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TENNIS | Page 3

Olympic cham
Zheng finds
mojo to reach
Tokyo semis



PREMIER LEAGUE | Page 4

Arsenal must
show 'ruthless
mentality' against
Liverpool: Arteta

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GULF TIMES

SPORT

CRICKET

England reeling
at 24-3 after gritty
Shakeel century
puts Pakistan ahead

Page 2

Captain Faisal nets hat-trick as Qatar beat Nepal in U17 Asian Cup Qualifiers



Qatar impressed again in a 5-0 defeat of Nepal in their AFC U17 Asian Cup 2025 Qualifiers Group F match at the Aspire yesterday. After the hard-fought 2-0 against Mongolia on Wednesday, Qatar looked a more confident side against Nepal with captain Zaid Faisal (top left) netting for the second straight game. Yazan Mohamed opened the scoring for Qatar after 21 minutes of play but it was Faisal who stole the show again with a hat-trick in the 45th, 56th and 82nd minute. In between, Omar al-Marzouqi also found the back of the net to help Qatar to move onto six points with a vital clash against Japan to come tomorrow while Nepal close out their campaign against Mongolia.



SPOTLIGHT

Al-Hitmi re-elected as First Vice-President of FIG at 85th Congress

Ali al-Hitmi has been re-elected as First Vice-President of the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) during the 85th FIG Congress, which concluded in Doha yesterday. Representatives from 157 member federations attended the event, which also saw the re-election of Morinari Watanabe of Japan as FIG President.

In a statement, al-Hitmi expressed pride in the successful organisation of the Congress, crediting its success to the support of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) under the leadership of QOC President HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, and QOC Secretary-General Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain. He noted: "This achievement is thanks to Qatar's commitment to supporting gymnastics at the highest levels and ensuring that international events held in Doha meet and exceed global standards."

Al-Hitmi emphasised the significance of his re-election, stating: "This Congress reflects the international gymnastics community's commitment to progress, and I am honoured to continue serving as

First Vice President. The collaborative efforts here will shape the future of our sport globally."

With a record-breaking turnout, this Congress marked the highest participation level in FIG's history. Al-Hitmi commented on the importance of this milestone, saying, "Such an exceptional level of engagement from FIG members demonstrates our unity and shared vision for the sport's development. I look forward to continuing our work together to advance gymnastics across all disciplines."

Re-elected FIG President Watanabe praised the organisation and impact of the Congress, noting that the professionalism and hospitality displayed in Doha set a high standard for future FIG events. He emphasised that the mission to grow gymnastics globally has been strengthened by the active participation and engagement of the FIG community throughout the Congress.

Reflecting on the Congress, Sheikh Hamad bin Abdulaziz al-Thani, Head of QOC Media Relations, highlighted al-Hitmi's influence within the international gymnastics community.



Ali Al-Hitmi at the 85th FIG Congress, which is being hosted by Qatar.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Ahli face Rayyan, aim to keep pressure on leaders Duhail

'We learned a lot from the loss to Al Duhail in our previous match and are ready to show improvement'

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Ahli will hope to keep pace with leaders Al Duhail at the top of the table when they take on Al Rayyan in the Qatar Stars League at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium today.

Al Ahli are riding high in the league, sitting second in the standings with 14 points. They have just had one loss - a 1-0 defeat to Al Duhail in their last match with Igor Biscan stressing the importance of bouncing back from that setback, believing his team has what it takes to get back to winning ways.

Biscan praised Al Rayyan's quality but expressed confidence in his squad's ability to respond positively. "We are playing against a strong and experienced team that also competes in the AFC Champions League. It won't be easy, but we aim to win and return to form. We learned a lot from the loss to Al Duhail and are ready to show improvement," Biscan said.

Al Rayyan currently sit in eighth place with 9 points, having secured three wins and four losses so far. In their most recent league outing, they edged Al Khor 2-1 in a closely contested match. However, their confidence took a hit earlier this week after a 2-1 defeat against Al Ahli of Saudi Arabia in the AFC Champions League Elite. Despite playing well in the second half, Rayyan failed to convert key chances, adding pressure ahead of this match.

Meanwhile, at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium, Al Shahania will meet Al Shamal as both teams look to gain valuable points. Al Shamal are currently sixth with 10 points after three wins, one draw, and three losses. They come into this game on the back of an impressive 5-2 win over Al Arabi, with Algerian striker Baghdad Bounedjah starring with nine goals this season. Mohammed Omar also shined in the last match, scoring twice, including a stunning strike from midfield.

Coach Nuno Almeida expects a tough



Al Ahli coach Igor Biscan believes his team has what it takes to get back to winning ways after their defeat to Al Duhail last week.

battle but hopes his team can carry their momentum forward. "Al Shahania are a good and well-organized team, as they proved by beating Al Duhail earlier this season. We need to stay focused and maintain our form to achieve another win," Almeida said.

On the other hand, Al Shahania are struggling near the bottom, sitting 11th with five points. They have only one win so far, along with two draws and four losses. Their coach, Alvaro Mejia, believes his team can bounce back despite a 2-4 defeat to Al Sadd last week.

"We must stay focused and keep building on our improvements. Some injured players have returned, and we hope they'll be ready for this match. Every point matters for us to move away from the bottom of the table," said Mejia.

Today's another match pits Umm Salal

against Al Khor at the Grand Hamad Stadium in what promises to be a hard-fought contest. Both teams are under pressure to improve after recent defeats.

Umm Salal, currently seventh with 10 points, slipped in the standings following a 1-3 loss to Al Gharafa last week. Coach Patrice Carteron is focused on addressing the team's shortcomings and getting back to winning ways.

Meanwhile, Al Khor are struggling at the bottom of the table with just three points from seven matches, making them the only team yet to secure a win this season. Despite a narrow 1-2 loss to Al Rayyan last week, Al Khor have shown signs of improvement under new coach Mehdi Nafti.

Nafti emphasised the importance of building momentum: "We're working hard to improve the team, and I see good progress from the players. Our focus is to



Al Rayyan players train yesterday, on the eve of their match against Al Ahli.

play well and earn points, no matter where we are in the standings."

Both teams know this is a vital game to escape the lower part of the table, and a win could spark a much-needed revival.

Leaders Al Duhail will be in action tomorrow, as they take on Al Gharafa at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium. The Red Knights returned to winning ways overcoming Al Ahli by a solitary goal scored by Kenyan star Michael Olunga after the side had suffered their only loss of the league so far against Al Shahania by a 1-2 margin.

Al Gharafa are fourth in the standings with 11 points from three wins, two draws and as many losses, and are looking forward to continue their winning run after beating Umm Salal 3-1 in their previous match.

Defending champions Al Sadd, meanwhile, take on Al Wakrah at the Al Janoub

Stadium tomorrow. Al Sadd after a rough start are in third spot with 12 points with four wins and having suffered three reversals. Al Wakrah are in fifth place with 11 points having scored three wins and two draws, and suffered two losses.

The Al Thumama Stadium will host the Al Arabi vs Qatar SC clash. Both teams enter the match under different circumstances given their results in the previous round.

In the league's seventh round, Al Arabi lost to Al Shamal 2-5, while Qatar SC beat Al Wakrah 2-1. In their opening match of the Gulf Club Champions League, Al Arabi held Qadsia of Kuwait 1-1 at the Al Thumama Stadium on Wednesday.

Al Arabi are currently ninth in the Qatar Stars League standings with seven points, the same as that of Qatar SC - who are in 10th place on goal difference.

THIRD TEST

England reeling at 24-3 after gritty century by Shakeel

'A hundred is a hundred and it's the best feeling and now we are in the best stage of the match'

AFP
Rawalpindi, Pakistan

Spinners Sajid Khan and Noman Ali left England reeling at 24-3 after Saud Shakeel's fighting hundred put Pakistan in control of the series-deciding third Test in Rawalpindi yesterday.

England came in looking to erase a deficit of 77 but had no answers for the Pakistan spinners on a turning pitch.

Sajid dismissed Ben Duckett for 12 and Noman Ali removed Zak Crawley (two) and Ollie Pope (one) in the space of five runs.

When bad light ended the second day's play with five overs remaining, Joe Root and Harry Brook were at the crease on five and three respectively.

England still need 53 runs to avoid an innings defeat with seven wickets in hand and three days left to play.

The series is tied at 1-1 after England won the first Test by an innings and 47 runs while Pakistan took the second by 152 runs, both in Multan.

On another day dominated by spin, Shakeel's brilliant 134 was the highlight, pulling Pakistan within touching distance of a first home Test series win since they defeated South Africa in February 2021.

Shakeel anchored Pakistan's innings, lifting them from a precari-



Pakistan's Saud Shakeel plays a shot during the second day of the third and final Test cricket match between Pakistan and England at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium in Rawalpindi yesterday. **Right:** Blood is splattered on the shirt of Pakistan's Sajid Khan after he was struck by the ball. (AFP/Reuters)



ous 177-7 to 344 all out. "We had an idea that this pitch will help spinners so with that in mind I prepared myself," said Shakeel, admitting it was one of his best knocks.

The left-hander held Pakistan's innings together with a gritty knock spread over 322 minutes and 223 balls, hitting just five boundaries.

"A hundred is a hundred and it's the best feeling and now we are in the best stage of the match," Shakeel said.

But leg-spinner Rehan Ahmed, who was the pick of the England

bowlers, said his team had plenty of fight left.

"I think we are still quite positive with so much batting to come so we are still very positive in the changing room come tomorrow," he said.

Ahmed took 4-66 while off-spinner Shoaib Bashir finished with 3-129.

The 29-year-old Shakeel defied England with an eighth wicket stand of 88 alongside Noman who made 45 before falling in the final over ahead of the tea break to spinner Bashir.

Shakeel added another 72 for the

ninth wicket with Sajid who scored an unbeaten career-best 48.

Shakeel was finally caught off a miscued pull off pacer Gus Atkinson while Ahmed dismissed the last man Zahid Mahmood for nought.

The visitors looked to be in control when young spinner Ahmed bagged three quick wickets to leave Pakistan teetering at the end of the first session.

England were eyeing a lead after Ahmed's burst left Pakistan on 187-7 at lunch but the Shakeel-Noman stand turned those expectations into frustration.

Shakeel batted with composure and reached his fourth Test hundred with a single off Rehan in a resistance-packed innings.

Noman - surviving a leg-before decision on review and a dropped catch off Root - assisted left-handed Shakeel admirably, hitting a six and two fours as the duo helped Pakistan add 80 in the second session.

Rehan sent Mohammad Rizwan (25), Salman Agha (one) and Aamer Jamal (14) back to the pavilion and threatened to derail Pakistan.

England's frontline spinners Jack Leach and Bashir could not

extract the same sharp turn from the pitch as rival Sajid Khan, who took 6-128 on Thursday.

Pakistan resumed the day at 73-3 in search of a sizeable lead to press for a series win.

But Shakeel was the only top-order batter able to build a meaningful innings after reaching double figures.

BRIEF SCORES (Day 2)
England 267 (Smith 89, Duckett 52, Sajid 6-128) **and 24 for 3** (Root 5*, Brook 3*) **trail Pakistan 344** (Shakeel 134, Sajid 48*, Noman 45, Rehan 4-66) **by 53 runs**

MATCH REPORT

Santner's 7-53 gives NZ substantial lead on day 2

AFP
Pune, India

New Zealand were in sight of a historic series win in India after spinner Mitchell Santner took 7-53 to help bowl out the hosts cheaply in the second Test yesterday.

A stunned India fell to 156 all out in their reply, gifting the visitors a first-innings lead of 103 on a turning Pune pitch.

New Zealand, who have never won a Test series in India and lead the three-match series 1-0, were 198-5 at stumps in their second knock, a lead of 301, after skipper Tom Latham hit 86.

Wicketkeeper Tom Blundell, on 30, and Glenn Phillips, on nine, were batting at the close of play.

"Still a job to do with the bat," bowling hero Santner said.

"Obviously the more runs we get now, it makes our job with the ball a little bit easier."

Spinner Washington Sundar grabbed four wickets to take his match tally to 11 after returning figures of 7-59 on day one.

Sundar trapped Devon Conway lbw for 17 in New Zealand's second knock before senior spinner Ravichandran Ashwin sent back Will Young for 23 before tea.

Sundar also bowled Rachin Ravindra for nine as the left-hander went back for a cut only to miss and the skidding ball hit the off-stump. Daryl Mitchell fell for 18.

Latham reached his fifty and kept firm in a 60-run partnership with Blundell until his departure when Sundar trapped the left-hander lbw.

"It is satisfying," Santner said



New Zealand's Mitchell Santner celebrates with his captain Tom Latham (right) after taking the wicket of India's Virat Kohli during the second day of the second Test at the Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium in Pune yesterday. (AFP)

of the visiting batsmen taking on the Indian spinners in favourable conditions.

"We know how challenging it can be in these conditions. Seen India squeeze a lot of teams for a long time and I guess it was pleasing with the bat with guys trying to fire some shots and play some sweeps and take on the bowlers," he said.

Santner sparkled for New Zealand with his left-arm spin as he claimed his first five-wicket haul in 29 Test appearances to trump India at their own game of spin.

Ravindra Jadeja top-scored with 38 but India's batting fell apart, with the hosts bowled out in the second session in just 45.3 overs.

Overnight batsmen Yashasvi Jaiswal and Shubman Gill started cautiously before Santner struck in the 11th over of the day.

He trapped Gill lbw for 30 with a slider to the right-hander.

The home fans were then stunned into silence when Santner took the prized wicket of Kohli, bowled on a low full toss for one.

Santner admitted it was a "shock" to get the star batsman out in that manner.

Off-spinner Phillips struck on his fourth ball to get the left-handed Jaiswal caught at slip for 30 to leave the hosts on 70-4 and then 83-5 when he bowled Rishabh Pant for 18.

First-match centurion Sarfaraz

Khan managed 11 before Santner got him caught at mid-on. "I thought the pace that Santner bowled today was spot on for this surface," India bowling coach Morne Morkel said.

"You want to be playing cricket on the front foot in these conditions, but we couldn't find that rhythm and momentum today," he said.

Last week's win by New Zealand was their first Test victory on Indian soil since 1988.

BRIEF SCORES (Day 2)
New Zealand 259 and 198 for 5 (Latham 86, Blundell 30*, Washington 4-56) **lead India 156** (Jadeja 38, Santner 7-53, Phillips 2-26) **by 301 runs**

ANNOUNCEMENT

Australia's Lehmann to coach English county Northamptonshire

AFP
London

Former Australia coach Darren Lehmann, who stood down after a ball-tampering scandal in South Africa, has agreed to take charge of English county side Northamptonshire.

The 54-year-old Lehmann oversaw Australia's 2015 World Cup triumph and was in charge for four Ashes series from 2013-2018, winning two on home soil but losing both campaigns in England.

A former Australia batsman, who appeared in 27 Tests and more than a hundred one-day internationals, Lehmann was also a prolific run-scorer in county cricket with Yorkshire and later returned to Headingley for one season to coach the Northern Superchargers in the Hundred.

Lehmann will start his new role in February, having penned an initial two-year deal, after John Sadler left the club following last month's defeat by Somerset in the T20 Blast quarter-finals.

The Midlands side won just two of their 14 matches in last season's Second Division of the County Championship but were contenders for limited-overs honours throughout the 1980s and 1990s,

while winning the last of their two Blast titles in 2016.

"Northamptonshire has a great history in our game," said Lehmann in a club statement.

"I am looking forward to meeting the players and learning about the club and its past and creating our own history over the coming months and years.

"The selling point for me is a group that wants to get better and follow their and the club's dreams, create memories and play at the highest level possible. I'm sure we will have success and fun along the way."

Lehmann quit his position in charge of Australia following a ball-tampering scandal during a 2018 Test against South Africa in Cape Town, even though he was not directly implicated in an incident where Australia batsman Cameron Bancroft was caught by television cameras applying sandpaper to the ball.

Steve Smith was stripped of the Australia captaincy as a result of the 'Sandpapergate incident', with vice-captain David Warner also found to have been involved.

Both Smith and Warner were given 12-month bans, with Warner issued with a lifetime suspension from any leadership role within Australian cricket - a punishment that was lifted earlier yesterday.



India's captain Rohit Sharma.

SHAMI OUT AS INDIA ANNOUNCES SQUAD FOR BGT SERIES

New Delhi: Seamer Mohammed Shami will not play in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy Test series against Australia while spinner Kuldeep Yadav has been sidelined with a groin injury as the country's cricket board (BCCI) announced an 18-member squad yesterday. Shami, who has not played for India since the 2023 one-day World Cup due to an ankle injury, hasn't been named in the Rohit Sharma-led squad for the five-match Test series starting from Nov. 22 in Perth. India have opted for Akash Deep as a third seamer behind Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Siraj while spinner Kuldeep will miss the

Test series due to a chronic left groin issue. "Kuldeep Yadav... has been referred to the BCCI Centre of Excellence after the end of the ongoing Test series against New Zealand for long-term resolution of his chronic left groin issue," the BCCI said in a statement yesterday.

India also announced the Twenty20 international squad for their four-match T20 series against South Africa, starting from Nov. 8 in Durban.

All-rounder Ramandeep Singh, pace bowler Vijaykumar Vyshak, and left-arm seamer Yash Dayal have received their maiden T20I

call-ups in the side led by captain Suryakumar Yadav. All-rounder Riyan Parag has been left out of the squad due to a right shoulder injury while pacer Mayank Yadav and all-rounder Shivam Dube were also unavailable for selection owing to injuries, the BCCI said.

India's squad for the Border-Gavaskar Trophy:
Rohit Sharma (c), Jasprit Bumrah (vc), Yashasvi Jaiswal, Abhimanyu Easwaran, Shubman Gill, Virat Kohli, KL Rahul, Rishabh Pant (wicket-keeper), Sarfaraz Khan, Dhruv Jurel (wicket-keeper), R Ashwin, R Jadeja,

Mohammed Siraj, Akash Deep, Prasidh Krishna, Harshit Rana, Nitish Kumar Reddy, Washington Sundar
Reserves: Mukesh Kumar, Navdeep Saini, Khaleel Ahmed
India's squad for T20Is against South Africa:
Suryakumar Yadav (c), Abhishek Sharma, Sanju Samson (wicket-keeper), Rinku Singh, Tilak Varma, Jitesh Sharma (wicket-keeper), Hardik Pandya, Axar Patel, Ramandeep Singh, Varun Chakaravarthi, Ravi Bishnoi, Arshdeep Singh, Vijaykumar Vyshak, Avesh Khan, Yash Dayal.

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar junior beach handball team qualifies for 2025 World Championship

QNA
Bangkok

The Qatari junior beach handball team qualified for the 2025 World Championship in Tunisia, after defeating its Indonesian counterpart (2-0), yesterday, at the conclusion of the third Asian Junior (U-17) Beach Handball Championship.

The tournament was held in the Thai capital, Bangkok, with the participation of 7 teams: Qatar, Oman, Iran, Jordan, China, Indonesia and hosts Thailand.

The Qatari team ended the first half of the match with a score of (30-18), before winning the second half in its favour as well with a score of (23-12).

With this victory, the Qatari team raised its score to 6 points, obtaining third place behind Iran (champion) and Thailand (runner-up), and thus ensuring its advancement to the third World Junior Beach Handball Championship, which will be held in the Tunisian city of Hammamet from June 17-22, 2025.

This is the second consecutive qualification for the Qatari junior beach handball team to the World Championship, as it had qualified for the previous edition held in Greece in 2022 after also coming in third in the second Asian Championship held in the Iranian capital, Tehran, in the same year. The Qatari team lost its first match against Jordan 1-2, while it won the second match against China 2-0.

Qatar then lost the third match against Thailand 1-2, and the fourth match against Iran with the same result, and won the fifth match against Oman 2-0, before concluding its journey yesterday with a victory over Indonesia 2-0.

It is worth noting that the Thai national team won the title of the first edition of the Asian Junior Beach Handball Championship, which was held in Pattaya in 2016, while the Iranian national team won the title of the second edition in Tehran in 2022.



TENNIS

Olympic champ Zheng finds mojo to reach semis

TOP SEED AT PAN PACIFIC OPEN BEATS LEYLAH FERNANDEZ

AFP
Tokyo

Zheng Qinwen reached the Tokyo semi-finals yesterday despite admitting to struggling for motivation after winning Olympic gold and receiving a hero's welcome in her native China.

The top seed beat Canada's Leylah Fernandez 6-0, 1-6, 6-3 to set up a final-four showdown with Russia's number six seed Diana Shnaider.

Zheng became the first Chinese player to win Olympic singles tennis gold when she triumphed in Paris this summer.

She said her "life changed" as a result and she "couldn't walk on the street" when she returned to play in China last month.

The 22-year-old is playing in a more sedate environment at the Pan Pacific Open in the Japanese capital and said it was "tough to find motivation".

"Especially after I finished in China because I got big expectations, a lot of stress, a lot of pressure there to play good in the Chinese events," she said.

"I already did one mistake after Australia, I lost motivation and lost a couple of matches I should not lose," she said, referring to reaching the Australian Open final in January.

"This time my team is trying to explain to me how important it is to keep the motivation up.

"If you are there on court, you need to fight 100 percent," Zheng said.



China's Zheng Qinwen serves against Leylah Fernandez of Canada during their singles quarter-final on day five of the Pan Pacific Open in Tokyo yesterday. (AFP)

Zheng yesterday looked set for a comfortable evening's work when she took the first set without dropping a game against Fernandez.

She said that her concentration dropped in the second set, but she refocused to reach her sixth semi-final of a breakout year.

"I'm happy I get (had) two matches (so far) here because honestly my motivation wasn't that high," she said.

"But I'm still able to push myself and get the match."

Zheng arrived in Tokyo after losing to Aryna Sabalenka in the final of the Wuhan Open. Sabalenka also beat her in the final in Melbourne.

Winning feeling sinking in
Before Wuhan, Zheng played at the China Open in Beijing, where she says the impact of her Olympic gold finally began to sink in.

"When I won the gold medal, honestly I didn't feel my life had changed until I went back to China," she said.

Zheng will face Shnaider for the first time in today's semi-finals.

The Russian advanced with a walkover when Japanese quarter-final opponent Sayaka Ishii withdrew injured.

Britain's number nine seed Katie Boulter will face American wild card Sofia Kenin in the other semi-final.

Boulter beat Canada's Bianca Andreescu 6-2, 6-1 while Kenin beat Russia's number three seed Daria Kasatkina 6-3, 6-4.

FORMULA ONE

Verstappen says 'definitely' his intention to remain at Red Bull

AFP
Mexico City

Max Verstappen has told AFP it is "definitely" his intention to remain at Red Bull until 2028 despite a turbulent season on and off the track.

Verstappen, speaking in an interview ahead of the Mexico Grand Prix, stressed he had a "long-term" contract with Red Bull until 2028, and praised rival teams for "catching up" on the previously dominant world champions.

Despite not winning a Grand Prix since June the 27-year-old expressed quiet confidence that he could hold off title rival Lando Norris of McLaren in the remaining five races and claim his fourth straight Formula One drivers' crown.

Red Bull and Verstappen raced out of the blocks at the start of the season, hoovering up seven of the first 10 races.

But then the wheels dramatically fell off their title charge, with Verstappen's only win since Spain coming in the sprint race in the United States last Saturday.

The Dutchman though believes the team under Christian Horner's stewardship have emerged from a fraught time to check McLaren's remarkable rise to the top of the constructors' standings.

The car that Verstappen likened to a "monster" only last month in Monza appears to have turned the corner, its problems ironed out, and Verstappen goes into Sunday's race 57 points clear of Norris.

'Tough races'

"We had a few tough races, I think we understood our problem and now the remaining races are all about just trying to get the balance back in the car and in general of course make it also go faster," he said.

If the RB20 was not reading its 2024 script properly, nor were the team, whose pre-season build-up was derailed by the damaging Horner case.

There had been speculation triple world champion Verstappen could move to Mercedes to replace Ferrari-bound Lewis Hamilton next year after Red Bull team principal Horner was accused of inappropriate conduct towards a woman colleague.

Horner was cleared of any wrongdoing ahead of the season-opener in Bahrain but the off-track

scandal rumbled on for weeks. Adding to the Red Bull turmoil were the departure of some integral figures in the team's success story over the years, not least engineering guru Adrian Newey.

Verstappen himself raised doubts about his future in Formula One one in Singapore last month after he was sanctioned by governing body, the FIA, for swearing.

Asked by AFP in Red Bull's motorhome at the high-altitude Mexican circuit whether he was planning to see out his Red Bull contract to the end of the 2028 season he replied: "That's definitely the intention, I signed a long-term deal with the team and in a perfect world we of course end it here."

And he did not make a link between Red Bull's off-track problems and their car losing its way in mid-season.

"This is something that is very difficult to answer, I think of course the decisions that were taken with this year's car were already before all that, so of course it's easy to blame it on that, but I don't want to do that."

'Prefer to win by 30 seconds'
After "a few tough races" with the Horner case an unwelcome side storm Red Bull look back in business.

"We are working together to try and come up with solutions, to try and find more performance and we are in the middle of that," added Verstappen.

"I think last weekend already it showed more promising results and I hope that we can continue that."

With Norris and McLaren emerging as genuine title contenders it's giving F1 fans something to shout about whilst making life a whole lot harder for Verstappen compared to 2023.

Fighting with Norris last weekend for third spot at the United States Grand Prix he said was good, "but winning by 30 seconds is also very nice!"

"I prefer to win by 30 seconds," said Verstappen who took third spot in Texas after Norris was relegated to fourth following a penalty.

He said there were no guarantees that he would be able to hold onto his driver's crown.

"A lot of things can still go wrong, but we just need to do a good job as a team and of course from my side I have to be on it every single weekend."



Red Bull's Max Verstappen with a person dressed as a catrina ahead of the Mexico City Grand Prix at Autodromo Hermanos Rodriguez, Mexico City yesterday. (Reuters)

GOLF

Nico Echavarria seizes 2-stroke lead in Chiba

Reuters
Chiba, Japan

Nico Echavarria's second straight 64 yesterday put the Colombian ahead by two strokes at 12-under after two rounds at the Zozo Championship in Chiba, Japan.

Echavarria carded seven birdies and a bogey to grab the 36-hole lead for the first time on the PGA Tour. His score of 128 at the Accordia Golf Narashino Country Club matched the tournament's 36-hole record set by Tiger Woods in 2019.

"I've never had a lead after 36 holes," said Echavarria, who played at the University of Arkansas.

His lone win on the PGA Tour was last year at the Puerto Rico Open.



First-round leader Taylor Moore shot a 3-under 67 yesterday and is tied for second at 10-under with Justin Thomas, who capped his bogey-free 64 with an eagle at the par-5 18th hole. Thomas is looking to break a two-year winless drought.

Ireland's Seamus Power posted the lowest round of the week with a bogey-free 62. With his career-best round on the PGA Tour, Power moved to 9-under and a three-way tie for fourth place with Eric Cole (67 on Friday) and Taiwan's CT Pan (66).

Marquez clocks lap record to go fastest in Thai MotoGP practice

Buriram, Thailand: Marc Marquez topped the timesheets in practice yesterday for the Thailand MotoGP with a lap record, as championship rivals Jorge Martin came second and Francesco Bagnaia fourth. The six-time world champion from Spain clocked a blistering time of 1min 29.165sec on his Ducati at a sweltering Buriram circuit.

Gresini's Marquez, a two-time winner at Buriram and victorious in last week's Grand Prix in Australia, pipped Ducati Pramac's Martin by 0.110sec. "I'm happy because starting the weekend that way is always important," said the 31-year-old Marquez, who is still just about in the title fight with three race weekends left.

Third was Enea Bastianini and Italian two-time defending world champion Bagnaia was fourth, also on a Ducati. Spain's Martin is just 20 points clear of Bagnaia in the world championship title race.

Marquez is third, but 79 points adrift of Martin. Combining the sprint race and the main race at Buriram, a maximum 37 points are up for grabs this weekend.

"In the first part of the season I was always struggling on the Friday, and there were a lot of ways to improve over the weekend," said Marquez. "Now on Friday I'm already on a good pace. Tomorrow it will be difficult to improve the lap time - it's already a track record." Rounding out the top 10 in afternoon practice were Maverick Vinales, Franco Morbidelli, Pedro Acosta, Alex Marquez, Marco Bezzecchi and Johann Zarco. They all progressed straight through to today's second qualifying, which shapes the first four rows of the grid for today's sprint race and Sunday's main event. The penultimate race weekend of the season is in Malaysia next weekend, ahead of the final leg in Valencia in mid-November.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arsenal must show 'ruthless mentality': Arteta

Slot targets Arsenal scalp after flying start to his Liverpool tenure

AFP
London

Mikel Arteta says Arsenal cannot afford to feel sorry for themselves after a rash of injuries and William Saliba's suspension ruined their preparation for tomorrow's blockbuster clash with Premier League leaders Liverpool.

Arteta's side will be without Saliba after his red card in last weekend's shock defeat at Bournemouth, with the Arsenal boss sweating on the fitness of several key players. Bukayo Saka, Riccardo Calafiori and Jurrien Timber are all in a race against time to be fit for Liverpool's visit to the Emirates Stadium on Sunday. "We're going to do our very best to somehow have them available. It's very uncertain," Arteta told reporters.

The Gunners have also been without captain Martin Odegaard since the Norway midfielder was injured on international duty in early September. Facing in-form Liverpool without so many stars is a daunting task, but Arteta is adamant his players will rise to the challenge.

"This is the game. Obviously we didn't want to be in this situation but we are lucky to have the squad we have. Don't feel sorry for ourselves," Arteta said. "In a lot of cases it's been very bad luck. It is difficult to control. It's about how we react. The team has to have the resources to mentally adapt to that. We have had very difficult and challenging moments but I don't think this is one of them. We are a good team and know how difficult we can be for the opponent. We have that ruthless mentality I love."

Third-placed Arsenal are four points behind Liverpool after losing ground on Arne Slot's men last weekend. Arsenal's response to their first defeat in all competitions since April was a lethargic 1-0 win against Shakhtar Donetsk in the Champions League on Tuesday.

Saliba was able to play against Shakhtar but the loss of his formidable partnership with Gabriel Magalhaes could be crucial in the Liverpool showdown. Ben White is a candidate to move from right-back to join Gabriel at the heart of Arsenal's defence. "It's true that partnership (with Saliba and Gabriel) has been very stable. There are other players who have played there before so we have to find a solution," Arteta said.

Liverpool have impressed in Slot's first season in charge after the former Feyenoord boss replaced Jurgen Klopp at Anfield. The Reds have won 11 of their 12 games in all competitions, with the lone loss coming against Nottingham Forest.



Arsenal's Gabriel Magalhaes (left) and Gabriel Martinelli train in London yesterday.

Arteta believes Slot has benefited from a quality squad and solid culture, from the dressing room to the boardroom. "For me they are one of the best teams in the last decade. They are in a really great moment, because of the infrastructure and the players," he said. "Arne Slot has inherited a team that was already successful. He has given them his own touch. You can see his fingerprints. You look at that team and think they are going to be contenders."

Slot said his Liverpool team are "matching his expectations" after their flying start to the season. The Reds are top of the Premier League with seven wins in their first eight matches and have also won all three of their Champions League games so far. He told reporters that he was expecting a tough test at the Emirates. "If you look at the last two seasons, Arsenal were far ahead of us, but also above Chelsea (whom Liverpool beat 2-1 last week)," he said.

"So you would assume that playing Arsenal would be even more difficult, but let's see at the end of the season where Chelsea and Arsenal both are. Normally you would expect,

especially because it's also an away game, that this one is even more difficult than Chelsea at home, and we all saw how difficult Chelsea at home was."

Last season Liverpool took just three points from their four games against champions Manchester City and Arsenal, who finished second. "We all know that taking points from your competitors, and nobody knows in this early stage who is going to be your biggest competitor, but I think we all know that Arsenal will be one of them," said Slot.

Injured forward Diogo Jota will miss the trip to London while goalkeeper Alisson Becker remains out of action.

FIXTURES

Today: (1400 unless stated): Aston Villa v Bournemouth, Brentford v Ipswich, Brighton v Wolves, Manchester City v Southampton, Everton v Fulham (1630)

Tomorrow: (1400 unless stated): Chelsea v Newcastle, Crystal Palace v Tottenham, West Ham v Manchester United, Arsenal v Liverpool (1630)

EUROPA LEAGUE

Mourinho up to old tricks in United draw

AFP
Istanbul

Fenerbahce coach Jose Mourinho wryly congratulated the referee who sent him off as one of the best in the world after his side drew 1-1 with Manchester United in the Europa League on Thursday, a score he teasingly called a good result for his former club.

The hosts secured a draw after Youssef En-Nesyri headed in a second-half equaliser, following an early goal by Christian Eriksen. Mourinho, however, was typically the centre of attention and was shown a red card in the second half after a heated dispute with referee Clement Turpin, who he claimed was monitoring his behaviour while simultaneously following the match.

"The referee told me something incred-



ible. He said at the same time he could see the action in the box and my behaviour on the touchline," the Portuguese said. "I congratulate him because he is absolutely incredible. During the game, 100 miles per hour, he had one eye on the penalty situation and one eye

on my behaviour on the bench. That is why he is the one of the best referees in the world."

The Portuguese, was full of praise for his side, who he said were the better team on the night. "We played amazing. If we play like this in the Turkish league we destroy everything because of course we played against a team with a superior level than us," he said.

"We had injuries. We had to do a crazy puzzle. Our performance was extraordinary. I could not ask any more from the players. I know English media will say United didn't play well but I think it would be fair to say we did an extraordinary match and we were better than them. A good result for Man Utd," added Mourinho, who was sacked by the English club in 2018.

United manager Erik ten Hag was disappointed with the result, with his side having now won one of their last 11 matches in European competitions.

SPOTLIGHT

PSG to go to court after LFP rules in favour of Mbappe

Reuters
Paris

Paris St Germain will take their wage dispute with Kylian Mbappe to court after the French football league's governing body (LFP) ruled in favour of the France captain yesterday.

French media reported the 25-year-old, who has not commented on the dispute, is seeking around 55mm euros (\$59.52mm) in salary and bonuses he says he is owed by the club. The Ligue 1 champions, however, say Mbappe's contract was "legally amended" and that he reneged on commitments when he left the club to join Spanish giants Real Madrid in the close season.

PSG said last month that Mbappe had refused an offer from the LFP to mediate on the issue. The LFP's National Joint Appeals Commission heard the parties on Oct 15 and announced yesterday it had ruled in favour of Mbappe.

"The club must pay him the salary he is claiming. This decision is not subject to appeal, but may be referred to the FFF (French Football Federation) Executive Committee," the LFP said. However, PSG said they would be "forced to bring the case before the competent courts" while still trying to find an "amicable solution" with Mbappe, who became the French club's all-time top scorer during his seven-year stay in the capital.

"What is in debate, and will ultimately be heard before an appropriate tribunal, is that the original contract was legally amended in August 2023 relating to the 2024-25 season, and also fully recognised by the player including in January 2024 - until the player then decided to renege all his com-



mitments upon leaving the club," a PSG spokesperson said.

"As a matter of law and fact, the player has made clear, repeated public and private commitments that the club simply asks are honoured, with the player being afforded unprecedented benefits by the club over 7 years in Paris. The club hopes these basic commitments will simply be respected, knowing that the club will be forced to have the player's bad faith judged by the competent courts if the player regrettably seeks to pursue this incomprehensibly damaging dispute, for himself and for French football, further."

Mbappe's representatives were not immediately available for comment. In January, Mbappe had said he made an agreement with PSG chairman Nasser al-Khelaifi which would "protect all parties and preserve the club's serenity for the challenges ahead".

Ancelotti 'not losing sleep' over improved Barca ahead of Clasico

Madrid: Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said La Liga leaders Barcelona's revival is not keeping him up at night ahead of today's Clasico. Hansi Flick's Barca visit the Santiago Bernabeu sitting three points ahead of the second-place Spanish champions and thrashed German giants Bayern Munich 5-1 in the Champions League on Wednesday. However Real Madrid are unbeaten in 42 La Liga matches and can match Barcelona's all-time record of 43 if they avoid defeat.

"The truth is they are doing very well," admitted Ancelotti at a news conference. "In a game like the Clasico, a derby, it's hard to pick a favourite. Luckily nobody is taking any sleep away from me at the moment."

Barcelona struggled last season and Madrid beat them in both La Liga Clasicos. Madrid midfielder Jude Bellingham scored three times in those two games during a fantastic campaign, but this season has not found the net in his first 10 appearances across all competitions.

Ancelotti said he was happy with Bellingham's performances and that the onus was now on superstar striker Kylian Mbappe to lead the scoring charts for Los Blancos. Bellingham, playing up front at the start of last season after Karim Benzema's departure, scored 10 goals in his first 10 Madrid matches.

"Last year we had no striker,

we lost an important striker like Karim, we replaced him with the goals of Bellingham, Joselu and Brahim (Diaz)," continued Ancelotti. "This year we don't have a problem, because we have a striker that can score 30, 35, 40 goals. The important thing is (Bellingham) does his work, which is very important."

Mbappe, who arrived from PSG this summer, is preparing for his first Clasico and Ancelotti said the striker was relaxed.

Barca coach Flick, also taking part in his first Clasico, hailed his team ahead of their biggest test of the campaign. The German coach said he would adapt his set-up, including an aggressive high-line defence, but not drastically, for the visit to the capital.

"We have our ideas, and I said also after the match against Bayern that we have to improve a little bit...every match we play, we adapt for the next match, and it's also the same against Real," explained Flick.

"They also have players who are very fast, we know that we play against Real Madrid, a team with world-class players. But in the end, I trust (my players), I have a big belief in my team."

Flick said he was grateful for the praise he has received after a superb start, but is not taking it too seriously. "It's nice, it's kind, but in the end, I know my job and I know that everything is about the result," he said.

LIGUE 1

De Zerbi hails Greenwood as Marseille await Paris Saint-Germain



Marseille's coach Roberto De Zerbi. (AFP)

AFP
Paris

Ligue 1 leaders Paris Saint-Germain make a risk-laden trip to the Mediterranean coast tomorrow where bitter rivals Marseille and their developing English stars Mason Greenwood and Jonathan Rowe are sharpening their knives.

French football has several fierce rivalries but Marseille vs PSG is the clash that catches the eye as the southern club enjoy decades-old bragging rights having won the old European Cup, while the closest Parisians have come is losing the Champions League final in 2020.

PSG could only draw with PSV Eindhoven in the league phase of the Champions League this week after a recent 2-0 defeat at Arsenal, meaning they have

made an unimpressive start to their European campaign this season. Marseille are lurking just three points behind the Ligue 1 leaders, and are resurgent under former Brighton coach Roberto De Zerbi. "We are Marseille, and we want to win this kind of match, we have the ambition. I want the players to be brave and go out and win it," De Zerbi said yesterday.

PSG meanwhile may appear less fearsome to their opponents having turned the page on the era of the now-departed superstar trio of Neymar, Lionel Messi and Kylian Mbappe. Greenwood's arrival in France sparked controversy as the 23-year-old former Manchester United striker is attempting to rebuild his fledgling career after charges of attempted rape were dropped, but not forgotten.

De Zerbi said he was focusing on Greenwood's potential. "I expect even more from him. He's a different player

from the others, he's really very good, but he can be even more complete, even more of a team man," the Italian said. "He has to work on the phase without the ball, but he is young, he is humble, very available. He can become a total player."

Greenwood's six goals so far and glimpses of class make him an early contender for player of the season in France, while the powerfully built England under-21 international Rowe, on loan from English Championship club Norwich, scored a sensational 95th minute clincher in a 3-2 comeback win at Lyon in September.

PSG though are on a 27-match unbeaten run away from home in Ligue 1 - and the omens for Marseille are not good as the run started against them with a 3-0 win on February 26, 2023. PSG will have to play without their supporters, who have been barred from Marseille's Stade

Velodrome due to homophobic chants aimed at their opponents' fans.

A little further along the south coast Nice, owned by Manchester United part-owner Jim Ratcliffe, host neighbours Monaco who have made an impressive start to the season and have 20 points, the same number as PSG. Nice will want to build on their modest haul of 10 points. Bruno Genesio pulled off a coup this week when his Lille side beat Atletico Madrid 3-1 in the Champions League. On their return to Ligue 1 they face off with Will Still's unbeaten Lens.

FIXTURES (ALL TIMES GMT)

Today: Angers v Saint-Etienne (1500), Reims v Brest (1700), Lens v Lille (1900)
Tomorrow: Lyon v Auxerre (1300), Strasbourg v Nantes, Nice v Monaco, Montpellier v Toulouse (all 1700), Marseille v Paris Saint-Germain (1845)