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MOTORSPORT

Qatar International Baja attracts quality entry list

38 cars have entered under various FIA categories with 62 motorcycles and five quads competing

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) has released a quality entry list for next weekend's Qatar International Baja, round six of the FIA World Baja Cup and the FIM Bajas World Cup and the second round of the FIA Middle East Baja Cup. The event takes place from October 30th to November 2nd.

Thirty-eight cars have entered under the various FIA categories with 62 motorcycles and five quads competing under the auspices of the FIM. The FIA section is further broken down into eight cars registered in the Ultimate section, 12 competing in the Challenger group, 13 in SSV and five in the Stock category for series production cross-country machines. Of those entrants, 12 are registered for the FIA World Baja Cup and 14 will challenge for points in the FIA Middle East Baja Cup.

Dennis Krotov tops the car category in an X-Raid Mini JCW Rally 3.0i, where main competition is likely in the Ultimate section from the Overdrive Racing Toyota duo of Dania Akeel and Akira Muira. Mirosław Zapletal will also make the trip directly from this weekend's Qassim Rally Toyota in Saudi Arabia.

The South Racing Can-Am Team's Diego Martinez is chasing overall Challenger honours. The Argentine heads the lightweight prototype section against the likes of Eduard Pons and Khalid al-Jafra in their Taurus T3 Max entries and five similar machines entered by the QMMF for Rashid al-Muhammadi, Abdulaziz al-Kuwari, Khalifa al-Attiya, Nouf al-Sowaidi and Ahmad al-Muhammadi.

Spaniard Fernando Alvarez leads the overall FIA World Baja Cup Drivers' Championship and the SSV section in his Can-Am Maverick XRS Turbo RR and the Argentina-based Spaniard heads a field that includes his main series rival Joao



Mohammed al-Balooshi heads a bumper motorcycle section for Qatar International Baja.

Ferreira and the title-challenging Amerigo Ventura and João Dias. Ferreira looks to have the Ultimate title in the bag already and has switched from an X-Raid Mini to compete in a Can-Am on this occasion.

Quaddy Racing will run new Yamaha YXR 1000R Sport Shift models for Ventura and Qatar's Ahmed al-Kuwari with local drivers Mohammed al-Atteya and Abdullah al-Khelaifi also entered in SSVs.

Dutch veteran Erik van Loon will continue test and development work with the new Can-Am Maverick R, but will run in an 'Experimental' category and will not be eligible for the official SSV classification.

Local driver Abdullah al-Rabban and Saudi rival Majed al-Thunayyan top the Stock class and are registered for the FIA Middle East Baja Cup.

MX Ride Dubai's Mohammed al-Ba-



Haitham al-Tuwaijri is the top quad seed for next weekend's Qatar International Baja.



Diego Martinez tops the Challenger category.

looshi is chasing overall FIM Bajas World Cup honours. The Emirati tops a quality multi-national motorcycle field that includes his two main Portuguese rivals David Megre and Pedro Bianchi Prata, Australian Andrew Houlihan and a host of riders from Poland, Kuwait, Lebanon, Great Britain, Slovenia, Germany, Ireland, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, France, India, Croatia, Canada, Mexico and the USA.

Abdulatif Mojadam, Abdulrahman al-Sheeb and Mohammed al-Thani represent the host nation, while Pole Joanna Mo-

drzewska and India's Sarah Kashyap will duel for FIM Women's category honours.

Haitham al-Tuwaijri, Abdulaziz al-Shayban, Hani al-Noumesi and Abdulaziz al-Atawi fly the Saudi flag in the quad category against the Emirati Abdulaziz Ahli in an all-Yamaha line-up.

The event is being organised by the QMMF run under the chairmanship of QMMF President Abdulrahman al-Manai, QMMF's Executive Director Amro al-Hamad and board member Abdulrazaq al-Kuwari.

FOCUS

85th FIG Congress kicks off in Doha

The 85th Congress of the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) officially began yesterday in Doha, welcoming over 500 delegates from 157 countries. The three-day event gathers representatives from national gymnastics federations across the globe.

The opening session was attended by Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain, Secretary-General of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC), and FIG President Morinari Watanabe.

Ali al-Hitmi, First Vice-President of FIG and President of the Qatar Gymnastics Federation, expressed his pride in the record-breaking participation at this year's Congress, underscoring the significance of Qatar's role in the international sports community.

Al-Hitmi highlighted Qatar's key contributions to the growth of gymnastics globally and expressed his gratitude to the QOC for its support in making the event a success. Sara Khalid Nasser al-Mesnad, Assistant Director of International Co-operation and Communication at the QOC, also welcomed the delegates.

"Over the years, Qatar has built a reputation as a global sporting hub – not only because of the events we host, but because of the people who make it all possible, such as Ali al-Hitmi," al-Mesnad said. "As a founding member and current President of the Qatar Gymnastics Federation al-Hitmi has devoted his career to advancing gymnastics in Qatar, the region, and beyond. His leadership has fostered an environment where athletes can thrive."

"This Congress arrives at a pivotal moment for gymnastics. The decisions



Secretary-General of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain, FIG President Morinari Watanabe, First Vice-President of FIG and President of the Qatar Gymnastics Federation Ali al-Hitmi and QOC Assistant Director of International Co-operation and Communication Sara Khalid Nasser al-Mesnad at the 85th FIG Congress in Doha.

made here will shape the sport's future for many years to come. Qatar is committed to supporting that future, not just through hosting events, but through the dedication of our leaders and ad-

ministrators who continuously contribute to gymnastics' global development."

FIG President Watanabe commended Qatar for hosting the 85th Congress and acknowledged Doha's integral role

in promoting gymnastics on the world stage. He highlighted Qatar's enduring support for the sport through its collaboration with FIG, including the annual hosting of the Artistic Gymnastics World Cup at Aspire Dome. Watanabe also praised Doha's standing as a premier global sports capital.

On October 25, delegates will vote to elect FIG's new governing bodies, including the President, three Vice-Presidents, seven Executive Committee members, and 21 Council members, with quotas for continental representation. Additionally, elections will be held for the President and six members of the Gymnastics for All Committee, as well as for the Presidents and six members of the Technical Committees for each of FIG's seven disciplines. Notably, Parkour will have its own Technical Committee for the first time. Two auditors will also be elected.

The Congress will welcome five new national gymnastics federations: Antigua and Barbuda, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Kenya and Zambia. Upon approval, this will bring the total number of FIG-affiliated federations to 164.

Delegates will also hear reports from the independent Gymnastics Ethics Foundation and the FIG Foundation for Solidarity, along with updates on safeguarding measures, the ASOIF Good Governance report, and insights from the new National Federation-Insights project, which aims to strengthen understanding of FIG's global membership.

Furthermore, proposed amendments to the FIG Statutes include the introduction of Paragymnastics as a new competitive discipline within FIG.

Qatar fall two places to 46th in FIFA Rankings

Doha: Qatar fell two places to 46th in the latest FIFA rankings after their struggles in the 2026 World Cup Qualifiers. The Asian champions had already fallen 10 spots in the previous rankings after a loss to the United Arab Emirates and a draw against North Korea in their opening two games of the qualifiers.

A recent 4-1 defeat to Iran pushed them further down, while a 3-1 win over lower-ranked Kyrgyzstan had little effect on their standing in the rankings announced yesterday.

Qatar remain the fifth-best Asian team, with Japan maintaining their place as the highest ranked Asian side. The Samurai Blue, who beat Saudi Arabia and drew with Australia in Group C of the qualifiers, moved one spot up to 15th.

Iran stayed in 19th after they drew with Uzbekistan and defeated Qatar in their Group A fixtures in October. South Korea (22), Australia (24), Iraq (56), Uzbekistan (58), Saudi Arabia (59), Jordan (64) and United Arab Emirates (68) are other sides to make up the top 10 highest Asian sides.

Meanwhile, world champions Argentina retained their top spot, but the gap between them and the chasing pack has narrowed. France remain second, with Spain in third.

England (4th), Brazil (5th), and Belgium (6th) have all held their positions. Portugal (7th, up 1) and Italy (9th, up 1) were the only teams to climb within the top ten, while the Netherlands (8th, down 1) and Colombia (10th, down 1) complete the group. Germany (11th, up 2) are closing in on a return to the top ten.

Comoros, Sudan, and Botswana made the biggest moves in the latest rankings. During the recent international window, 32 qualifiers for the FIFA World Cup 2026, 47 matches for the CAF Africa Cup of Nations 2025, 79 Nations League fixtures, and 17 friendlies were played, making October 2024 a particularly busy month for global football.

MATCH REPORT

Seven-star Sundar delivers as India restrict NZ to 259

The young off-spinner bags 7-59 as veteran Ashwin takes 3-64

Reuters
Pune

India's Washington Sundar claimed a career-best seven-wicket haul and spin partner Ravichandran Ashwin took three to dismiss New Zealand for 259 before the hosts reached 16-1 at stumps on the opening day of the second Test in Pune yesterday.

India lost Rohit Sharma, the skipper bowled by Tim Southee for a nine-ball duck, but Shubman Gill was unbeaten on 10 with Yashasvi Jaiswal six not out at the end of an absorbing day.

Brought into the side in place of Kuldeep Yadav following India's eight-wicket defeat in the series opener in Bengaluru, Washington justified his selection by scything through New Zealand's middle and lower order to finish with 7-59.

"What happened today is a dream come true. To be living the dream is an unbelievable feeling," Washington said.

"I'd manifested this to happen in this particular series for a couple of weeks. The way it came through, I'm really grateful.

"I knew I was going to play this game two days ago. It's a great opportunity because I wasn't part of the squad to start the series with ... to get this opportunity, I'm really grateful to the coach and the captain."

Ashwin claimed 3-64 as India made the most of the turn on offer at the Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium to dismiss the tourists cheaply after they were well placed at 197-3. Devon Conway, who fell nine runs short of a ton in the first innings of the Black Caps' series-opening victory, made 76 while Rachin Ravindra scored 65 before Washington took charge and put India



India's Washington Sundar (third right) celebrates with teammates after taking the wicket of New Zealand's Tim Southee during the first day of the second Test at the Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium in Pune yesterday. (AFP)

in a strong position. Ravindra scored 134 and 39 not out in the first Test and picked up from where he left off, reaching his fifty with back-to-back fours off Akash Deep as India's shoulders had begun to droop late in the afternoon.

Washington lifted the gloom with a couple of unplayable deliveries that castled Ravindra and Tom Blundell (3) in a 10-minute spell before tea.

He returned after the break to remove Daryl Mitchell (18), Glenn Phillips (9), Southee (5) and Ajaz Patel (4) and leave the touring side shell-shocked.

Mitchell Santner was the last to fall for an entertaining 33, the left-hander's stumps shattered by another peach of a delivery

from Washington. Conway earlier reached his third fifty in four innings with a driven boundary on the first delivery after lunch from Jasprit Bumrah and hit him for two more in the same over.

He also deployed the reverse sweep to good effect but was caught behind after a misjudged drive off Ashwin, who bagged his 531st wicket to surpass Australia's Nathan Lyon and sit seventh on the all-time list.

New Zealand opted to bat and made a good start as captain Tom Latham and Conway safely negotiated the fast bowlers, but India hit back by introducing spin after seven overs.

Ashwin had Latham trapped plumb in front of the wicket for 15 with one that drifted and turned,

while Washington also got early assistance from the black-soil wicket.

New Zealand kept rotating the strike, punishing the rare bad delivery, before Ashwin struck again by having Will Young caught behind for 18 following a successful review when the batsman attempted to tinkle one down the leg side.

India have won their last 18 home series since 2012 but that record is on the line after they lost the opening test. The last match is in Mumbai early next month.

BRIEF SCORES (Day 1)
India 16 for 1 (Southee 1-4) **trail New Zealand 259** (Conway 76, Ravindra 65, Washington 7-59, Ashwin 3-64) **by 243 runs**

FOCUS

Rabada 'a superstar' as South Africa crush hosts Bangladesh



South Africa's Kagiso Rabada (centre) celebrates with teammates during the fourth day of the first Test in Dhaka yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Mirpur, Bangladesh

South Africa cruised to a seven-wicket win over Bangladesh in the first Test yesterday with fast bowler Kagiso Rabada the star of the show in Mirpur.

Rabada took 6-46 as Bangladesh went from 283-7 overnight to 307 all out, leaving the visitors a victory target of 106.

Rabada finished with 9-72 in the match, having been the fastest bowler to reach 300 Test wickets during the first innings.

"It's special," stand-in captain Aiden Markram said of a victory that was sealed before lunch on day four and gave South Africa a 1-0 lead in the two-match series.

They move up to fourth in the World Test Championship standings.

"A pretty young group, or slightly inexperienced group... to come to the subcontinent and get a win is great for us," Markram added.

Left-arm spinner Taijul Islam took all the wickets to fall in his 3-43, but he failed to slow South Africa's chase as they reached 106-3.

Tony de Zorzi top-scored with a quickfire 41 off 52 balls, hitting seven fours.

Fellow opener Markram was first to go, bowled by Taijul for 20.

De Zorzi departed in the 16th over trying to play a big shot over long-on, caught by Hasan Mahmud.

David Bedingham was third out

caught behind by wicketkeeper Litton Das.

Tristan Stubbs, unbeaten on 30, ensured there were no further alarms.

"He has been a superstar for us for years," Markram added of Rabada.

"And to see all those stats pop up about him... it really proves that he's one in a million, and we're really lucky to have him on our team."

Bangladesh lost their last three wickets for just 24 runs inside half an hour, all-rounder Mehidy Hasan Miraz top-scoring with 97.

"Missing out on the century is disappointing," said Mehidy yesterday.

"I would have been happy if I had executed the plan better. I was only focusing on guiding the team to a strong position."

Nayeem Hasan departed lbw without adding to his overnight 16 on the third ball of the day when a rampant Rabada inswinger kept low.

Wiaan Mulder removed Taijul for seven in the fourth over via a thick edge to Stubbs at third slip.

Mehidy fell three runs short of his second Test century in the next over when he edged Rabada to Mulder at slip.

BRIEF SCORES (Day 4)
South Africa 308 (Verreynne 114, Mulder 54, Taijul 5-122) **and 106 for 3** (De Zorzi 41, Stubbs 30*, Taijul 3-43) **beat Bangladesh 106** (Mulder 3-22, Rabada 3-26, Maharaj 3-34) **and 307** (Mehidy 97, Jaker 58, Rabada 6-46) **by 7 wickets**

Washington delighted to be part of spin trio after day one heroics

Pune: Washington Sundar was the standout bowler for India with seven wickets against New Zealand yesterday but the 25-year-old said being part of the three-pronged spin attack on the opening day of the second test was a special experience. After veteran spinner Ravichandran Ashwin did the initial damage with 3-64, Washington ripped through the Black Caps and finished with career-best figures of 7-59 to restrict them to 259 before India reached 16-1 at stumps on a riveting day. Ravindra Jadeja went wicketless on the day but helped keep the tourists from building on their positive start. "We communicated a lot. They brought a lot of qualities, skill sets and experience as well. That really helps for someone who is playing along with them. It definitely helped me today," Washington told reporters. "It's special, isn't it, to be playing

in a game that both of them are a part of. I hope that we'll get to play a lot more games together." Washington was a late addition to the squad after India's eight-wicket defeat in the series opener in Bengaluru and he said he was delighted with how things unfolded for him. "Right from the start, getting to play this game and coming back to the test squad, there are a lot of things that I can say mean a lot to me and are very special," added Washington, who replaced Kuldeep Yadav in the eleven. "I'm grateful. I don't think I'll ever forget this day." Washington will add extra firepower to India's long batting line-up having scored 152 in a recent domestic game and he said he was looking forward to today's action. "It's going to be exciting," the Tamil Nadu player added. "Hopefully, we can put a lot of runs on the board."



India's Washington Sundar (left) celebrates with teammates Rohit Sharma (right) and Ravindra Jadeja after taking the wicket of New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra during the first day of the second Test in Pune yesterday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Smith rescues edgy England as Sajid picks up six wickets



England's Jamie Smith plays a shot during the first day of the third and final Test against Pakistan at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium yesterday. Right: Pakistan's Sajid Khan celebrates after taking the wicket of England's Harry Brook. (AFP/Reuters)

AFP
Rawalpindi, Pakistan

England fought back to reduce Pakistan to 73-3 on the first day of the series-deciding third Test in Rawalpindi yesterday, after off-spinner Sajid Khan took six wickets.

Sajid finished with 6-128 and left-arm spinner Noman Ali took 3-88 after a rearguard 89 by wicketkeeper Jamie Smith enabled England to recover to 267 from a precarious 110-5 at lunch.

At the close, Pakistan captain Shan Masood and Saud Shakeel were both unbeaten on 16, with the home team trailing by 194 and the match in the balance.

On a dry and spin-friendly Rawalpindi pitch, 13 wickets fell on day one with all but one going to spin bowlers. In the final session, England off-spinner Shoaib Bashir dismissed Abdullah Shafique for 14 and left-arm

Jack Leach accounted for Saim Ayub who had made 19.

Gus Atkinson was the only fast bowler to take a wicket, dismissing Kamran Ghulam for three.

"The pitch helped us for the first 25 overs, but when the ball got softer it was difficult to spin the ball," said Sajid, who took nine wickets in the second Test victory in Multan.

"Smith played a brilliant knock otherwise we could have got them out for under 200. We need a good first-innings lead to win this Test," admitted Sajid.

England were in huge trouble at 118-6 after they lost captain Ben Stokes in the third over of the second session, caught by Sajid for 12.

But Smith, who reached his fifty off 94 balls, and Atkinson (39) added 105 for the seventh wicket to rescue their side.

Smith fell 11 runs short of his second Test century after enabling England to add 149 for their last four wickets.

Smith smashed six towering sixes and five fours in his 119-ball knock before he was caught off a miscued slog against spinner Zahid Mahmood in the last over before tea.

"I want to be someone who does well in all conditions, not just at home," said Smith, who is playing his first Test series overseas.

"To come out here and to put in that performance is quite pleasing."

After tea, Sajid removed Rehan Ahmed for nine to complete his third five-wicket haul before also dismissing Leach for 16.

The morning session was dominated by second Test heroes Sajid and Noman who bowled unchanged for 42 overs at the start of England's innings.

After England won the toss and opted to bat, Pakistan opened with the spin duo, who benefited from the parched pitch offering turn and low bounce from the first ball.

It was only the fourth time in Test cricket history the new ball on the first morning had been taken by two spinners and the first time in Pakistan.

Zak Crawley and Ben Duckett raced to 56 in a confident start but England lost Crawley (29), Ollie Pope (three) and Joe Root (five) for just 24 runs to be 80-3.

Noman had Crawley caught off a miscued drive while Sajid removed Pope and Root before.

Duckett, who completed a half-century off 76 balls, was trapped lbw by Noman for 52 after hitting four fours and a six to leave England 98-4.

That became 98-5 five balls later when first Test triple centurion Harry Brook was bowled behind his legs by Sajid for five attempting a sweep.

BRIEF SCORES (Day 1)
Pakistan 73 for 3 (Masood 16*, Shakeel 16*) **trail England 267** (Smith 89, Duckett 52, Sajid 6-128) **by 194 runs**

FORMULA ONE

Alonso calls in sick ahead of his 400th career race

'Hopefully I've got at least another 40 or 50 more races to come'

Reuters
Mexico City

Aston Martin's double world champion Fernando Alonso called in sick yesterday ahead of what will be his record 400th Formula One Grand Prix weekend.

The team said the 43-year-old Spaniard, who had been due to take part in a news conference at Mexico City's Autodromo Hermanos Rodriguez, was feeling unwell and would skip his regular media activities.

"Fernando is focused on feeling 100% for Friday and his planned return to the AMR24 (car) for free practice two," the team said.

Brazilian reserve Felipe Drugovich had always been due to take Alonso's place in first practice.

Although Sunday will be Alonso's 400th race weekend, he has actually started 'only' 396 races so far.

He was unable to re-start Belgium 2001 with Minardi, missed the infamous six-car 2005 US race with Renault and was out of the 2017 Russian Grand Prix before the start due to a McLaren engine issue.

Alonso, who debuted with Minardi in 2001 and won his titles with Renault in 2005 and 2006, has still taken part in more than a third of all world championship Grands Prix held since the first in 1950.



Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso takes a selfie during his 400th Grand Prix press conference ahead of the Mexico City Grand Prix. (Reuters)

Winner of 32, his last victory was in Spain with Ferrari in 2013.

"Championships and race wins are what matter most to us as drivers but, at the same time, it shows my love for the sport and the discipline I've had to perform at a very high level for more than 20 years," he said in a team Q&A.

"I don't think I'll be adding another 400 to my total, but hopefully I've got at least another 40

or 50 more races to come in the next couple of years."

The oldest current driver, Alonso stands out in Formula One also as a driver who has had success in other series.

A two times winner of the 24 Hours of Le Mans with Toyota, he is a world endurance champion and in 2017 led the Indianapolis 500 for 27 laps before his car's engine failed. In 2020 he finished

13th in the Dakar Rally. "I think modern F1 is easier on the body than previous eras and that allows you to compete for longer," he said.

"It's still a huge physical challenge, but the technology in F1 has changed so the cars are a little friendlier to the drivers. Seat comfort, safety equipment, helmets - everything has evolved into a better place."

SPOTLIGHT

Bagnaia on 'mission' to overhaul Martin in MotoGP title fight



FROM LEFT: Ducati Lenovo Team's Italian rider Francesco Bagnaia, Prima Pramac Racing's Spanish rider Jorge Martin, and Gresini Racing's Spanish rider Marc Marquez take part in a press conference ahead of the MotoGP Thailand Grand Prix at the Buriram International Circuit in Buriram yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Buriram, Thailand

Reigning two-time MotoGP world champion Francesco Bagnaia warned Jorge Martin yesterday that he is on a "mission" to overhaul his title rival, starting in Thailand this weekend.

Pramac Ducati's Martin leads Italian defending champion Bagnaia by 20 points with three race weekends left in the season.

That leaves Bagnaia with little room for error heading into tomorrow's sprint and Sunday's grand prix at Buriram.

"The mission is to do it - to recover points and be competitive," said the 27-year-old, who lost ground after coming third on his Ducati at Phillip Island in Australia. Spain's Martin was second in the grand prix on Sunday, behind Marc Marquez.

"We know this track is better for me in terms of performance," Bagnaia said in Thailand.

"It is a track that I like and where our potential can be higher, and I love the layout."

He added: "Twenty points in this moment is not a huge gap."

Bagnaia may like the track more at Buriram compared to Australia, but it was the 26-year-old Martin who triumphed in both the sprint and the main event last year in Thailand.

"For sure I'm in a good moment," said Martin, who is attempting to win the MotoGP world crown for the first time.

"Australia was really good. I wanted to win, but confident for this race."

The extreme heat and humidity in Buriram could be a factor, as it will be in Malaysia in the penultimate race weekend of the season.

"For sure it will be hot, it will be difficult," said Martin.

Six-time MotoGP champion Marquez is third in the title battle and still mathematically in with a chance, albeit 79 points adrift of Martin.

Combining the sprint race and the main race, a maximum 37 points are up for grabs this weekend.

"It will be tough," the Spanish great said, sitting alongside Martin and Bagnaia.

"These two guys will put the target super high."

The season wraps up in Valencia in mid-November.

SHARAPOVA AND THE BRYAN BROTHERS ARE ELECTED INTO HALL OF FAME

New York: Five-time singles Grand Slam champion Maria Sharapova and American twins Bob and Mike Bryan, who formed the most successful doubles team in history, were named to the International Tennis Hall of Fame's Class of 2025, organisers said yesterday. They will be officially inducted at an Aug. 23 ceremony at the Hall of Fame in Newport, Rhode Island. Sharapova, one of only 10 women to achieve a career Grand Slam in singles, became the first Russian woman to reach the world number one ranking in 2005. She also won a silver medal at the 2012 London Olympics.

"Incredibly grateful to receive this honour," Sharapova, 37, wrote on X. "A big thank you to The Hall of Fame, and to all the voters. "Most importantly, this recognition is such a beautiful reminder of the deep appreciation I have for my fans. Each one of you made me reach for the stars and look at what we have achieved together." Renowned for her never-say-die approach to the sport despite regularly being hampered by shoulder problems, Sharapova was one of the game's most recognisable players but her image took a hit after the announcement in 2016 that she had failed a drug

test. Sharapova tested positive for meldonium at the Australian Open in 2016 and was banned by the International Tennis Federation for two years before an appeal led to her suspension being reduced to 15 months. She returned to competition in 2017 and retired in February 2020, ending a career in which she won almost \$40m in prize money, became one of the highest paid sportswomen in the world and one of the most recognisable athletes. The Bryans won 16 Grand Slam men's doubles titles together and were the world's top-ranked team

for a record 438 weeks. The Californian pair won a professional era record 119 titles together, including 16 Grand Slams, 39 ATP Masters 1000s and the ATP Finals title four times. The Bryans also won Olympic gold at London 2012 and were part of the US Davis Cup-winning team in 2007. "Beyond each of their historic accomplishments on the court, the Class of 2025 have had such a profound impact on the game of tennis and have inspired multiple generations of fans across the world," Hall of Fame President and former world number one Kim Clijsters said in a news release.



Maria Sharapova of Russia poses with the French Open trophy near the Eiffel Tower after winning the women's final at Roland Garros in Paris June 8, 2014. (Reuters)

FOCUS

Olympic gold medal winner Zheng hails China's latest tennis boom

AFP
Tokyo

Olympic champion Zheng Qinwen said yesterday that tennis has become so popular in China that players are struggling to book courts and find coaches.

Zheng became the first Chinese player to win an Olympic singles tennis gold when she triumphed in Paris, sparking an unprecedented wave of interest in the sport at home.

Tournaments in Beijing, Shanghai and other Chinese cities have played out in front of packed-out crowds in recent months, with local players enjoying unprecedented success.

Zheng is playing at the Pan Pacific Open in Tokyo, where she started her campaign with a 7-5, 6-0 win over Japan's Moyuka Uchijima yesterday. The 22-year-old top seed said tennis is flourishing at all levels in China, not just the professional game.

"After I won at the Olympic Games, tennis started to be more popular in China," said the world number seven.

"Normal people started to know tennis as a sport.

"I heard right now in China it's tough to book a tennis court, and also tough to find a coach for tennis. Before it wasn't like that."

Zheng is not the only Chinese



China's Zheng Qinwen celebrates her victory against Japan's Moyuka Uchijima during their singles match on day four of the Pan Pacific Open in Tokyo yesterday. (AFP)

player enjoying success on the men's and women's tours.

Wang Xinyu and Zhang Zhizhen also came away from the Paris Olympics with medals, taking silver in mixed doubles.

Zhang and Bu Yunchaokete then contested an all-Chinese semi-final at the Hangzhou Open last month.

The 22-year-old Bu went on to cause a sensation at the China Open in Beijing, beating sixth seed Andrey Rublev in the quarter-finals before losing in the semis to world number one Jan-nik Sinner.

Zheng said professional suc-

cess is having an impact on grass-roots tennis in China.

"All the parents think tennis is a really good sport, so they want their kids playing tennis too," she said. Zheng arrived in Tokyo after losing to Aryna Sabalenka in the final of the Wuhan Open. She faces Canada's Leylah Fernandez in the quarter-finals today.

"I tried to explore more things in my game, try to go more to the net, be more aggressive compared to before," Zheng said after her win over world number 57 Uchijima.

"I think it's time to add new things to my game."

GOLF

Fast start propels Mao Saigo into lead at Maybank Championship

Reuters
Kuala Lumpur

Mao Saigo carded six birdies over her first eight holes and finished with a 9-under-par 63 yesterday to seize a one-stroke lead after the first round of the Maybank Championship in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Saigo collected 10 birdies to offset her lone bogey on the par-4 17th hole at the Kuala Lumpur Golf and Country Club. The Japanese native also hit 11 of 14 fairways and 14 of 18 greens.

"I made a lot of middle-length putts so that's why I played so well," Saigo said. "There is so much strong up and down play required, so it's very difficult."

Saigo is chasing her first win on the LPGA Tour.

Haeran Ryu of South Korea recorded eight birdies during a bogey-free round to reside one stroke in back of Saigo.

Ryu was pleased with her performance considering she admitted to not feeling her best.

"I don't remember my play today because today my body feels not good, so I just want a good finish," Ryu said. "Yeah, 8-under is pretty good. Today my putter is good, better than last week. Yeah, I make a lot of birdie. I'm so happy!"

Taipei's Wei-Ling Hsu and China's Ruixin Liu finished at 7-under to sit tied for third place. Hsu had seven birdies during her bogey-free round, while Liu had eight birdies against one bogey.

The duo rests one stroke ahead

of a six-golfer contingent that includes reigning Women's PGA Championship winner Amy Yang.

"I personally prefer this warmer weather over cold one, because cold one makes me stiff during the round," Yang said. "But also I mean, we used to play east course and I love that course, yeah. But this course is also great and I am really looking forward to play three more rounds."

Defending champion Celine Boutier shot a bogey-free round en route to carding a 5-under 67 to sit in a tie for 11th place.

She outlasted Jeeno Thitikul in a nine-hole playoff in 2023 to win the inaugural Maybank Championship.

Canadian Brooke Henderson shot a 3-under 69 yesterday, two strokes ahead of Hannah Green.

LIV Golf Promotions: Only tournament winner gets full-time spot

Riyadh: Golf professionals and top amateurs seeking to compete in LIV Golf League events in 2025 will convene in Saudi Arabia in December for LIV Golf Promotions, hoping for their chance to earn a spot in the league and in The International Series in 2025. LIV Golf announced yesterday its plans for the second edition of the event in which participants will compete for a \$1.5m purse.

A three-day, four-round tournament will be held Dec. 12-14 at Riyadh Golf Club. At the end of the 36-hole final day, the top finisher will win \$200,000 and book a spot on the LIV Golf League 2025 roster. The top 10 finishers, including ties, will gain entry into all events next year in The International Series, which the Asian

Tour sanctions. Also eligible to take part in the event are LIV players who were relegated after the 2024 season because of their finish, as well as those without a 2025 team commitment who finished between 25th and 48th place in the 2024 standings.

"Those who have competed in the LIV Golf League consistently share similar feedback: the energy, camaraderie, and global competition have created a once-in-a-lifetime experience for players to pursue their dreams at the highest level," said Greg Norman, LIV Golf's commissioner and CEO.

"LIV Golf Promotions delivers another pathway for up-and-coming players to experience a life-changing season with LIV."

SPOTLIGHT

Saudis part ways with coach Mancini

AFP

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's football body said it was ending the contract of national coach Roberto Mancini after 14 months in the job yesterday, following a run of poor results. The Saudi Football Federation has reached a mutual agreement to terminate the contract of Mancini, 59, who signed a lucrative deal until 2027 in August last year, a statement said.

Building a strong national team is a priority for the oil-rich Saudis who splashed more than a billion dollars on players last year and are the sole bidders for the 2034 World Cup. "The Saudi Football Federation announces that it has reached an agreement to terminate the contract of national team coach Roberto Mancini and confirms that the name of the new coach will be announced within days," the body said.

Mancini, who led his native Italy to Euro 2020 victory during a trophy-laden career, managed seven wins, six defeats and five draws with the Green Falcons. The knives were out for the former Manchester City and Inter Milan boss after a home defeat to Japan and a draw with Gulf rivals Bahrain in 2026 World Cup qualifying.

"The SFF (Saudi Football Federation) has been negotiating with Mancini to terminate his contract since the defeat against Japan," a source at the body, who did not want to be named, said. "The situation is not easy because Mancini believes that he did not get a full chance, in addition to the fact that the contract is very massive. Poor results and unconvincing performance in the recent period forced SFF to make a change."



Roberto Mancini managed seven wins, six defeats and five draws with Saudi Arabia. (Reuters)

Mancini's predecessor Herve Renard, who led the Saudis to a shock win over eventual champions Argentina at the 2022 World Cup, is being touted for a surprise return. The Frenchman left the job abruptly in March 2023 to take over France's women's team. "Renard is one of the names strongly suggested, but the way he left in his previous period makes SFF a little hesitant," the SFF source said.

Mancini was one of a string of high-profile arrivals last year in Saudi Arabia, the world's top oil exporter which is trying to remodel itself as a business and leisure hub. He was unveiled in Riyadh just days after Brazilian superstar Ney-

mar was presented to fans in the capital, joining Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema and a host of others in the Saudi Pro League.

At the time, Mancini warned he was not a "magician" and four months later the Saudis slumped at the Asian Cup in Qatar where they were knocked out in the round of 16. Under the Italian, the Green Falcons have dropped five places to 59th in the FIFA rankings, just the eighth highest among the Asian teams. Mancini, who has won Italian and English league titles as coach, signed up with the Saudis just a fortnight after he caused a stir by resigning from Italy's national team.

EUROPA LEAGUE

Dovbyk penalty leads Roma to victory

Reuters
Rome

Artem Dovbyk's first-half penalty earned AS Roma a 1-0 home victory over Dynamo Kyiv in an uneventful Europa League match yesterday.

Dovbyk gave Roma the lead in the 23rd minute, converting a penalty after Taras Mykhavko was penalised for pulling Tommaso Baldanzi's shirt. The visitors went close to equalising on several occasions, missing multiple opportunities, and had a goal disallowed just before the break for offside. Roma took control in the second half and continued to push forward in search of a second goal, controlling the majority of possession. The hosts nearly found the net when Eldor Shomurodov fired a shot wide from a tight angle in the closing minutes.

Ajax Amsterdam eased to a 3-0 win over Qarabag, who had two players sent off, to move provisionally to the top of the standings thanks to goals from Kenneth Taylor, Chuba Akpom and a Wout Weghorst penalty. Qarabag



midfielder Julio Romao received an early red card for a foul on Mika Godts, while Elvin Jafarguliyev was sent off for a second booking just before the end.

Real Sociedad beat Maccabi Tel Aviv 2-1 in Belgrade thanks to goals from Jon Pacheco and Sergio Gomez. Striker Dor Turge-man grabbed a late consolation for the hosts nine minutes from time before teammate Osher Davida was sent off for a second booking just before fulltime.

Eintracht Frankfurt overcame a surprisingly tricky challenge to secure a 1-0 home victory against Latvia's FK RFS, with midfielder Hugo Larsson scoring the decisive goal in the 79th minute.

UEFA CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Felix brace fires Chelsea past Panathinaikos

Coach Maresca made 11 changes from the side that lost at Liverpool last weekend

AFP

London

Joao Felix ended his goal drought with a brace as Chelsea powered to a 4-1 win against Panathinaikos in Athens in the UEFA Conference League yesterday. Portugal forward Felix has struggled to make an impact since returning for a second spell with Chelsea in August.

Yet to start a Premier League game following his move from Atletico Madrid, the 24-year-old seized the chance to prove a point to Chelsea boss Enzo Maresca.

Felix's only goal in seven previous appearances this season came on his debut at Wolves on August 25. He ended his six-game barren run in the first half against out-classed Panathinaikos and netted again after the interval.

Mykhailo Mudryk and Christopher Nkunku were also on target as Chelsea made it two wins from two games in the tournament. Before kick-off, Panathinaikos paid tribute to their defender George Baldock, who drowned in his swimming pool in Athens aged 31 earlier this month.

In Panathinaikos's first home match since Baldock's death, his teammates warmed up wearing the Greece international's number 32 on their shirts, while fans held up green cards with the same numerals during an emotional minute's silence. Maresca made 11 changes from the side that lost at Liverpool last weekend, but still fielded a strong side that was far too dynamic for Panathinaikos.

Felix put Chelsea ahead in the 22nd minute, starting the move with a cushioned header to Mudryk before sprinting into the six-yard box to slot home from the Ukrainian's cross. After setting up Chelsea's opener, Mudryk bagged the second himself in the 49th minute with a fierce strike from Neto's cross.

Felix scored again in the 55th minute, putting the result beyond doubt with a 20-yard drive that took a wicked deflection



Chelsea's Joao Felix (third left) scores against Panathinaikos during the UEFA Conference League match in Athens. (AFP)

into the net. Nkunku's 59th minute penalty, awarded for Daniel Mancini's foul, underlined Chelsea's superiority. Facundo Pellistri got one back for Panathinaikos with a close-range finish in the 69th minute.

Beaten by West Ham and then Olympiakos in the last two Conference League finals, Fiorentina survived a scare in their 4-2 win at St Gallen. The Swiss side took a shock lead through Felix Mambimbi's 23rd minute goal but Lucas Martinez equalised in the 50th minute.

Jonathan Ikone struck for Fiorentina four minutes later before St Gallen's Lukas Gotzler levelled in the 62nd minute. Ikone restored the lead in the 69th minute and Rob-

in Gosens's stoppage-time goal secured the Serie A team's second successive victory in the competition.

The champions of the Republic of Ireland were too strong for the champions of Northern Ireland as Shamrock Rovers routed Larne 4-1.

The first competitive meeting between the two sides was played at Belfast's Windsor Park because Larne's Inver Park stadium is not big enough to host Conference League matches.

Rovers were on top from the start as Graham Burke's incisive run teed up Joshua Honohan, who drilled home from eight yards in the third minute. Johnny Kenny

headed in Burke's cross to increase the visitors' lead in the 24th minute.

Tomás Cosgrove's 30th minute own goal put Rovers in command and Chris Gallagher's reply erased as Burke completed the thrashing in the 53rd minute. Hearts also have six points after beating Omonia Nicosia 2-0 at Tynecastle.

Alan Forrest and Blair Spittal were the scorers as Hearts ignored their position near the bottom of the Scottish Premiership to build on their opening victory against Dinamo Minsk. It was a second consecutive win for new Hearts boss Neil Critchley, who replaced the sacked Steven Naismith.

"Too soon" to call Barca contenders despite Bayern romp: Flick

Barcelona: Barcelona coach Hansi Flick said it was too early to say his team were contenders to win the Champions League even after they hammered six-time winners Bayern Munich 4-1 on Wednesday.

The Catalans last won the trophy in 2015 and had lost their prior six matches against Bayern but they crushed last season's semi-finalists at the Olympic stadium, with Raphinha scoring a hat-trick.

"It's too soon (to say we're contenders), we just started the season, we're on a long road in La Liga and the Champions League," Flick told reporters. "We're aiming to go game by game and we're preparing ourselves like that."

La Liga leaders Barcelona face Spanish and European champions Real Madrid tomorrow in La Liga in a mouthwatering Clasico battle, which will be another key test for Flick's side.

"We're obviously very proud of the result tonight but on Saturday it continues, another hard game against a team with a name that everybody knows," he said. "We want to put on another great performance... with a result like this, the team deserved it and also their celebration after the game."

Raphinha opened the scoring inside the first minute and after Harry Kane equalised, Robert Lewandowski put Barca back ahead. Two more strikes by former Leeds United winger Raphinha, on his 100th appearance for the club, sealed Barcelona's emphatic victory.

"Raphinha is for me a very good example of how the team works, Raphinha is someone who always gives everything in training and in games too, he plays with a lot of intensity," said Flick. "He's very important for us, he presses, and today we saw too he scores goals... he's got a good dynamic with the ball and today had an excellent game. He's a player who is both defensive and attacking, with intensity, dynamism and technique."

4TH QATAR ARABIAN BREEDERS CUP BEGINS AT AL SHAQAB



H Sara of Al Henzab Stud claimed the top prize in the Class 1A Yearling Fillies Class while Durra Al Khor of Al Khor Stud was best in the 4-Yearling (Class-ID) on the opening day of the 4th Qatar Arabian Breeders Cup at the indoor arena of Al Shaqab yesterday. The three-day show will continue till tomorrow marking the start to the new Arabian horse show season, both national and international. It is recognised by the European Conference of Arab Horse Organisations (ECAHO) and is a Breeders Show in category and showcases more than 150 horses. Divided into classes, horses awarded first to fifth place will receive medals and horses placed first, second and third will qualify for the championships for colts, fillies, mares and stallions. Over three days, nine judges, four disciplinary committee members and two ringmasters from around the globe will officiate in the show. As per the rules of the show, horses participating in Breeders shows do not qualify for the World Championship, Title shows, A shows or Global Champions Arabians Tour (GCAT) shows. **PICTURES: Juhaam**