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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Afif orchestrates Al Sadd's victory over Al Shahania

The Wolves climb to third place and are three points behind leaders Duhail, who are in action today

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Akram Afif excelled with three assists as Al Sadd scored an exciting 4-2 win over Al Shahania in the Qatar Stars League at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.

While The Wolves began sprightly scoring three goals in the first half, Al Shahania hit back with two in the second half as Al-hassan Koroma scored a brace, but an own goal cost them dear.

For Al Sadd, the goals came from Moustafa Tarek Mashal (2nd minute), Rafa Mujica (19th minute), Cristo Gonzalez (23rd minute) and from Pelle van Amersfoort (Own Goal - 78th minute). For Al Shahania, Koroma scored in the 54th and 89th minutes of the match.

The win was defending champions Al Sadd's fourth of the league this season and pitchforked them into the third place in the rankings with 12 points as they cut Al Duhail lead to three points. Duhail are in action when they take on second-placed Al Ahli in a crucial clash. Meanwhile, Shahania with a fourth loss, remain in tenth place with five points.

Sadd defender Ahmed Suhail said it was a deserved win for his side. "We played a good game and were the better side during the first half, managing to score three early goals which allowed us to play more comfortably. The dip in performance in the second half was somewhat natural, but we succeeded in securing the win with four goals. Certainly, this victory gives us a morale boost to keep improving, stay on the same path, and achieve more wins both domestically and in Asia," he said.

The first three of Al Sadd's goals were all set up by the mercurial Afif. In the first, he grabbed a defensive rebound from the right to send the ball across to Moustafa at far left to score the opening goal. In the next one, Afif initiated the move in the middle before running down the left to set up Mujica with a through ball to score gleefully.

Minutes later, Afif collected a back flip from Mujica to move left and provide Gonzalez with a perfect ball to strike the third goal from the centre for The Wolves. Koroma gave Al Shahania hope when he first made the most of a fine assist from Mohamed Bader Sayyar, who ran down deep before moving the ball back to Koroma to sweep a left footer into the net (1-3).

An over-zealous Al Shahania then saw a reversal as Pelle van Amersfoort headed an Al Sadd corner kick into his own goal



Al Sadd's Moustafa Tarek Mashal (centre) celebrates with teammates Akram Afif (right) and Giovanni after scoring against Al Shahania at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

(1-4). Koroma provided some heat minutes later as he grabbed substitute Abdulrahman Mosed's long cross to strike hard and his shot went past the hands of goalkeeper Saad Al Sheeb.

There were many hits and misses for both sides during the match. An Afif header went past the left post early in the first half while a Hashim Ali threatening kick was stopped by Al Shahania goalkeeper Shehab Ellethy. Later, a Mohammad Ibrahim header for Al Shahania was pushed over by Al Sheeb. He also saved a face to face shot and another from some distance from Amersfoort, denying Al Shahania.

Earlier, Al Rayyan scored a hard-fought 2-1 win over Al Khor at the Al Khor Stadium. The goals for Al Rayyan came through

Yohan Boli (Own Goal - fifth minute) and Roger Guedes (82nd minute), while Boli pulled one back for Al Khor (10th minute).

It was the third win of the league for Al Rayyan, which took them to seventh place with nine points, while Al Khor remain bottom on three points.

Al Khor suffered a setback right at the start when Boli trying to cut off a Gabriel Pereira cross from the right deflected the ball into his own goal. Boli, the Ivory Coast international, however, soon made amends as he headed a Sofiane Hanni corner kick home drawing parity for his side much to the joy of the team's fans at the stadium.

With scores levelled, tussle began to regain lead. In the 25th minute, Al Rayyan had a fine opportunity when following



Al Rayyan scored a hard-fought 2-1 win over Al Khor at the Al Khor Stadium.

a top of the box battle the ball went to an unmarked Achraf Bencharki, stationed on the left but his kick saw the ball go left off the left post.

The deadlock continued till late in the second session with both teams trying to break the shackles. Al Rayyan eventually succeeded as Bencharki made a high ball cross from the right, and the ball beat the stretched leg of Al Khor's Ruben Semedo to reach Guedes who slotted it in neatly.

The breakthrough lifted Al Rayyan spirits and left Al Khor still searching for their maiden win in the league championship. Al Khor did try hard to find the equalizer a second time but could not succeed. When a kick inside the danger area was cut off by an Al Rayyan defender's shoulder they also appealed hard to the referee, but it was ruled out.

Al Khor striker Yohan Boli expressed his regret over the team's loss. "We performed well in the match against Al Rayyan, but this performance was not enough for us to come out with a victory and collect the

three points that were important for us," he said. "We know that our position is difficult in the competition as we are in last place, but we will do our best in the upcoming rounds to improve our position and get a boost to move forward in the standings," Boli added.

He continued: We have good players, but we lack some luck in some matches to advance further in the competition and achieve our goal of remaining in the Ooredoo Stars League at the end of the season. The journey is still long, but I trust Al Khor's ability to achieve this.

In the other match yesterday, Al Gharafa beat Umm Salal 3-1 at the Thani Bin Jassim Stadium. Antonio Mance put Umm Salal ahead in the 49th minute, but Gharafa struck back as Joselu converted a penalty in the 62nd minute. Ferjani Sassi added a second in 88th minute, while Jamal Hamad Mayor put the game to bed in the last minute of stoppage time. Gharafa are fifth with 11 points, while Umm Salal are a place below with 10 points.

AL-OBAIDLI WINS AMATEUR CLASS AT HATHAB



Abdullah Saleh al-Obaidli won the Amateur class during the third round of the Longines Hathab Qatar Equestrian Tour at the indoor arena of the Qatar Equestrian Federation yesterday. Al-Obaidli clocking 36.51 seconds on his horse Manny to finish ahead of Ali Abdullah al-Mohannadi (BCO) and Fahad Abdulkarim Abdul (Kay). In the 80cm Future Riders Level 2 competition, Tamim Joaan al-Thani emerged triumphant with Fallonevada. Mohammed Faisal al-Marri (Al Sadd) came second, while Abdulaziz Abdullah al-Aabri (Any Way) was third. Nasser Hamad al-Thani claimed the top spot on his horse Sita in the 60cm Level 1 Future Riders class. Fahad bin Nasser al-Thani (Coco Chanel) finished second, ahead of Mohammed Abdullah al-Marri (Latino).



Younousse and Tijan enter Joao Pessoa Elite16 quarters



Qatar's Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan entered quarter-finals of the Volleyball World Beach Pro Tour Joao Pessoa Elite16 in Brazil yesterday. The duo topped the Group D despite having a mixed outing yesterday, winning one and losing the other match. They beat home favourites Gustavo Carvalhaes and Vitor Felipe 21-16, 21-19, but lost to Argentina's Nicolas Capogrosso and Tomas Capogrosso 21-19, 23-25, 8-15.

FOCUS

Pakistan crush England in 2nd Test to set up series decider

'This has come after some rough times and the boys stepped in after a lot has happened this past week'

AFP
Multan, Pakistan

Spinner Noman Ali took eight wickets as Pakistan crushed England by 152 runs in the second Test to level the series yesterday in Multan.

Noman grabbed 8-46 and Sajid Khan took 2-93 as the pair wrapped up England's second innings for 144 after the visitors were set a daunting target of 297.

It was Pakistan's first home win since February 2021 and came after they were thumped by an innings in the first Test on the same Multan pitch.

The third and final Test starts in Rawalpindi on October 24.

Noman finished with a match haul of 11-147 while Sajid had figures of 9-204, only the second time in Pakistan's history that two bowlers took all 20 wickets in a Test. Pakistan's last Test win at home came against South Africa in Rawalpindi more than three years ago. It was followed by 11 home Tests without a win.

This also becomes Shan Masood's first win as skipper after getting the job last year, including 3-0 and 2-0 whitewashes at the hands of Australia and Bangladesh.

Pakistan's ploy of dropping ace batsman Babar Azam in one of four changes after the first Test and playing on a reused pitch with three spinners paid off handsomely. Azam's replacement, debutant



Pakistan's players celebrate winning the second Test against England at the Multan Cricket Stadium in Multan yesterday. (AFP)

Kamran Ghulam, made a century to anchor Pakistan's first-innings 366.

Masood praised his side for their character.

"The first one (win) for me and long awaited for the team is always special," said Masood.

"This has come after some rough times and the boys stepped in after a lot has happened this past week."

The captain, who like his team had been under fierce pressure in cricket-mad Pakistan, added: "We came up with a strategy to get

20 wickets and we made it happen. "We were never afraid of taking risks. Three years and 11 months creates hunger, so it's good to win at home."

England, who made 291 in their first innings, came into the fourth day firmly up against it after los-

ing openers Zak Crawley (three) and Ben Duckett (nought) late on Thursday.

Resuming at 36-2 on a reused pitch offering sharp spin, Ben Stokes' men managed to add just 108 runs before folding.

"It was a tough ask for us, but

the way we took the game on today was the only way we could win," Stokes said.

In just the second over of the day off-spinner Sajid - one of Pakistan's four changes from the first Test - removed Ollie Pope with a sharp turning delivery and caught the miscued drive off his own bowling. Noman then trapped first-Test history-maker Joe Root leg-before for 18 and Harry Brook for 16 to leave England facing defeat at 78-5.

Brook smashed an epic 317 and Root a brilliant 262 - eclipsing Alastair Cook's England Test run record - in the first match, and their dismissals signalled England's demise was fast approaching. Noman's fourth wicket came in the form of Jamie Smith, whose uppish slog sweep was held by Masood at mid-on. Smith scored six.

Stokes and Brydon Carse fought hard to take the total to 125 when Stokes was stumped in a comical manner, jumping out of the crease to loft Noman but missing the ball as his bat flew out of his hands.

Noman wrapped up the match with the wickets of Carse (27), Jack Leach (one) and Shoaib Bashir (nought), improving his previous best of 7-70 against Sri Lanka in Colombo last year.

BRIEF SCORES (Day 4): Pakistan 366 (Ghulam 118, Ayub 77, Leach 4-114) **and 221** (Salman 63, Bashir 4-66) **beat England 291** (Duckett 114, Sajid 7-111) **and 144** (Noman 8-46) **by 152 runs.**

SPOTLIGHT

India fight back after Ravindra ton cements New Zealand lead

AFP
Bengaluru, India

India hit back with a batting blitz after New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra struck 134 to guide the visitors to a lead of 356 on day three of the rain-hit opening Test yesterday.

The hosts were 231-3 at stumps and still trailed the Black Caps by 125 runs after Glenn Phillips got Virat Kohli caught behind for 70 on the last ball of the day in Bengaluru.

Kohli, who unsuccessfully reviewed his dismissal, put on a stand of 136 with Sarfaraz Khan, who was still batting on 70.

"Important for us to hold our lines and lengths and do that for long periods like Test cricket is," Ravindra told reporters.

"The wicket of Virat was very massive and hopefully we stick at it... in the morning."

Sarfaraz raced to his fifty in 42 balls but the crowd erupted when senior partner Kohli got his half ton at his adopted home ground of IPL team Royal Challengers Bengaluru.

Kohli soon passed 9,000 Test runs, only the fourth Indian to reach the landmark after Sachin Tendulkar (15,921), Rahul Dravid (13,265) and Sunil Gavaskar (10,122).

Spinner Ajaz Patel removed the Indian openers after a strong start to the innings when Yashasvi Jaiswal and skipper Rohit Sharma put on 72 runs.

Jaiswal made 35 before the left-hander danced down the track in his attempt to hit Patel and got stumped by wicketkeeper Tom Blundell.

Rohit smashed Matt Henry for four, six and four to raise his fifty



New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra celebrates after scoring a century during the third day of the first Test against India in Bengaluru yesterday. (AFP)

but soon played a delivery by Patel onto his stumps and was out for 52.

Number three Kohli had a nervy start and got his first runs after 14 balls but eventually found his groove, smashing eight fours and

a six. But the day's star remained the Wellington-born Ravindra, who smashed his second Test ton and was the last Kiwi to fall in the tourists' first innings total of 402.

Ravindra, a batting all-rounder

whose parents hail from Wellington and whose father was in the crowd, said the familiarity helped him in his knock.

"It's a little bit comforting although the wicket is completely different, nice knowing the surroundings," he said. "It's a lovely wicket to bat."

Ravindra resumed on his overnight score of 22 and raised his century with a boundary off Ravichandran Ashwin before lunch.

He kept up the charge during an eighth-wicket stand of 137 with Tim Southee, who smashed 65 with five fours and four sixes.

India's quicks bowled good spells in the morning after New Zealand resumed on 180-3 with Mohammed Siraj and Jasprit Bumrah striking early.

Ravindra led the attack as he and fellow spinner Kuldeep Yadav took three wickets each.

"It was tough to control runs on this wicket, because even the good balls were being hit for runs," said Kuldeep, who wrapped up the New Zealand innings with Ravindra's wicket.

India wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant remained off the field after he injured his knee on Thursday, with Dhruv Jurel substituted.

It was the same knee Pant hurt in a serious car crash in December 2022 that forced him out of action for more than a year.

New Zealand bowled out India for 46 on day two, their third-lowest Test score and lowest ever on home turf. The first day was washed out due to rain.

BRIEF SCORES (Day 3): India 46 and 231 for 3 (Sarfaraz 70*, Kohli 70, Rohit 52) **trail New Zealand 402** (Ravindra 134, Conway 91, Southee 65, Jadeja 3-72) **by 125 runs.**

WOMEN'S T20 WORLD CUP

New Zealand edge Windies to reach final

AFP
Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

New Zealand saw off the danger of Deandra Dottin to book their place in the Women's T20 World Cup final with a nail-biting eight-run win over West Indies in Sharjah yesterday.

After Dottin's 4-22 restricted the White Ferns to 128-9, the all-rounder clubbed a superb 33 from 22 balls with three sixes as West Indies finished just short on 120-8.

New Zealand will face South Africa, who knocked out defending champions Australia on Thursday, in Sunday's final at Dubai. New Zealand, who lost in the finals at the first two tournaments in 2009 and 2010, made a solid start as Suzie Bates (26) and Georgia Plimmer (33) added 48 for the first wicket.

But the innings faltered as Dottin stepped in to remove Amelia Kerr, Brooke Halliday, who made a rapid 18, Maddy Green and Rosemary Mair.

Some late slugging from Isabella Gaze with 20 from 14 balls

gave the Kiwi bowlers a target to defend.

West Indies struggled at the top of their innings against some accurate bowling and the game looked up when captain Hayley Matthews was dismissed for 15.

Dottin, however, clubbed three sixes as she hammered 33 from 22 balls to bring West Indies back into the game.

When she fell, Afy Fletcher (17 not out) and Zaida James (14) took up the fight with New Zealand only sealing victory in the last over of the match.

New Zealand off-spinner Eden Carson was named Player of the Match for her return of 3-29 from four overs.

BRIEF SCORES: New Zealand 128-9 in 20 overs (Georgia Plimmer 33, Suzie Bates 26, Isabella Gaze 20 not out; Deandra Dottin 4-22, Afy Fletcher 2-23) **bt West Indies 120-8 in 20 overs** (Deandra Dottin 33, Afy Fletcher 17 not out; Eden Carson 3-29, Amelia Kerr 2-14) **by eight runs**
Player of the Match: Eden Carson (NZL)



New Zealand's players celebrate after the dismissal of West Indies' captain Hayley Matthews during the ICC Women's T20 World Cup semi-final at the Sharjah Cricket Stadium in Sharjah yesterday. (AFP)

UNCAPPED SPINNER REPLACES SHAKIB IN BANGLADESH TEST SQUAD

Bangladesh called up uncapped spinner Hasan Murad yesterday to replace retiring Shakib Al Hasan ahead of the first Test against South Africa after security fears led the ex-skipper to cancel plans to return home.

Shakib announced his retirement from international cricket last month but said that he wanted to play one last red-ball series at home.

But the 37-year-old is also an ex-lawmaker in a government ousted by a revolution,

and his links to Bangladesh's autocratic former premier have made him a target of public anger.

Shakib cancelled plans to return home on Thursday for the first time since the August uprising, saying the decision was made as "a matter of my own security". Left-arm spinner Murad, 23, was named in the squad instead for the first match of a two-Test series starting in Dhaka on Monday.

"We have been informed that Shakib is

unavailable for the first Test," Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) selection panel chair Gazi Ashraf Hossain said in a statement. "He is at the end of his Test career but along with his experience, we still do not have someone of that calibre with both bat and the ball to replace him," he added. "However, Hasan Murad has performed consistently in first-class cricket... We believe he has the potential to deliver at this level."

Murad has taken 136 first-class wickets

from 30 matches since his 2021 debut. Shakib is a former lawmaker from the party of autocratic ex-leader Sheikh Hasina, who fled by helicopter to India in August.

He is among dozens from Hasina's party facing murder investigations for a deadly police crackdown on protesters during the uprising.

Asif Mahmud, who heads the sports ministry, said he had advised the cricket board to discourage Shakib from returning be-

cause of public anger. Shakib apologised in a Facebook post earlier this month for remaining silent during the revolution.

BANGLADESH SQUAD: Najmul Hossain Shanto (capt), Shadman Islam, Mahmudul Hasan Joy, Zakir Hasan, Mominul Haque Showrab, Mushfiqur Rahim, Litton Das (wk), Zaker Ali Anik, Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Taijul Islam, Nayeem Hasan, Taskin Ahmed, Hasan Mahmud, Nahid Rana, Hasan Murad. (AFP)

MOTORSPORT

Marquez quickest in Australian MotoGP practice

MARQUEZ CLOCKED A BLISTERING FASTEST LAP OF 1MIN 27.770SEC



Gresini Racing MotoGP team rider Marc Marquez of Spain (right) speeds through a corner during a MotoGP practice session at the Australian MotoGP on Phillip Island yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Phillip Island, Australia

Marc Marquez topped the timesheets in weather-disrupted practice for the Australian MotoGP yesterday with championship leader Jorge Martin recovering from a tumble to go fourth fastest.

Six-time world champion Marquez, a four-time winner at Phillip Island, clocked a blistering fastest lap of 1min 27.770sec around the waterfront circuit after early rain cleared.

The Spaniard finished 0.102sec clear of his brother Alex, both on

Gresini bikes, in a session briefly interrupted by a goose on the track.

Italy's Marco Bezzecchi on his Ducati-VR46 came third ahead of Martin on a Pramac, the Spaniard edging his chief title rival Francesco Bagnaia into fifth.

With four race weekends left the championship is finely poised with Martin just 10 points ahead of Italy's Ducati defending champion Bagnaia.

Ducati's Enea Bastianini is 69 points adrift, two clear of Marc Marquez, with both needing podium finishes to stay in touch this weekend.

However, Bastianini could only finish 16th.

The riders finally fired up their bikes after the opening morning practice was cancelled without any action due to persistent heavy rain.

It was a headache for the teams who were keen for a dry day to gather data on what tyres were best suited to the newly resurfaced track.

The drenching stopped in time for the afternoon session, but disaster struck for Martin when he crashed on only his second lap after making contact with Fabio Quartararo.

Bagnaia also struggled, back in the pits early.

When both men returned, a red flag came out after a goose wan-

dered onto the track to further complicate their efforts to clock competitive laps.

Marquez set the early pace before being dethroned by Maverick Vinales with 10 minutes left, but he roared back to take top spot as Martin and Bagnaia threatened.

Vinales, Brad Binder, Fabio Di Giannantonio, Franco Morbidelli and Alex Rins also secured their places in the top 10.

They all progressed straight through to today's second qualifying, which shapes the first four rows of the grid for the sprint race and tomorrow's main event.

The group will be joined by the fastest two in Saturday's first qualifying stint.

TENNIS

Nadal defeated by Alcaraz in Saudi Arabia as career nears end

AFP
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Rafael Nadal admitted his fitness level was well off the tour's top players after falling on Thursday in straight sets to fellow Spaniard Carlos Alcaraz, who described the exhibition match as "a little bit sad".

The 38-year-old Nadal, who announced last week he would retire from tennis after the Davis Cup Finals in Malaga next month, lost 6-3, 6-3 to 21-year-old Alcaraz in the semi-finals of the "Six Kings Slam" event in Saudi Arabia.

Afterwards he described Alcaraz, winner of the French Open and Wimbledon this year, as an "animal" and acknowledged he was not competing at the highest level.

"I have not much pressure here. I'm just trying to have fun," he told a post-match press conference.

"I know I'm going to play against players that...are in much better shape than me because they are on the professional tour and winning tournaments."

Alcaraz said he knew the Saudi crowd was against him but wanted to let Nadal, winner of 22 Grand Slams including 14 French Open titles, bask in the support.

"It's a little bit sad... It was not a really comfortable mo-

ment for me. Obviously I really wanted to win," said Alcaraz. "Once you step on the court it's no friends, no idols" but "I think this is his moment right now," he added.

Prior to Thursday's match Nadal had made his last singles appearance at the Olympic Games in Paris where his campaign was cut short by old rival Novak Djokovic in the second round.

He had also teamed-up with Alcaraz in men's doubles at the Games and may reprise that role at the Davis Cup Finals.

Nadal will play Djokovic again today after the Serbian great lost a much tighter match to Australian Open and US Open champion Jannik Sinner, who prevailed 6-2, 6-7 (0/7), 6-4 and will take on Alcaraz in the final.

"Having Novak in front, it's like a nostalgic thing," Nadal said, looking ahead to their battle for third place in the Saudi exhibition.

"We faced each other plenty of times, so it's going to be good fun to play each other again one more time in this match."

As for the Davis Cup Finals next month, Nadal said he was unclear what his form would be.

"Emotionally I'm sure I will be ready. In terms of physically, in terms of tennis level, I mean (there) remains a month" to prepare, he said, adding that he would not hesitate to speak up if he thought he could not compete well in singles.



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz (right) embraces compatriot Rafael Nadal after winning the semi-final in Riyadh. (Reuters)

FORMULA 1

Norris shrugs off Red Bull 'trick' of the trade at US Grand Prix

AFP
Austin

McLaren's Lando Norris said he felt calm and confident ahead of this weekend's United States Grand Prix and did not expect rivals Red Bull to lose performance after making requested car alterations.

The champion team admitted they had made changes after talks with the sport's ruling body the International Motoring Federation (FIA), widely reported to have concerned a "trick" mechanism to control the ride height of their cars.

Red Bull has denied making use of the device.

"It's one thing having it on your car and a second if you're using it," said Norris who is 52 points behind Red Bull's three-time world champion Max Verstappen with six races remaining.

Verstappen will be seeking to end a run of eight races without a victory in Sunday's contest at the Circuit of the Americas.

"So, if it has been helping them, if they've been utilising it in the way people think they have, then maybe it will shift in our direction, but when you talk about things like that, they're not going to have got several pole positions or wins just because of such a device.

"So I don't think it will really change anything in the scheme of things - maybe at certain qualifying when it's been split by hundreds of a second or even thousands. Then you might say, 'OK, well, maybe this has helped in that direction or this direction?'"

The story was a hot topic in the Austin paddock with many ob-



McLaren's British driver Lando Norris wears a cowboy hat in the paddock ahead of the United States Formula One Grand Prix at the Circuit of the Americas in Austin, Texas. (AFP)

servers suggesting that the issue was that a device may have been used to change a car's ride height in parc ferme between qualifying and the race.

"While we have not received any indication of any team employing such a system, the FIA remains vigilant in our ongoing efforts to enhance the policing of the sport," the ruling body said in a statement.

Teams are not allowed to make set-up changes between qualifying and the race.

A Red Bull representative said: "Yes, it exists, although it is inaccessible once the car is fully assembled and ready to run. In the correspondence we have with the FIA, this part came up and we have agreed a plan going forward."

On his prospects this weekend as F1 goes into a triple header of races in Texas, Mexico and Brazil, Norris said: "Our expectations now, and actually for a while, have

been that we're a top team and we're fighting for wins and we're fighting for a constructors' championship and a drivers' championship.

"So just as much as it can go wrong, it can also go well, like it has done for us. We're fighting against the best of the best and it's been a fun year. I think no matter what, it's still been a successful season."

Verstappen made it clear he was unconcerned over the issue.

"Let's see how the upgrades go," he said, referring to a package aimed to boost his and the team's performance for the run-in to the championship season in which they trail rivals McLaren in the constructors title race.

"I'm not worried about anything and I just want to go out and have fun and do the best I can to do well in the race. There's a lot of changes including the track, too, so let's see how it goes."

Injured Osaka pulls out of Pan Pacific Open in Tokyo

Tokyo: Four-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka of Japan pulled out of next week's Pan Pacific Open in Tokyo yesterday because of a back injury.

The former world number one has been sidelined since she retired from her last-16 match at the China Open against eventual champion Coco Gauff at the start of the month.

She then pulled out of this week's Japan Open in Osaka.

The 27-year-old was set to compete at the Pan Pacific Open as a wild card but organisers said she would be "absent because of a lower back injury".

Osaka's appearance at the China Open was her first tournament under Patrick Mouratoglou, the Frenchman best known for being the long-time former coach of Serena Williams.

She has struggled for consistency since returning to tennis

in January after the birth of her daughter Shai in July 2023. Her best results since becoming a parent have been two quarter-final appearances.

China's Olympic champion Zheng Qinwen - ranked number seven in the world - is the top-ranked player at the Pan Pacific Open. Russia's Daria Kasatkina and Brazil's Beatriz Haddad Maia are also set to compete. (AFP)

SWIMMING

Marchand says 'just having fun' after victory in post-Olympic return

AFP
Shanghai

Leon Marchand won gold in the 100m individual medley with a timing of 50.65 seconds at the short-course World Cup in Shanghai yesterday, in his first swim since his Paris heroics.

The 22-year-old Frenchman, who won four gold medals and was the poster boy of the Olympics this summer, beat Switzerland's Noe Ponti by just one millisecond. Marchand was thrust into the global spotlight at the Paris Olympics when he won all four of his individual races - the 200m butterfly, 200m breaststroke and 200m-400m medley double.

That put him in elite company alongside American legend Michael Phelps.

"Right now I'm just trying to get back to old training," Marchand, who spent weeks resting after the Olympics, told AFP.

"I don't really expect a lot of results, I'm just trying to have



France's Leon Marchand reacts after winning the final of the men's 100m individual medley event during the World Aquatics Swimming World Cup in Shanghai yesterday. (AFP)

fun and go back to my standards," he said. Marchand surprised audiences in the 100m individual medley heats earlier yesterday when he walked up to his lane wearing a swimming cap bearing the name of United States great Caeleb Dressel.

The nine-time gold medallist

is not in China. Marchand said he had exchanged caps with Dressel at the Olympics.

"Dressel is someone I look up to in swimming, he really helped me in my swimming career and in my life too, so I was really proud of wearing this cap this morning," he told AFP.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Liverpool's Slot warns against snap judgements

'If you judge your team only on a week that would not be fair'

AFP
London

Arne Slot has warned that Chelsea could be Liverpool's "toughest opponent" of the season so far but cautioned against snap judgements as he prepares for a testing week.

Liverpool are top of the Premier League table with six wins in seven games but have had a relatively kind fixture list so far under their new manager.

That changes from Sunday, when they face high-flying Chelsea, before a tough match at RB Leipzig in the Champions League in midweek and an away trip to Arsenal next week.

Over the coming weeks they also face Brighton, Aston Villa and Manchester City in the Premier League, with Bayern Leverkusen and Real Madrid both making the trip to Anfield in the Champions League.

Slot was asked yesterday whether Enzo Maresca's Chelsea, fourth in the league, would be their hardest game so far.

"If you look at the league table it is," he said.

"I think Manchester United (Liverpool won 3-0) is a very good team, a top club in England that has spent a lot of money to make the team better again, same for Chelsea in this season.

"Chelsea does really well, so if you look at the league table then they are the ones that might be our toughest opponent but it's not always about the league table sometimes, it's about the form on the day, it's about their game plan.



Arne Slot's Liverpool are top of the Premier League table with six wins in seven games but have had a relatively kind fixture list so far.

"We had some difficulties with Wolves as well, who are bottom of the league, but it is a challenge that's for sure."

Former Feyenoord manager Slot, who has hit the ground running at Anfield after replacing Jurgen Klopp, has warned against

reading too much into results over the next week.

"If you judge your team only on a week that would not be fair," he said.

"You have to judge as a team after this spell of games, not three of them but six, seven or eight of them, then we know better how we act and how we perform. If we play tough Champions League games and tough league games, it's normal in everybody's season and we know how difficult it is."

He added: "The only ones who showed they could perform Champions League and in the league are Manchester City and Arsenal in the last two seasons.

"Now it's up to us but I don't think it's fair to judge us after a week, even if we play really well it wouldn't be fair. The best way to judge us is in four weeks."

Slot confirmed that number one goalkeeper Alisson Becker would be out for the coming weeks.

"That's a blow for him and for us because he did really well this season and has done so well for this club for so many years," he said.

"Now the good thing is Caoimhin (Kelleher) did really well for us in previous years, in this season also, so we have a good replacement but you always want all your players now."

Kelleher, 25, came close to leaving in the close season in search of regular playing time after Liverpool signed Georgia international Giorgi Mamardashvili, who is set to join from Valencia in 2025.

Brazil's Alisson missed international duty after suffering an injury during a 1-0 win at Crystal Palace earlier this month.

Chelsea's James back in contention for Liverpool trip after long layoff

Chelsea captain Reece James has recovered from injury and is available to make his season debut at Liverpool in the Premier League on Sunday, manager Enzo Maresca said. Defender James has struggled with hamstring injuries over the years, and started just five league games last season. He has not played since injuring his hamstring again during Chelsea's pre-season tour of the United States. "James is available. Finally he is back," Maresca told reporters yesterday. "He worked with us all the international break and it's good news, especially for him because the injury is not a good feeling. "Finally we have all the squad available apart from the suspended

ones." The Italian added that Chelsea would have to manage the 24-year-old's workload and restricting him to one game a week could help solve his recurring injury problem. "In this moment I think it can be the solution now. In the future, I don't know," Maresca said.

"If we want to build something with him in terms of physicality and physical condition, probably the solution is to allow him to go slowly and to use him once a week and then hopefully in the future, we can use him more during the week."

Maresca also plans to manage the workloads of Romeo Lavia and Wesley Fofana in similar fashion. The potential return of James is a timely

boost for Chelsea's beleaguered back line, with Marc Cucurella and Fofana suspended after picking up their fifth yellow cards of the season. Maresca's men have impressed in his debut season in charge, netting 16 goals, just one shy of Manchester City's league-leading 17, but have failed to beat Liverpool in their last five Premier League meetings, losing 4-1 at Anfield in January.

"We are going to approach the game not thinking where we are, but preparing the game in the best way to get points," he said.

"This game will not define where we are and in the event we lose? It's just a process, it's just a game. We will do our best."

FOCUS

Saka's injury is not serious, Arsenal boss Arteta says

Reuters
London

Arsenal winger Bukayo Saka's injury is not serious and they are hopeful he will be available for their Premier League trip to Bournemouth on Saturday after picking up a problem on England duty, manager Mikel Arteta has said.

The 23-year-old was forced off during England's shock 2-1 loss to Greece in the Nations League at Wembley last week with a slight hamstring issue. Saka returned to Arsenal for further assessment, missing England's 3-1 win away to Finland.

Saka has scored two goals and provided seven assists in seven Premier League appearances for Arsenal this season.

"(Saka) is not a serious injury," Arteta told reporters yesterday. "He is evolving really well. He has done a few things in the last two days. He wasn't fit enough to play with the national team in the second game, but we are hopeful.

"We have a training session this afternoon. He did some bits yesterday, let's see if he can make it on time."

Another injury concern is Kai Havertz after the forward missed Germany's Nations League



matches against Bosnia and the Netherlands due to a knee problem. Brazilian left winger Gabriel Martinelli is also doubtful for the Bournemouth match.

Havertz, 25, has been enjoying a fine campaign, netting four times in seven Premier League games. "He had a few issues, and we have been dealing with that. He has been absolutely brilliant. He has very good communication with the national team and the manager," Arteta said. "We have modified everything we could do here and if he trains well today, he has a good chance to be fit and available.

"Gabi landed yesterday afternoon here, so we had a very short time to be with him," added the Arsenal coach. "Yesterday he went outside to do a little bit and see how he is feeling, and today will be another step. (We will see) if we want to take the risk if he is fit

because I know what the player is going to say."

Captain Martin Odegaard will miss Saturday's game as he continues to recover from an ankle injury, but Arteta said next week will be crucial to see how close the Norway midfielder is.

Last season's runners-up Arsenal are third in the standings with 17 points from seven matches and trail leaders Liverpool by a point. Bournemouth are 13th on eight points. Arteta was also asked about the appointment of German Thomas Tuchel as England manager.

Former Chelsea and Bayern Munich boss Tuchel is the first German to manage England and only the third foreigner after the late Sven-Goran Eriksson of Sweden and Italian Fabio Capello.

Arteta described Tuchel as one of the best coaches in the world.

SPOTLIGHT

Coach Ancelotti says Mbappe 'seems unaffected' by rape investigation reports

AFP
Madrid

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said yesterday the club's French striker Kylian Mbappe "seems unaffected to me" after Swedish media reported he is being investigated for an alleged rape during a visit to Stockholm.

Mbappe's lawyer told AFP this week the France captain was "shocked" to see his name linked to the investigation and he will take action for libel.

The forward was not selected by France for UEFA Nations League matches after an injury and visited the Swedish capital with a group of people last week.

"In this moment (the reports) are speculations, I see him working every day, he is happy, content, he doesn't seem affected to me at all," Ancelotti told a news conference.

"He's looking forward to keep on helping the team."

Ancelotti said Mbappe, 25, had been given time off by the Spanish and European champions.

"The days off were set for him and beyond that, individuals can choose what they want to do," explained Ancelotti.

"I don't care where players prefer to rest. I went to London for a couple of days and didn't ask anybody. I also don't have a travel agency to organise trips for players."

A Swedish prosecutor has confirmed that an investigation

has been opened, without naming Mbappe. Mbappe claimed in a post on X on Monday there was a link between the report and a hearing before a French league committee on Tuesday over his bitter dispute with his former club Paris Saint-Germain over what he says is 55mm euros (\$60mn) in unpaid wages.

"FAKE NEWS!!!! It's becoming so predictable, on the eve of the hearing, as if by chance," he wrote.

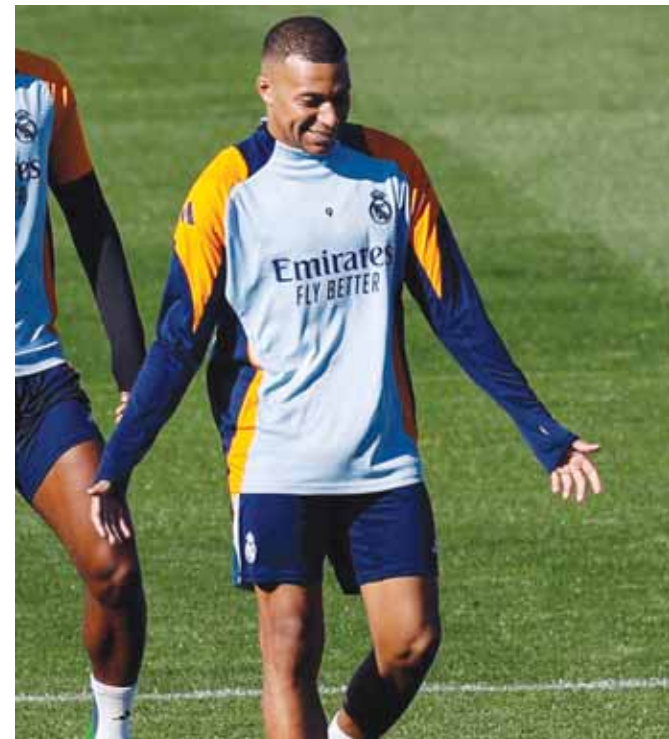
Mbappe completed a dream move to join Madrid in the summer after seven years at PSG. The striker scored five goals in his first seven La Liga appearances before suffering a thigh injury.

Mbappe made a quicker-than-expected recovery but France did not select him for their games against Belgium and Israel, earning the forward criticism in his homeland.

Madrid, three points behind leaders Barcelona, visit Celta Vigo today with Mbappe expected to start for Los Blancos. Ancelotti said the superstar attacker looks a "different player" after doing some fitness work during the international break.

"Mbappe took advantage of this break to improve his condition, recover from injuries... he's doing very well, happy and looking forward to playing tomorrow," continued Ancelotti.

"This fortnight has helped him a lot - he's a different player than he was from before the break."



Real Madrid's French forward Kylian Mbappe gestures as he attends a training session at the club's training facilities of Valdebebas, in the outskirts of Madrid, yesterday. (AFP)

COMMENT

Luis Enrique happy with PSG's start to season despite difficulties

Reuters
London

Paris St Germain's defence of their Ligue 1 title is already proving a challenge and they have also lost one of their two Champions League games, but manager Luis Enrique is content with his side's early season form.

PSG are unbeaten in the league, but drawing two out of seven games has allowed AS Monaco take a two point lead at the top of the standings, and Luis Enrique's side were also outclassed in their 2-0 defeat by Arsenal.

The manager, who would not comment on media reports that he has extended his contract at

PSG until there is official confirmation from the club, remained upbeat as his side prepare for Saturday's home game with Strasbourg. "The start of the season in general has been very positive, even more positive than I imagined," Luis Enrique said at a press conference on Friday.

"Throughout the season, it is not a linear process, there are better moments and less good moments. We haven't had any bad spell yet. We would like to win every game but that is not possible in football."

The Strasbourg game comes after an international break where many of PSG's players were in action, and the manager accepts this will be a factor in the match. "We have to bear in mind

playing time with international teams, travel time, and fatigue. So, of course that is going to have an effect on the team on the pitch tomorrow," Luis Enrique said.

"We need to win tomorrow but it will not be easy. It is never easy to come back after the international break."

The international break can also have its positive side. One player who has struggled at PSG this season but shone for his country is forward Randal Kolo Muani, who scored both goals in France's 2-1 win in Belgium on Monday. "That is certainly good news for me as a coach, to see our international players getting good results, produce strong performances, scoring goals, defending well," Luis Enrique said.

Asian football body takes Bahrain concerns 'seriously' after threats

Asian football chiefs said yesterday they took Bahrain's concerns "seriously" after the country looked to get a World Cup qualifier moved out of Indonesia over alleged death threats.

Bahrain are scheduled to play Indonesia away in March in the decisive third round of Asian qualifying for the 2026 World Cup in North America.

The teams met last week and drew 2-2, with hosts Bahrain

equalising in the ninth minute of injury time. Indonesian officials and supporters later complained bitterly that the added time had gone on for too long.

Bahrain's football association (BFA) said this week it will ask for the return fixture to be moved out of Indonesia "to preserve the safety of the team".

Bahrain's players have been "subjected to a torrent of insults, slander, threats and hacking op-

erations" online, the BFA alleged. Indonesia's FA said the Bahrain team would be safe.

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) said it was "aware of the concerns".

"The AFC takes these concerns seriously and is fully committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of all players, officials, and fans, while condemning all forms of online abuse and threats," it said in a statement.