a set down to beat Coco Gauff 1-6, 6-4, 6-4 yesterday and reach the Wuhan Open final for the third time.

A champion in Wuhan in 2018 and 2019, Sabalenka improved her perfect record in the tournament to 16-0 and will next face Zheng Qinwen, who became the first Chinese player to reach a WTA 1000 final on home soil. It will be a rematch of the Australian Open final, which Sabalenka won earlier this season.

In an all-Chinese affair, the fifth-seeded Zheng defeated Wang Xinyu 6-3, 6-4 to reach her fourth final of the season. "I never imagined that my first WTA 1000 final would happen here in Wuhan," said Olympic champion Zheng, who was born in the Hubei province and moved to Wuhan when she was a child. "Today was a very tough match, Xinyu played really well. The crowd was very supportive and fair to both of us."

Gauff, who was on a nine-match winning streak on the back of her title run in Beijing last week, played a perfect first set but committed a whopping 21 double-faults during a semi-final lasting two hours, 26 minutes. Sabalenka has now won 19 of her last 20 matches, a stretch that includes titles in Cincinnati and at the US Open.

"It definitely felt like one of the biggest matches of my career be-

cause the crowd made it feel like it was a Grand Slam final," said Sabalenka, who is now 4-4 in career meetings with Gauff.

Sabalenka struggled on serve early on and couldn't control her forehand as a clinical Gauff leapt to a double-break 5-0 lead inside 19 minutes. The American fourth seed dropped a mere two points behind her first serve and limited the Belarusian to just two winners throughout that opening frame. Down 2-4 in the second set, Sabalenka took seven games in a row, capitalising on Gauff's double-faults to build a 3-0 lead in the decider.

Despite Gauff's best retaliatory efforts, Sabalenka held on to close out a gritty victory. Sabalenka, who has had her fair share of serving woes in the past and worked with a specialised biomechanics coach to overcome them, said she could relate to Gauff's double-faulting issues during the semi-final.

"I was playing that match thinking, 'Well, girl, I feel you. I feel you like nobody else,'" said Sabalenka, 26. "I know what she's going through. This is really difficult. But I know that if she'll be able to overcome this serve situation - she is already one of the best players, but I'm pretty sure she's going to be one of the greatest players."

Gauff added a new coach to her team, Matt Daly, after the US Open and they've been tinkering with her serve ever since. The 20-year-old described her troubles on Saturday as "growing pains" and assures "there's a lot of positives to look forward to".



Aryna Sabalenka hits a backhand return to Coco Gauff during the semi-finals of the Wuhan Open in China's Hubei province. (AFP)

BOTTOMLINE

Al-Mohannadi retains Asian Table Tennis Union presidency



Qatar Table Tennis Association President Khalil bin Ahmed al-Mohannadi was officially re-endorsed as the President of the Asian Table Tennis Union for the next electoral cycle (2025-2028) during the General Assembly held in Astana, Kazakhstan, on the sidelines of the 27th Asian Championship.

Al-Mohannadi, who was the sole candidate for the presidency, secured his position after the nomination period closed in August. He first assumed the role in October 2021 and is the first Arab and Qatari to hold this prestigious position since the Federation's establishment in 1972.

In his acceptance speech, al-Mohannadi expressed gratitude to the Kazakh Federation and its president for their excellent organisation of the championship, which marks the first time the event is being hosted in Central Asia. Representatives from 31

member countries attended the meeting, forming the legal quorum required for the elections.

The assembly also conducted elections for vice-presidents and regional deputies and reviewed reports submitted by various committees, including financial audits and updates on regional activities.

The assembly highlighted key achievements made by the Federation from 2021-2024, including the development of table tennis in Asia and enhanced cooperation among member states.

Al-Mohannadi also announced the launch of the Asian Table Tennis Union Academy in partnership with Aspire Academy, which will focus on improving junior talent and human resource efficiency.

Future championships were confirmed, with Uzbekistan and North Korea set to host major events, and China assigned to organise the Asian Cup from 2025-2027.

FOCUS

QOC hosts boxing tournament - Knock Out 2024



Qatar Boxing Federation President Sheikh Fahad bin Khalid al-Thani, London 2012 Olympic Champion Serik Sapiyev of Kazakhstan and Assistant Director of the Sports Events Department at the QOC Salah al-Saadi honoured the winners across all divisions.

The Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC), in collaboration with the Qatar Boxing Federation organised the first edition of the Qatar Olympic Committee Boxing Tournament - Knock Out 2024 on Friday.

The event received a big turnout from different age groups and public.

The participants showed good technical skills in the boxing competitions, where in Junior's 46kg, Mohammed al-Marri won the first place and Hamad al-Tamimi finished second, while in 60kg, Abdulaziz Abdulatif came out on top and Mohammed al-Sharqawi settled for second place.

In the Youth division, Majid al-Edris emerged victorious in the 77kg category, followed by Ahmed Waleed in second place. In the 63.5kg class, Yousef al-Saied secured first place, while Faisal al-Nuaimi took second. The 75kg category saw Fras Garmil claim the top spot, with Mishaal Dergam finishing as runner-up. In the +92kg division, Fares Ali captured first place, with Cezar Ehab coming in second.

Abrer Gakooga won gold in the 80kg category, with Yahaya Omar earning second place. In the +92kg division, Mohammed Faras secured the title, while Younes Bin Tamo finished in second place.

At the Award ceremony, the winners of the three categories were crowned by Sheikh Fa-



had bin Khalid al-Thani, the President of Qatar Boxing Federation; Kazakhstan's Serik Sapiyev, London 2012 Olympic Champion; and Salah al-Saadi, Assistant Director of the Sports Events Department at the Qatar Olympic Committee. This event comes in line with the QOC's mes-

sage of promoting sports and physical activities among different segments of the society. Notably, the organisation of these events annually will help discovering new talents who will feed the national teams in the local and international competitions.

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar's al-Kuwari on pole for maiden MERC title

The unstable situation in parts of the Middle East meant that the Rally of Lebanon was not a round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) this year and the Oman Automobile Association recently cancelled what would have been the final round of the series in Oman in late November.

That means that the Cyprus Rally will bring this year's shortened three-round series to a thrilling conclusion from October 18-20 and could well see the crowning of a first-time champion.

Twenty-one drivers grace the entry list for the Nicosia-based event and six of those are registered for MERC points with three aiming for the overall Drivers' Championship. Qatari Abdulaziz al-Kuwari currently has a 12-point lead over Jordanian Shaker Jweihan in the standings and sits 14 points ahead of Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah.

A finish in fourth place or higher for al-Kuwari in the general classification and the Power Stage would be sufficient for the Qatari to win the title for the first time, although a slip up could see al-Attiyah storm through to seal a 20th title if he were to win



Qatar's Abdulaziz al-Kuwari currently has a 12-point lead over Jordan's Shaker Jweihan in the standings and sits 14 points ahead of compatriot Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah.

the rally and the Power Stage. Disaster for either of the Skoda drivers could see Jweihan add the MERC title to the MERC2

Championship he now has an unassailable lead in. Last year's Cyprus event saw a little

piece of rallying history made when al-Attiyah and title rival Abdullah al-Rawahi tied on points at the end of the season and could not be split on a tie-break ruling in the Sporting Regulations for FIA Regional Rally Championships. A special committee was set up and the decision was taken to share the title between the two drivers with al-Attiyah claiming a record-breaking 19th regional title and al-Rawahi winning his first.

Following the cancellation of the Oman event in November, al-Rawahi has withdrawn his entry from the Cyprus Rally, knowing full well that he only had a slim mathematical chance of regaining the title after picking up points for third in Qatar and then retiring in Jordan.

While al-Kuwari and Rashid al-Muhammadi drive a pair of SRT-run Skodas, eight-time event winner al-Attiyah wheels out his usual Autotek Motorsport-run machine that he used for the first time in Jordan in May. Panayiotis Yiangou and Aristos Nicolaou are also registered for MERC points in their Hyundai i20 R5 and a podium finish for the Cypriot could well affect the outcome of the MERC. Jweihan leads the MERC2 category by 12

points from Shadi Shaban but none of his rivals have made the trip to Cyprus and the series has been secured before an engine is started in anger.

Lebanon's Carlos Hanna is present as the co-driver alongside Jweihan, however, and a finish would see him overhauling the absent Samer Issa to win the MERC2 Co-drivers' Championship.

Italian veteran co-driver Giovanni Bernacchini sits alongside Nasser Saleh Al-Attiyah and will be trying to defend a slender lead in the MERC Co-drivers' Championship.

FIA MIDDLE EAST RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP POSITIONS

1. Abdulaziz al-Kuwari (QAT) 49pts
2. Shaker Jweihan (JOR) 37pts
3. Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT) 35pts
4. Pierre-Louis Loubet (FRA) 33pts
5. Mads Ostberg (NOR) 29pts
6. Shadi Shaban (JOR) 28pts
7. Abdullah al-Rawahi (OMN) 25pts
8. Husam Salim (JOR) 24pts
9. Denis Krotov (KGZ) 22pts
10. Bader al-Fayez (JOR) 19pts
11. Nasser Khalifa al-Atya (QAT) 17pts
12. Ihab al-Shorafa (JOR) 16pts

WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Saudi players cannot live in the past, warns coach

Japan have opened a five-point gap at the top of the standings

Reuters
Jeddah

Saudi Arabia coach Roberto Mancini has warned his players not to rest on their previous achievements as he seeks to reinvigorate his team's challenge for an automatic berth at the 2026 World Cup.

Mancini saw his side slip to a 2-0 loss in Jeddah on Thursday against a Japan side that has dominated Asia's third round of preliminaries to leave the Saudis playing catch-up in the race for World Cup qualification.

Saudi Arabia are looking to book a spot at a third consecutive World Cup - and seventh in total - with Mancini telling his players they cannot rely on historic performances to confirm their passage to North America in two years' time. "We don't live in the past, the important thing is to qualify regardless of the ranking," said Mancini, who took over as the long-term replacement for Herve Renard in August 2023. "Three years ago the situation was different. Maybe the players were playing more or were younger. We have to deal with the current situation."

Under Renard the Saudis notched up a famous 2-1 win over Argentina in the teams' opening game of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, the last defeat suffered by Lionel Scaloni's side before going on to win the title with victory over France in the final.

Renard resigned in March 2023 to take charge of France's women's team while moves to strengthen the Saudi Pro League by authorities have seen a significant influx of highly paid foreign stars shift to the country in recent seasons. Their arrival, which comes with clubs allowed to sign as many as 10 non-Saudi players and field up to eight in each SPL match, has left Mancini overseeing a group of players who are often lacking regular game time.

"The only problem we have, three years ago all the Saudi players played every game," said Man-



Roberto Mancini has urged his players to look forward after Saudi Arabia suffered a 2-0 loss to Japan in their World Cup qualifiers Group C tie on Thursday.

cini. "Today, 50, 60 percent don't play in the game and this is the only problem that we have."

Saudi Arabia host Bahrain on Tuesday, looking to return to winning ways with Mancini's side level on four points with their visitors and Australia. Indonesia are a further point adrift with China bottom of the group with zero. Only the top two finishers are certain to qualify for the finals in North America with the third- and fourth-placed teams advancing to a further round of preliminaries.

Meanwhile Japan will look to further strengthen their grip on the group when they

welcome Australia to Saitama on Tuesday, with head coach Hajime Moriyasu praising his players for sticking to the game plan. "In every match we have a different tactic and against Saudi Arabia, we played with three defenders at the back because we were playing against a strong team. We worked hard on that. We faced pressure in the first half but in general, the plan worked. Despite the fact that we won by two goals, it could have been different as Saudi Arabia played great football and their fans were really supportive. I expect them to go to the World Cup," said Moriyasu.

AL ABDULGHANI MOTORS EXCLUSIVE MOBILITY PARTNER FOR DOHA MARATHON

Doha: Al Abdulghani Motors, the authorised distributor for Toyota and Lexus in Qatar, announced its sponsorship of the Doha Marathon by Ooredoo 2025 as the Exclusive Mobility. This partnership aligns with the company's ongoing commitment to supporting local sporting events while advancing sustainable and innovative mobility solutions in line with Qatar National Vision 2030.

Scheduled for January 17, 2025, the 13th edition of the Doha Marathon is set to be the largest ever, with over 15,000 participants expected to hit the streets. As an exclusive Mobility partner, Al Abdulghani Motors will play a pivotal role in ensuring the smooth execution of the event, offering a range of innovative transportation solutions for both participants and organizers.

In addition to supporting the event's logistics with a fleet of buses, SUVs, and bicycles for paramedic teams for the organizers, Al Abdulghani Motors will set up a dedicated booth at the Sheraton Hotel Park, where visitors will have the opportunity to explore the latest Toyota and Lexus models and learn about the company's sustainability initiatives. Al Abdulghani Motors employees will participate in the race, embodying the company's commitment to employee well-being and fostering a culture of

health and fitness. Commenting on the partnership, Abdulghani Nasser al-Abdulghani said: "We are thrilled to be the Exclusive Mobility Partner for the Doha Marathon by Ooredoo. This sponsorship aligns with our goals to promote a healthier lifestyle where we believe that through sports, we can contribute to human development in alignment with Qatar National Vision 2030. We look forward to taking part in making this event a happy one for all participants."

Sabah Rabiah al-Kuwari, Director of Public Relations, Social Responsibility, and Sponsorships at Ooredoo Qatar added: "We are delighted to welcome back the Doha Marathon for another inspiring event. This year, we are pleased to have Al Abdulghani Motors join us as one of the sponsors. Their dedication to supporting the local community and their commitment to sustainable mobility resonate with the values of our marathon."

To add to the excitement, two lucky participants will have the chance to win a brand-new Toyota Crown in a raffle draw, which will be announced after the race. Al Abdulghani Motors' sponsorship of the Doha Marathon reflects its commitment to contributing to Qatar's sports and sustainability sectors, playing a role in creating a healthier, greener future.

Viana to succeed Begiristain as Man City director of football

London: Txiki Begiristain will step down as Manchester City director of football at the end of the season with Sporting Lisbon's Hugo Viana replacing Pep Guardiola's trusted adviser, the Premier League champions said.

Begiristain joined City in 2012 after working in the same role at Barcelona between 2003 and 2010. The Spaniard was widely credited with convincing his former Barcelona team-mate Guardiola to become City manager in 2016. Begiristain had given Guardiola his first managerial job

at Barcelona, with the pair striking up a close friendship when they played for the Spanish club in the 1990s. City have enjoyed a golden era with Guardiola and Begiristain calling the shots.

They have won six Premier League titles, including the last four in a row, and the club's first Champions League crown among a host of other trophies. Begiristain's impending exit will raise further questions about Guardiola's future with his contract expiring at the end of this season.

NATIONS LEAGUE

Croatia extend Scotland's losing streak

AFP
Zagreb

Croatia's Andrej Kramaric condemned Scotland to their worst losing streak in five years as the striker sealed a 2-1 win in the Nations League yesterday. Steve Clarke's side took a shock lead through Ryan Christie's first half goal at the Stadion Maksimir.

But Igor Matanovic equalised before the interval and Kramaric bagged the winner midway through the second half. Scotland have lost four successive games for the first time since 2019. They arrived in Zagreb winless in their last eight competitive matches, the longest streak in their history, and that dismal run has now reached nine.

Scotland have mustered just one win in their last 15 matches, a 2-0 victory over minnows Gibraltar in June. Having crashed out of Euro 2024 at the group stage, the Scots sit bottom of Nations League Group A1 after defeats against Poland, Portugal and Croatia. In Clarke's defence, he is dealing a debilitating injury list that denied him the services of James Forrest, Kieran Tierney, Jack Hendry, Tommy

Conway, Aaron Hickey, Nathan Patterson and Lewis Ferguson. Even so, another loss when Portugal visit Hampden Park on Tuesday would add to the pressure on the Scotland boss.

GERMANY WIN AS 10-MAN DUTCH RESCUE POINT

On Friday, Deniz Undav scored twice as Germany defeated Bosnia and Herzegovina 2-1 to edge closer to the Nations League quarter-finals as 10-man Netherlands rescued a 1-1 draw in Hungary.

Bayer Leverkusen's Florian Wirtz laid on a backheel for Undav's opener after 30 minutes in Zenica. The Stuttgart forward then made it two when he turned in Maximilian Mittelstaedt's cross. Bosnia hit back with 20 minutes remaining when 38-year-old former Manchester City forward Edin Dzeko headed in from a corner for his 67th international goal. The win moves Germany onto seven points from three games, two ahead of the Netherlands with the heavyweights facing each other tomorrow in Munich.

At the Puskas Arena in Budapest, Hungary and Dutch players, as well as spectators, observed a minute's silence in

memory of former Netherlands great Johan Neeskens who passed away this week at the age of 73. Hungary took the lead in the 32nd minute when Roland Sallai scored with a close-range finish after being teed up by Zsolt Nagy. It was the perfect start to the game for Hungarian coach Marco Rossi who was taking charge of the national team for the 69th time.

Hungary were looking at defeating the Dutch in the teams' first meeting since they were mauled 8-1 in 2013. That prospect brightened when Liverpool's Virgil van Dijk was red-carded in the 79th minute. However, four minutes later, the Dutch made a mockery of their one-man disadvantage when Denzel Dumfries headed in a free-kick from Cody Gakpo.

Wales squandered a 2-0 lead to draw 2-2 with Iceland in Reykjavik. Tottenham's Brennan Johnson, scoring for the seventh consecutive game for club and country, and Harry Wilson gave Craig Bellamy's team a comfortable 2-0 lead at the break but Iceland hit back in the second half.

Substitute Logi Tomasson cut the deficit in the 69th minute before Wales goalkeeper Danny Ward allowed a 72nd minute drive from the same player to bounce off



Croatia's Andrej Kramaric (right) scores against Scotland during the UEFA Nations League match at the Maksimir Stadium in Zagreb, Croatia. (Reuters)

his elbow and into the net.

Elsewhere on Friday, Sweden let slip a 2-0 lead to draw 2-2 in Slovakia, a result which left both teams on seven points from three games but with the Swedes ahead on goal difference in their group. Yasin Ayari and Ken Sema had Sweden 2-0 up after 32 minutes in Bratislava but Slovakia bat-

ted back for a point thanks to a brace from David Strelec.

Tomás Chory scored twice to give the Czech Republic a 2-0 home win over Albania. The Czechs are level on six points with pool leaders Georgia who lost 1-0 to Ukraine thanks to Mykhailo Mudryk's 35th-minute cool finish.