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SPORT

CRICKET

Kohli looking 'ominous' ahead of opener against Australia: Bumrah

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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Sadd target fifth straight win to close in on Duhail

Defending champs are hot on the heels of leaders Duhail, trailing by just four points

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Sadd will look to extend their impressive unbeaten streak as they face off against bottom-placed Al Khor, with the Qatar Stars League resuming today after the international break. Currently in second place with 18 points, Al Sadd are hot on the heels of league leaders Al Duhail, trailing by just four points. Coach Felix Sanchez's squad is riding a four-match winning streak, with recent victories over Al Gharafa, Al Shahaniya, Al Wakrah, and Al Rayyan.

Coach Felix Sanchez aims to keep the momentum going, emphasising the need to focus on one match at a time, despite the challenges of players returning from international duty.

"We have four important matches in the coming period, starting with our match against Al Khor," Sanchez said yesterday. "Each game has its own story, and we have to focus only on the next match. We need to work hard to prepare well and collect three points," the former coach added.

While Al Sadd's squad has suffered injuries, they have capable replacements who've kept the team performing at a high level. Sanchez's tactical depth and ability to adapt have kept Al Sadd's attack potent, with 26 goals scored—the second-highest in the league.

"Things are always difficult when we play after the international break, because the players return after playing two matches with their national teams and some of them have taken long trips. We have to evaluate the players' condition in order to prepare well for this match, we know that we have a short time to prepare, but we are excited for this match," Sanchez said.

Al Khor, languishing at the bottom of the table with only four points from nine games, are desperate to improve their position. Coach Mehdi Nafti remains optimistic despite the team's struggles, highlighting their improved play over the past month.

"We do not look at the standings and I believe in the capabilities and potential of my players to get out of the danger zone," Nafti stated.

"My team has been different for a month



Al Sadd players at a training session on the eve of their Qatar Stars League match.

and is playing good football, but we lack results and as you can see how we performed in the last 3 or 4 matches, as the team is playing distinguished football, which makes us aspire to come out with positive results in the upcoming matches. The players are developing match after match and

we are creating more opportunities and we have always been the better side in recent matches, he added.

He remains confident that his team can pull off a positive outcome, especially with key attackers Yohan Boli and Aymen Hussein in good form. Despite Al Khor's dire

situation, they will aim to leverage their home-field advantage, with Nafti urging his squad to seize this chance against the reigning champions.

GHARAF A FACE WAKRAH IN BATTLE FOR TOP FOUR SPOT

Another key fixture this week is the showdown between Al Gharafa and Al Wakrah at the Thani Bin Jassim Stadium, set to kick off at 6pm today. The stakes are high as both teams jostle for top-four positions.

Al Gharafa, sitting fourth with 15 points, will look to veteran playmaker Yacine Brahimi and a talented offensive lineup to continue their push. Al Wakrah, just a point behind in fifth place, also come into this match on the back of a strong performance, having defeated Umm Salal 3-0 in their previous match.

Al Gharafa coach Pedro Martins acknowledges the importance of this fixture. "Al Wakrah are a team known for their collective play," he noted, emphasising the need for his squad to deliver a cohesive performance.

Al Wakrah's coach Ali Rahma al-Marri is similarly focused, highlighting his players' readiness after the international break. "We tried to exploit the QSL Cup break to prepare, and now our goal is to collect three points against direct competitors."

In the other match today, Al Rayyan face off against Al Shamal at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium, with both teams tied on 10 points. Al Rayyan hold a slight edge due to goal difference, but both sides are eager to climb higher in the standings after suffering losses in the previous round.

Rayyan's coach Younes Ali emphasises the importance of focus and converting opportunities into goals after their narrow 1-2 defeat to Al Sadd. "Our focus now is on the existing group and winning the next four games," he stated.

Meanwhile, Al Shamal coach Nuno Almeida is looking to bounce back from a heavy 2-6 loss to Al Duhail and aims to shore up his team's defence.

Tomorrow, defending champions Al Duhail will play Al Arabi at the Al Thumama Stadium at 3pm while Umm Salal will meet Al Ahli at the Grand Hamad Stadium at 5.30pm. Qatar SC will face Al Shahania at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium at 5.30pm.

Tickets for FIFA Intercontinental Cup Qatar go on sale

Doha: General public ticket sales for the FIFA Intercontinental Cup Qatar 2024 began yesterday via the official tournament website: <http://fic24.qa> Tickets are available for purchase by all card-holders, and all three matches and price categories will have additional tickets released.

The start of general public ticket sales follows a week-long VISA pre-sale period for VISA card holders, which witnessed significant demand for tickets with the top purchasing nations being Egypt, Qatar Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

The tournament, which will be hosted by Qatar from 11 to 18 December, will give football fans the unique opportunity to see reigning UEFA Champions League champions Real Madrid CF, Al Ahly SC (CAF Champions League 2024 Winners), C.F. Pachuca (CONCACAF Champions Cup 2024 Winners) and the yet-to-be-decided winners of the CONMEBOL Copa Libertadores 2024.

Stadium 974 will host two matches, before the much-anticipated final match at the iconic Lusail Stadium – marking the two-year anniversary of the historic FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 final. Both venues are fully accessible and will offer a wide range of seating options for disabled fans.

A full breakdown of prices can be found below:

FIFA Derby of the Americas Qatar 2024 and FIFA Challenger Cup Qatar 2024 (Stadium 974):
Category 1 – QR150
Category 2 – QR70
Category 3 & Accessibility – QR40

FIFA Intercontinental Cup Qatar 2024 Final (Lusail Stadium)
Category 1 – QR1,000
Category 2 – QR600
Category 3 & Accessibility – QR200

Spectators will be allowed to purchase six tickets per person. An official resale platform will be available at a later stage. Fans are reminded to purchase tickets only from the official source to avoid any potential issues such as counterfeit or invalid tickets.

HORSE RACING

Wathnan Racing's Dark Trooper claims Barzan Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Wathnan Racing and jockey James Doyle completed a quick-fire double in the day's feature contest, as Dark Trooper took the QA Gr3 Barzan Cup, 1400m race for Thoroughbreds at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

It was a thrilling finish as the Alban de Mieulle-trained four-year-old winner held off the charge of Fuwayrit by a neck, marking the start of his career in Qatar with a black-type success.

Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi, QREC Racing Manager, presented the trophies to the winners of the race.

The QA Gr3 Thoroughbred Guineas saw a thrilling finish with three horses, all in the colours of Wathnan Racing, battling in the closing stages of the 1400m race and it was Garfield Shadow who stole a march to win for trainer Hamad al-Jehani. In the hands of Doyle, the three-year-old bay colt prevailed by 1¼ lengths from Soldier's Gold, who was two lengths ahead in front of Native America.

Al-Khbaib, carrying the colours of Al Shaqab Racing, made his Qatari debut a success by winning the Purebred Arabian Guineas. Trained by Jean de Mieulle, the four-year-old colt was ridden by Faleh Bughanaim, who waited until the final 200m to unleash his mount's turn of foot and he sauntered clear to win the 1400m



Jockey James Doyle rode Wathnan Racing's Dark Trooper to the Barzan Cup win yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim

race by 1¼ lengths. Saad Ali al-Kubaisi, Deputy Director of the QREC Registration & Studbook Dept crowned the winners of the race.

On seasonal debut, Dawi continued his impressive performance with a victory, winning the Sheraouh Island Cup for owner HE Sheikhha Iman bint Mohammed bin Khalifa al-Thani. Under a front-running ride from Tomas Lukasek, the seven-year-old, trained by Rudy Nerbonne, stretched

clear in the final 200m of the 2100m contest for Purebred Arabians to win by 2¼ lengths.

In the card opener, Abdulatif bin Husain Z al-Emadi's Pazeer won the 2100m Thoroughbred Handicap (85 & above) for four-year-old contest. Jockey Lukas Delozier guided the Khalifa Hamed Nasser al-Sawai-trained 10-year-old bay gelding to beat Sharq Stud's El Chaco by a quarter of a length to emerge as winner.



Connections of Dark Trooper celebrate after the four-year-old won the QA Group 3 Barzan Cup at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

RESULTS 6th Al Rayyan Race Meeting – Guineas & Barzan Cup (Div 1) Winners (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

Barzan Cup - Thoroughbreds (Class 1 QA Gr3)
Dark Trooper, Alban Elie De Mieulle, James Doyle
Thoroughbred Guineas (3yo only) (Class 1 QA Gr3)
Garfield Shadow, Hamad al-Jehani, James Doyle

Purebred Arabian Guineas (4yo only) (Class 2)

Al Khbaib, Jean de Mieulle, Faleh Bughanaim
Sheraouh Island Cup - Purebred Arabian (Class 2)
Dawi, Rudy Andre Nerbonne, Tomas Lukasek
Thoroughbred Handicap 85 and above (Class 2)
Pazeer, Khalifa Hamed Nasser al-Sawai, Lukas Delozier

BORDER-GAVASKAR TROPHY

Kohli looking 'ominous' ahead of opener: Bumrah

'The beauty about cricket is even if you win, you start from zero, and even if you lose you start from zero'

AFP
Perth

Stand-in skipper Jasprit Bumrah insisted yesterday that India were carrying no baggage from their Test whitewash by New Zealand and warned Australia that star batsman Virat Kohli was looking "ominous".

India head into the first of five Tests against Australia today in Perth on the back of their first home series loss in 12 years.

But speedster Bumrah, who will captain the side after Rohit Sharma stayed home following the birth of his second child, said they were only looking forward.

"The beauty about cricket is even if you win, you start from zero, and even if you lose you start from zero," he told reporters. "So that's how I look at the game."

"Obviously, yes, we were disappointed and we were down that we had a tough series (against New Zealand)."

"But we are not carrying any baggages. We come with a fresh mindset, different opposition and you learn from the changes that have happened in our team."

With Rohit out, KL Rahul or Abhimanyu Easwaran are in line to open alongside Yashasvi Jaiswal, while there are doubts over number three Shubman Gill who has hurt his thumb.

Their bowling line-up is also unclear. Bumrah said India had settled on who would partner him in the attack, but he would wait until the toss to reveal all.

Kohli is certain to play, but will pad up under increasing scrutiny after managing only two Test centuries in the last five years and averaging just 15 against New Zealand.

Despite signs that one of the world's greatest batsmen may be past his best at 36, Bumrah cautioned that Kohli should never be written off.

Kohli has a stellar record in



Australia captain Pat Cummins (left) and India captain Jasprit Bumrah pose with the trophy at Optus Stadium in Perth yesterday, on the eve of the first Test of the five-Test Border-Gavaskar Trophy. (AFP)

Australia, averaging 54.08. "He is one of the greats of the game," said Bumrah.

"He's the utmost professional that we have in our team. He's got a lot of success."

"Okay, one or two series here and there can go up and down, but the confidence that he has at this moment, I have no doubts."

"He's looking to contribute. And the way I've seen him at training... the signs are ominous."

With Bumrah taking the arm-band, the first Test will have two fast bowlers captaining their teams, with Pat Cummins in charge of Australia.

Bumrah said he was determined to do the job his way.

"I love responsibility. I wanted to do the tough job since I was a child," he said.

"I've never followed a copybook plan... I've never followed a model and I go with my instincts and

that's how I've always played my cricket. "I have a lot of faith in my instincts and gut," he added.

Cummins tells McSweeney not to emulate Warner against India

Australia captain Pat Cummins yesterday urged new opener Nathan McSweeney not to try and emulate swashbuckling David Warner, while admitting his team had unfinished business with India.

The uncapped McSweeney will make his Test bow at Perth Stadium today, parachuted in at the top of the order alongside Usman Khawaja after Warner's retirement this year. He has big shoes to fill, and goes into the game having only opened once before at first-class level, in a warm-up Australia A match this month.

Cummins said he must be himself when he fronts a world-class Indian attack spearheaded by Jas-

prit Bumrah on what is expected to be a fiery pitch. "Davey is very hard to replace in many ways, but I think t h e



India's Virat Kohli attends a practice session at the Optus Stadium in Perth yesterday. (AFP)



Australia's Travis Head (left) and debutant Nathan McSweeney during a practice session at Optus Stadium in Perth yesterday. (AFP)

most important thing for someone like Nath coming in is to play his own game," he said.

"He doesn't need to strike at 80 like Davey did if that's not his game."

Other than McSweeney, Australia has a settled side which is on a mission to win their first Test series against India in almost a decade. Only Mitchell Starc, Josh Hazlewood, Nathan Lyon and Steve Smith remain from the squad that last won in Australia back in 2014-15.

Since then they have slumped to four straight Border-Gavaskar series losses, including two at home.

"It's kind of one of the last things to tick off for a lot of us," Cummins told reporters of beating their big rival.

"Almost every challenge that we've had thrown with us over the last few years we've stepped up and done well."

"To do that for another year, another home summer, would kind of cement this."

While Australia go into the first of five Tests with their starting XI locked in, India is set for a shake up after their devastating 3-0 home series loss to New Zealand.

Rohit Sharma will likely miss the match following the birth of his second child, with Bumrah assuming the captaincy.

Number three Shubman Gill is a doubt with an injured thumb, while the bowling line-up behind Bumrah is yet to be decided.

Nevertheless, Cummins is under no illusions about the task ahead. "There will always be pressure when you are playing at home," he said. "We're all excited, we know India are right up there with the best teams."

"They are missing a couple of guys we are more familiar with, but we know that whoever they pick they will obviously think are good enough for Test cricket."

SWIMMING

Peaty in no rush to make 2028 decision after Paris frustrations

Reuters
London

Triple Olympic swimming champion Adam Peaty said he is not ready to make a decision about competing at the 2028 Los Angeles Games after the Briton was left frustrated by illness and some of the team's decision-making in Paris.

Peaty missed out on a third straight 100 breaststroke title by 0.02 seconds at La Defense Arena.

The 29-year-old had been bidding to join Michael Phelps as the second male swimmer to win the same Olympic individual swimming event three times but, struggling to recover from Covid-19, he lost out to Italian Nicolo Martinenghi.

Though rating Paris as a "great Games" personally, Peaty told *The Times* he was also left with a feeling of frustration by the illness and with some of the decisions made by British team management.

"There is still a lot of hurt there because of certain things and, because of the illness, and



because of some decisions that were made by the team that I don't think were in the best interest of the athletes," said Peaty.

"And so there is a bit of anger." Peaty did not elaborate on his misgivings with team management but said there conversations to be had in private.

"Anger is good, if it's anger with purpose and it makes sure that my voice is heard. Britain can obviously grow from that experience (in Paris)," he added.

Peaty, who will be 33 when Los Angeles hosts the Games, said he might take another six months or a year's rest before being ready to

commit to another gruelling Olympic training programme.

The possibility of the 50 breaststroke being added to the Olympics might help sway him toward LA given the lower training load required for success compared to the 100. World Aquatics has asked for the 50 breaststroke, butterfly and backstroke events to be added to the schedule for 2028. Peaty is the world record holder in both the 50 and 100 events.

"You can train a lot smarter for the pure sprint and it won't take as much energy to do that," said Peaty.

FOCUS

Modern pentathlon at LA 2028 no rescue operation for the sport: President

Reuters
Berlin

Modern pentathlon at the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics will not be a rescue operation for the sport with obstacle running replacing horse riding, the new president of the sport's international federation (UIPM) Rob Stull said yesterday.

The blend of fencing, freestyle swimming, show jumping, pistol shooting and cross-country running caused a furore at the 2021 Tokyo Games when a German coach struck a horse that refused a fence.

The sport was dropped from the initial list for the 2028 Los Angeles Games but reinstated after the governing UIPM decided the equestrian element would be replaced by obstacle racing after this year's Paris Olympics.

The change caused ructions,

with some athletes unhappy but the sport hopes to appeal to a larger, younger and more diverse audience already sold on popular obstacle course franchises.

"Absolutely it is not a rescue operation," Stull, who was elected to the post last week and succeeded long-time president Klaus Schormann, told a group of international reporters.

"I don't look at our sport defensively. We have had challenges and we have acknowledged that. So I don't view it from a defensive mode. It is an offensive action in building and growing the sport," Stull, a former Olympian who competed in both pentathlon and fencing at the Games, said.

In Paris the horses went out in style - saddled up for one last Olympic ride in the gardens of the Chateau de Versailles, palatial home of the 17th century 'Sun King' Louis XIV.

The change for Los Angeles is not the first for the sport since its

debut in 1912, with firearms and swords having been replaced by laser pistols and electric epees among others.

"Modern pentathlon is five disciplines and the new one is 20% of the sport. What I am hoping to see in Los Angeles is what we saw in Paris but elevated," Stull said.

"Paris was a huge success for modern pentathlon. The bar has been set and raised for modern pentathlon."

The venue for the sport's competition at the Los Angeles Games has not yet been determined with Stull saying it needs to be finalised sooner rather than later.

"We have a list of things that have some urgency. Establishing the venues is on that list," he said. "I had some ideas that are exciting. I want to try hard for that iconic venue. It was a campaign promise."

"Modern pentathlon because of its nature, any stadium you bring we can fill it," he said.

Tanak steals march on Neuville in Rally Japan opener

Title-chasing Ott Tanak finished ahead of championship leader Thierry Neuville in the first stage of the season-ending Rally Japan yesterday, with Adrien Fourmaux clocking the fastest time. Belgian Neuville is looking to clinch his first world title and holds a 25-point lead over Estonia's Tanak going into the decisive leg of the year. Tanak needs to have a perfect weekend to stand any chance of overhauling his Hyundai teammate and he laid down a marker by finishing second in the opening super stage.

Tanak was 0.5sec behind France's Fourmaux, with Neuville in sixth place, 2.2sec off the leading pace. There are 30 points up for grabs this weekend and Neuville said he was "counting down the stages" until the finish. "Once the rally starts, it's probably easier to manage the stress," said the Belgian, a five-time world championship runner-up. "Nevertheless it will be a challenging weekend for us and we need to keep concentrated and just do the job." Tanak looked raring to go as he

drifted around the twists and turns of the opening super special stage at Toyota Stadium. "It was all a clean stage," said Tanak, the 2019 world champion. "Nice atmosphere, but otherwise looking forward for tomorrow." Neuville and Tanak can also help Hyundai win the manufacturers' championship this weekend in Japan. They hold a 15-point lead over Toyota. "It's good to see everybody motivated but at the same time quite relaxed," said Neuville. "Everybody's going to try to do his best."

PRE-DEPARTURE PRESS CONFERENCE



Sri Lanka's coach Sanath Jayasuriya (left) speaks as chief selector Upul Tharanga looks on during a press conference ahead of the team's departure to South Africa for two Test matches, in Colombo yesterday. The opening Test starts November 27 in Durban, followed by one in Gqeberha on December 5. The series is part of the ICC World Test Championships. (AFP)

TENNIS

Australia edge out US to reach Davis Cup semis

Lleyton Hewitt's side signs in for its third successive semi-finals

Reuters
Malaga

Australia booked their place in the Davis Cup semi-finals as doubles pair Matthew Ebden and Jordan Thompson clinched the deciding rubber against the United States yesterday.

Olympic champion Ebden and Thompson beat Tommy Paul and Ben Shelton 6-4 6-4 to put Lleyton Hewitt's side into their third successive semi-final of the men's team event.

The US were slight favourites going into a battle between the two most successful nations in the competition's history, but Australia's Thanasi Kokkinakis beat Shelton 6-1 4-6 7-6(14) in the opening singles after saving four match points.

World number four Taylor Fritz then levelled it up with a 6-3 6-4 defeat of Alex de Minaur to send the tie to the doubles.

Surprisingly, American captain Bob Bryan opted against using his doubles specialists Rajeev Ram and Austin Krajicek and sent out Shelton and Paul instead and the plan backfired as Ebden and Thompson's greater doubles craft proved decisive.

Australia will find out their opponents later when reigning champions Italy take on Argentina.

Hewitt's Australia have been knocking on the door for a few seasons now, losing in the final to Canada in 2022 and falling at the final hurdle again to Italy last year.

"We have such a rich history in



Australia's Jordan Thompson and Matthew Ebden celebrate winning their doubles match against Ben Shelton of the US and compatriot Tommy Paul during the Davis Cup Finals quarter-final at Palacio de Deportes Jose Maria Martin Carpena Arena, Malaga, Spain, yesterday. (Reuters)

this competition and these boys know it's a great honour to wear the green and gold out there," former world number one Hewitt said.

"We've had a very similar team of around six guys who have put their hand up for three or four years now, they have gelled together well, super proud of the whole team."

Hewitt said he had been confident that world number 77 Kokkinakis, who often saves his best for Davis Cup ties, would rise to

the occasion against 21st-ranked Shelton.

And so it proved as he prevailed in a thriller. He outplayed Shelton in the first set, but the powerful young American responded impressively to win the second.

As serve began to dominate, the match inevitably went to a tie-break which was the longest in the Davis Cup for five years.

Kokkinakis led 6-4 but Shelton saved two match points with booming serves and as the tension mounted both players saved

match points against them by serving aces. Shelton banged down two to lead 14-13 but Kokkinakis was not done and reeled off three successive points to claim the win. "Seeing the boys on the sidelines, seeing Lleyton, obviously an idol growing up, getting super fired up and in my ear keeping me going motivated, I think it's massive," Kokkinakis said.

Fritz repeated his win over De Minaur at the ATP Finals but Australia took full advantage of the Americans' doubles switch.

SPOTLIGHT

Italy's Paolini celebrates 'unbelievable' year after BJK Cup glory

AFP
Malaga, Spain

Jasmine Paolini celebrated an "unbelievable year" for both herself and Italian tennis after driving her nation to Billie Jean King Cup glory on Wednesday.

The world number four enjoyed a stunning season, finishing as runner-up at Roland Garros and Wimbledon, winning her second career title in Dubai and then triumphing with Italy in doubles at the Olympics and again in Malaga.

Paolini won the second singles rubber against Slovakia's Rebecca Sramkova to complete a 2-0 win for Italy, following Lucia Bronzetti's victory over Viktorija Hrunčáková in the opening match.

Meanwhile in the men's game Italy's Jannik Sinner is the world number one and won the Australian Open, US Open and the ATP Finals last week.

"I think it's an unbelievable year for Italian tennis and it's so good for our sport in our country," Paolini told reporters.

"We have a lot of fans of tennis in Italy now, tennis is growing a lot.

"It's really good to have Jannik as world number one, he's an ex-

ample for everybody. It was an unbelievable year I have to say."

Italy were beaten in last year's BJK Cup final and Paolini said at that point it would have been "impossible" for her to imagine her success this season.

"This year was crazy, to finish it like that - it's a dream," said the 28-year-old.

"At the beginning of the week I didn't think we'd end the week with a trophy, it's always tough this competition, with big matches..."

"I'm glad that we were able to do it, it's not easy after last year we lost in the final... last year Canada played amazing tennis, this year we played amazing tennis - we deserve it I think."

Paolini and her teammates were wearing blue jackets which were given to the winners by former women's tennis great Billie Jean King herself at the trophy ceremony.

"We exchanged jackets, I give her mine and she gives me this one," explained Italian captain Tatiana Garbin.

"It's an honour to talk to Billie, she's a legend... she's the one who changed the game.

"It's an honour to have her here, she changed the way women are treated, not just in sport but in all the situations."



Italy's Jasmine Paolini (centre) and Team Italy teammates hold up the trophy after winning the Billie Jean King Cup Finals at the Palacio de Deportes Jose Maria Martin Carpena arena in Malaga, Spain. (AFP)

Verstappen cool on F1 championship hopes in Vegas

Las Vegas: Max Verstappen played down his prospects of clinching a fourth consecutive drivers' world championship at this weekend's Las Vegas Grand Prix.

The Red Bull driver, who claimed a spectacular victory in the rain-hit Sao Paulo Grand Prix three weeks ago, said that triumph had not proved that all his problems were over after a winless 10-race run.

Speaking to reporters in Las Vegas, he said it was not certain that he would win again to take the 2024 title.

"At the moment, it's difficult to tell because if you look at the last few races in the dry of course we didn't have the pace... It's not that, because we won in the rain in Brazil, suddenly everything is fixed and everything is looking great again.

"Of course, it gave me a good position in the championship, but also I have to be realistic that we are not the quickest.

"I hope that we can be competitive here. It's still very unknown with the track temperatures, of course, and like last year very cold." The Dutchman leads McLaren's Lando Norris by 62 points in the title race with three Grands Prix remaining - and 60 points avail-

able at the final two races. This leaves Norris needing to beat Verstappen by three points in Las Vegas to keep his title challenge alive.

"For me, the pressure is from me because I want to do well always, every single weekend," said Verstappen. "And it is not necessarily about the championship.

"I am just trying to enjoy the weekend as well and to see. How competitive we can be. It is not decided yet so there are still points that we need to be scored.

"Really, it is about how quick I am and how good the car is more than anything else.

"In the last few races, McLaren has been the quickest but last year, Ferrari was very fast here and it can be different every year.

"Other teams have upgrades compared to the last time here so it is difficult to say what can happen here at the moment."

Verstappen also expressed surprise at the sudden departure of race director Niels Wittich.

The FIA said on the eve of the Grand Prix that the German had left his role to "pursue new opportunities", but Wittich said he had been dismissed with three races remaining this year. Rui Marques has replaced him. "I

think everyone was very surprised to see that with three races to go," said Verstappen who added his support to the Grand Prix Drivers' Association's demands for the FIA to treat them "like adults" with greater consultation and transparency.

The drivers also asked for president Mohammed Ben Sulayem to "consider his own tone and language when talking to our member drivers, or indeed about them."

"We just wanted to send a letter to make sure that everyone is aware of our concerns and what we want to work on and we'll see what comes out of that," said Verstappen.

"At the moment, nothing has happened. I think there was a lot going on with the FIA anyway that they had to deal with - now we'll see in the coming races and we'll keep engaging."

Mercedes' George Russell said the FIA had not responded to their open letter and admitted drivers, in general, were "a little bit fed up with the whole situation.

"Getting things to change, or promises upheld, seems slightly more challenging," he said. "Maybe the FIA or the president did not recognise how seriously we all felt."



Red Bull Racing driver Max Verstappen during media availabilities at Las Vegas Circuit yesterday.

COMMENT

Tsunoda 'nearly sent home' at US border!

Reuters
Las Vegas

Japanese F1 driver Yuki Tsunoda said he "nearly got sent back home" by US border officials when he arrived for Saturday's Las Vegas Grand Prix.

The 24-year-old racer for Red Bull-owned RB told reporters Wednesday that he was wearing pajamas when he was pulled aside and questioned for several hours before being allowed into the country.

"Luckily, they let me in after a couple of discussions," he said. "Well, a lot of discussions, actually," he said. "I nearly got sent back home. Everything is all good now but yeah, luckily I'm here."

Tsunoda said he had no issues entering the US earlier this year for races in Miami and Austin, Texas.

"I was wearing pajamas, so



maybe I didn't look like an F1 driver," Tsunoda said. It was not immediately clear where Tsunoda went through customs.

Tsunoda has eight top-10 finishes in 21 starts this season and currently ranks 11th in the F1 drivers' standings.

GOLF

Young Elvis on song as stars Smith and Day lurk

AFP
Brisbane, Australia

Elvis Smylie holed a bunker shot on the last to put his name above star attractions Jason Day and Cameron Smith with a 65 for a first-round lead at the rain-soaked Australian PGA Championship yesterday.

The 22-year-old, the son of multiple tennis Grand Slam doubles champion Liz Smylie, is two clear of 2022 British Open winner Smith and former world No.1 Day.

Smylie was given his first name decades after his father sat in the front row with tennis icon John McEnroe during an Elvis Presley concert in the 1970s. He sprinkled his own stardust on day one of the Australian PGA at Royal Queensland in Brisbane - the opening round of the DP World Tour's 2025 season.

At the par-5 ninth, his last, he recovered spectacularly from a poor bunker shot by holing a subsequent shot from an adjoining sand trap for birdie.

Smylie's eight birdies and two bogeys put him at six-under-par, one ahead of unheralded Swiss golfer Joel Gurrbach, Australia's Matias Sanchez and Frenchman Victor Perez.



Elvis Smylie fist bumps on day one of the Australian PGA Championship at Royal Queensland Golf Club yesterday. (pga.org.au)

"Technically, I didn't touch the green and made (birdie), which is a good way to finish and there were lots of positives today," Smylie said about not needing a putter on the last.

"I've played a lot of golf (at Royal Queensland) and every part of my game's really good at the moment."

Perez plans to embrace forecasted heavy rain in pursuit of his fourth career DP World Tour win.

"It's a lot easier when you're playing well," he said of the deluge.

"These conditions can create good separation and I was hitting the ball nicely, so I was able to free flow."

Left-handed Smylie upstaged Smith and Day, who joined crowd favourite and defending champion Min Woo Lee in a marquee group in the morning wave.

Smith and Day shot 67 to join a large group at four-under including LIV golfer Marc Leishman.

Three-time Australian PGA winner Smith was stagnant for nine holes before a terrific approach into the first hole, his 10th, for the first of four back-nine birdies.

"Seeing that putt go in (provided) a little bit of confidence and from there, when I'm putting good, the rest of my game frees up and I can really start to play some aggressive golf," Smith said.

Lee was five-under through 12 holes but dropped three shots and carded a three-under 68.

Day, a 13-time PGA Tour winner, played his first competitive round in Australia in seven years and was embraced warmly.

"It has been a while since I've been here so I wasn't too sure how things would unfold but the Australian crowds are always great," he said.

LIGUE 1

Ramos nears PSG return as Sampaoli makes Rennes bow

Defending French champions are six points clear of Monaco

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain hope to have striker Goncalo Ramos available again soon after he returned to training ahead of today's game against Toulouse, while former Argentina coach Jorge Sampaoli makes his Ligue 1 return this weekend with Rennes.

Bradley Barcola has emerged as PSG's chief attacking threat this season and is the league's top scorer with 10 goals, but the lack of a reliable centre-forward remains an issue for Luis Enrique – particularly in the Champions League.

While the French champions are six points clear of Monaco in Ligue 1, they languish outside the top 24 in the new single-table format in Europe, with a trip to Bayern Munich coming up next Tuesday. Before that comes the visit of a resurgent Toulouse, winners of their past three games after a rough start to the campaign and the only team to beat PSG in their last 40 league matches.

Toulouse beat PSG 3-1 in May to spoil Kylian Mbappe's final game at the Parc des Princes, albeit with the title long since wrapped up by that stage. It was hoped Ramos, who scored 14 times overall last season, would establish himself as the spearhead of the PSG attack, but he went down with ankle ligament damage in the opening day win over Le Havre in August.

"He's in the final phase of his recovery. When will he be available? I don't know, I'll see him at training. He's doing very well already. He just needs to sharpen up so he can play in matches," PSG coach Luis Enrique said.

One player who did not feature in the international break was winger Ousmane Dembele who left the France training camp with a hamstring issue, but he is expected to return for PSG. "In theory, it was nothing serious. I don't think it was a big issue and these things happen during the



Paris Saint-Germain players train in the snow yesterday, ahead of their Ligue 1 match against Toulouse.

season," Luis Enrique said. "It is normal with such a busy schedule, he should be available to play."

Defender Nuno Mendes suffered a sprained ankle playing for Portugal and while Luis Enrique said it was also not serious, he was still unsure if he would be fit to face Bayern.

Monaco could slice the gap at the top in half if they beat fellow Champions League participants Brest earlier on Friday, while Marseille must bounce back from a disheartening home defeat by Auxerre. "If I'm the problem, I'm ready to leave. I'll leave the money and hand back my contract," raged Marseille coach Roberto de Zerbi after their 3-1 loss to the promoted

side a fortnight ago.

Lens host Marseille tomorrow before Lyon, who face a transfer ban and have been threatened with relegation over the club's debts, bid to extend their unbeaten run to seven matches.

Sampaoli, a 2015 Copa America winner with Chile who spent 16 months at Marseille between 2021 and 2022, begins his mission to turn around a spluttering Rennes outfit against Lille on Sunday.

Rennes have lost six of 11 games and sit only a point above the relegation play-off spot.

"Our job here will be to comfort a group of footballers so they don't feel uncomfortable on the pitch, but have fun and play with

much more energy," the 64-year-old Sampaoli said following his appointment last week.

"I'm very passionate about being here and having this great challenge."

FIXTURES

(all times GMT)

Today: Monaco v Brest (1800), Paris Saint-Germain v Toulouse (2000)

Tomorrow: Lens v Marseille (1600), Saint-Etienne v Montpellier (1800), Reims v Lyon (2000)

Sunday: Lille v Rennes (1400), Auxerre v Angers, Nantes v Le Havre (1600), Nice v Strasbourg (1945).

BUNDESLIGA

High-flying Bayern face injury woes as crucial phase looms

AFP
Berlin

Bayern Munich's home clash with Augsburg today kick-starts a crucial run of fixtures for the German giants, who are struggling under the weight of injuries in key positions.

After today's match, Bayern host Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League on Tuesday, before a trip to Borussia Dortmund and a German Cup clash with Bayer Leverkusen. Bayern can go eight points clear with a win against Bavarian neighbours Augsburg, who are yet to win away this season.

But Bayern will need to do so missing several players along with major question marks in key positions. The club announced this week that Joao Palhinha had joined fellow defender midfielder Aleksandar Pavlovic on the club's long-term injury list.

Palhinha arrived in the summer from Premier League side Fulham, having been specifically signed to address a weakness in the position. Bayern coach Vincent Kompany looks set to go with the out-of-form Leon Goretzka, who has only started once this season, putting him alongside Joshua Kimmich. Yesterday, Kompany revealed captain and goalkeeper Manuel Neuer was in doubt "with a rib issue".

"It's still a bit early," Kompany said of Neuer's chances. "We hope he can still start tomorrow. We have to wait and see how it goes in training."

With long-term back-up Sven Ulreich missing "for personal reasons", third-choice

goalkeeper Daniel Peretz, fresh off two clean sheets for Israel, could be handed his first Bundesliga start. "We assume that 'Manu' will be able to be there. If that's not the case, Daniel Peretz will play tomorrow. We have no doubts about him – he's been very good with the national team."

Teenage striker Mathys Tel will also miss today's clash with an injury picked up on international duty, putting more weight on the shoulders of Harry Kane. Defenders Hiroki Ito and Josip Stanisic, both of whom are yet to play this season, are still weeks away from returning.

The failings of Bayern's rivals will however allow them to breathe a little more easily, at least in the league. Nearest challengers RB Leipzig have fallen off the pace after dropping five points in their past two games, while defending champion Leverkusen are already nine points behind Bayern.

Just 10 games in, Xabi Alonso's side have dropped 13 points this season – one more than they did in the entirety of the last campaign. Dortmund, Champions League runners-up last season, are languishing in seventh place.

FIXTURES

(1430 GMT unless stated)

Today: Bayern Munich v Augsburg (1930)

Tomorrow: Borussia Dortmund v Freiburg, Wolfsburg v Union Berlin, Bayer Leverkusen v Heidenheim, Stuttgart v Bochum, Hoffenheim v RB Leipzig, Eintracht Frankfurt v Werder Bremen (1730)

Sunday: Holstein Kiel v Mainz, Borussia Moenchengladbach v St Pauli (1630)



Bayern Munich can go eight points clear with a win against Augsburg, who are yet to win away this season.

Sahin enjoying more options as injury list shortens

Berlin: Borussia Dortmund will have several players back from injury for their Bundesliga game against visitors Freiburg tomorrow, with coach Nuri Sahin relieved to have more options again.

The Ruhr valley club have had as many as 10 players injured at some stage, dropping to seventh place, 10 points off leaders Bayern Munich.

But they will now have five players back, with goalkeeper Gregor

Kobel as well as Gio Reyna, Julien Duranville, Waldemar Anton and Jamie Bynoe-Gittens.

"After a long time there is more good news than bad news regarding injuries," Sahin told a press conference.

"I don't expect Gio and Duranville, for example, to be at 100% but the physios have done a great job. So if they are in the squad that means they can play. I'm just happy to be able to take deci-

sions," he said. "We can now take some nice decisions."

Until the international break last week, Dortmund, who travel to Dinamo Zagreb in the Champions League next week, struggled with injuries and failed to win any of their away matches in the league, losing touch with the leading teams. Dortmund, who have 16 points from 10 games, will be without injured defender Niklas Suele and suspended captain Emre Can.

FOCUS

Spurs right to challenge length of Bentancur ban: Postecoglou

Reuters
London

Tottenham Hotspur are right to challenge the length of Rodrigo Bentancur's ban for making a racist remark about his South Korean teammate Son Heung-min, said manager Ange Postecoglou. Uruguay midfielder Bentancur was hit with a seven-match sanction by the Football Association this week, adding to Postecoglou's woes after an inconsistent start to the season. "It's obviously disappointing because he's been great for us this year," the Australian said.

"He's been one of the ones whose football has gone up another level, but we understood this was kind of coming and I support the club's decision to appeal the severity of the ban. We will work with Rodrigo through that and make sure in that time he has all of our support in the right way so that when's he available again, he's ready."

The FA charged Bentancur in September after he made a joke at Son's expense during a television show. A host asked Bentancur for a Spurs player's shirt, to which the Uruguayan replied, "Sonny's?"; adding: "Or one of Sonny's cousins as they all look more or less the same."

Bentancur, who was also fined 100,000 pounds (\$125,950.00), apologised to Son and said there was no



The FA charged Rodrigo Bentancur (left) in September after he made a joke at teammate Son Heung-min's expense during a television show.

bad feeling between them. In a statement, Tottenham said they had not appealed the guilty finding but the ban which they believe is too severe.

Postecoglou added his support for the player. "As a club, we are going to support him because the one thing that is undeniable to me is I know him, he's an outstanding person, he's an unbelievable teammate and he's a person with the utmost character and he's made a mistake."

Tottenham have further problems ahead of their trip to champions Manchester City tomorrow with Micky van de Ven ruled out and fellow centre back Christian Romero a doubt.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Chelsea's Maresca excited to face old club Leicester but James injured

Reuters
London

Chelsea manager Enzo Maresca is excited to tackle his former club Leicester City, who he guided into the Premier League last season, but the London side will be without their captain Reece James who has been sidelined with injury yet again.

Maresca joined Leicester in June last year following the club's relegation to the second-tier in the 2022-23 season and helped the Foxes bounce back to the top flight as they were crowned champions in the 44-year-old's first term in charge.

"I'm excited and thankful, it was a fantastic season. The owner, his family are fantastic people. They care for players, staff, all of the people that work in the club. You can see that," Maresca told reporters ahead of tomorrow's game. "It was a fantastic season because I met good people. There was a fantastic connection between the players and staff, and that is something you have to create to be successful. I'm still in contact with them."

Maresca said captain James, who has made only four appearances this season after struggling with a hamstring injury, is unavailable after suffering a setback this week. "He felt something, he has to be out. For sure, this weekend and then we'll see. We don't know for how long. He has to try and avoid as much as he can but sometimes things happen even if you want to avoid that," Maresca said. "Hopefully he can be available for the next one but he is not



available for this one. It's a muscular problem. We don't want to take any risks for this weekend. Hopefully, it's not something long."

Chelsea are third in the standings with 19 points from 11 games and will face a Leicester side languishing in 15th place but Maresca said they cannot take Steve Cooper's side for granted. "They know exactly what we do ... We will try to adjust the small details to see if we can do something different. It's more from their side that they know us better than we know them," Maresca said.

"It's not an easy game. We can see it is always complicated, no matter where the teams are in the table. We are going to make sure we are focused and prepared. We will prepare to win in the best way."

SOUTHAMPTON SUFFER RAMSDALE, BEDNAREK BLOW
Premier League basement dwell-

ers Southampton have been dealt a double injury blow ahead of Sunday's home clash against Premier League leaders Liverpool with keeper Aaron Ramsdale and central defender Jan Bednarek both ruled out. Bednarek, who has been ever-present in the league this season, was injured while playing for Poland against Portugal last week while Ramsdale has had finger surgery.

Both are expected to be out for several weeks, according to Southampton manager Russell Martin. "They'll both be out for this weekend and a number of weeks," he told Southampton's website. "Aaron has had an operation on his finger, he'll hopefully be back this side of Christmas. Jan, we spoke really quickly after the game. He was really worried about his knee injury. Thankfully the injury is not as significant as we fear, hopefully a week or two before Aaron."

It is hardly the news Martin needed with the visit of a flying Liverpool side who are five points clear at the top. "They've been two of our best players all season. Of course it will affect the team and how it looks but others need to step in and take their opportunity," he said.

Southampton are bottom with four points from 11 games. "We should be excited for the challenge and I think teams have shown in the last few weeks that you can pick up big results against big teams, good opposition, and we are going to have to," Martin said of the challenge of facing Liverpool. "Our level of performance against teams at the top end of the table has been good on the whole."