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FOOTBALL

Al Arabi to lock horns with Al Duhail in QSL Cup final

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FOOTBALL

Pachuca, Ahly clash for spot in Intercontinental Cup final

Today's winner will face European champions Real Madrid at Lusail Stadium on December 18

By Sports Reporter
Doha

A tantalising prospect lies in store as CONCACAF winners Pachuca lock horns with Egyptian champions and reigning CAF Champions League winners Al Ahly at the Stadium 974 today in the FIFA Challenger Cup. The victors will face European champions Real Madrid in the FIFA Intercontinental Cup final at Lusail Stadium on Wednesday, December 18.

The Mexicans will head into the game buoyant after their comprehensive 3-0 victory over Botafogo in the FIFA Derby of the Americas on Wednesday. They can expect to face stern examination against a high-quality Al Ahly team, who qualified for the Challenger Cup with a 3-0 success against UAE side Al Ain in October.

Pachuca could be without defender Sergio Barreto, who was forced off injured during their win over Botafogo.

Gustavo Cabral could replace the 25-year-old in the starting XI. Al Ahly will be unable to call upon goalkeeper Oufa Shobeir, defender Mohamed Hany and winger Karim Fouad. The injured trio have not been named in their Intercontinental Cup squad.

Ahly coach Marcel Koller said he will not settle for anything less than leading his side to the final against Real Madrid. While some coaches might shy away from playing that kind of burden on their players' shoulders, Koller knows his squad have the muscle to handle it.

"I think it's going to be a fantastic time to be here, to play in this tournament and play against the best teams in the world," said Koller. "We are happy and we hope we can win the next game and go to the final. We went to see [Pachuca's] game against Botafogo," added Koller. "They played excellently tactically. That's how we're preparing now too. We want to get the best



Al Ahly's goalkeeper Mohamed El Shenawy (right) adjusts the ear piece of his coach Marcel Koller during a press conference in Doha yesterday. **PCITURES: Noushad Thekkayil**

possible result. We naturally want to get to the final against Real Madrid. That's why it's important that the players are focused in this all-or-nothing game. The losers go home and we want to stay here a bit longer. Regardless of whether there is extra time or a penalty shoot-out. The goal has to be to reach the final."

The prospect of playing at the Lusail Stadium, venue of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 final is the icing on the cake for the Swiss coach.

"It's fantastic to be able to play in these stadiums here in Qatar," said Koller. "It wasn't that long ago that the World Cup was held here. We also have fantastic training grounds, which is not something we have everywhere in Africa. That makes it enjoyable for the players and for me as a coach. As a result, the level is high and it's important to feel that on the pitch in the game in order to advance."

Ahly are no strangers to success in international competition. They clinched their 12th CAF Champions League title this year and four times reached the podium at a FIFA Club World Cup across ten appearances. This resounding triumph has boosted the confidence of Guillermo Almada's Pachuca. Having eliminated the Copa Libertadores champion, they now believe they have a real chance of advancing to the final and competing for the title against Real Madrid.

The Tuzos showcased their excellent form in the opening match. However, they cannot afford to underestimate the Egyptian side. "Our ambition is to compete in every match. We showed (against Botafogo) that we have character and quality in our team. We came here with dreams, just like everyone else," stated Oussama Id-rissi, a former player for Sevilla and Cadiz, among other clubs.



Al Ahly and Pachuca (below) players train at the Stadium 974 yesterday, on the eve of their FIFA Challenger Cup match.



SHOWJUMPING

Al-Qahtani wins as second edition of Al Shaqab League kicks off

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The second edition of the Al Shaqab League kicked off to a thrilling start at the renowned Longines Indoor Arena in Al Shaqab yesterday, showcasing exciting equestrian competition. Following the success of its inaugural edition, the League continues to nurture young talent and promote excellence in horsemanship, offering aspiring riders under 25 a dynamic and competitive platform to display their skills.

In the feature class - Youth Champions 125cm - Qatari rider Faris Saad al-Qahtani riding his trusted horse Hidiene, took the top spot as the pair combined to clock impressive times of 30.71 and 31.10 seconds.

Saudi's Khaled al-Hady followed closely, riding Doremi Du Flot Z to times of 32.80 and 33.74 seconds, earning him a well-deserved second place. Qatar's Ibrahim Yousef al-Mahmoud astride Hero claimed third place after registering times of 32.71 and 34.89 seconds.

In the Future Champions 105cm class, Mohammed Faisal al-Marri claimed first place with his mare Dusty in 25.08 seconds. Abdullah bin Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani starred by securing both second and third places with two different horses. He came second with Cassandra 352 in 27.37 second and in third place with Goteborg Handyman in 27.46 seconds.

In the Introductory Class - Optimum Time - 80cm, Abdulla Ahmad al-Musafri triumphed with his gelding Ready To Rock And Roll, completing the course in 52.55 seconds. Abdulrahman Khalid al-Thani, riding Evidence Du, finished second in 52.87 seconds, followed by Rashid Abdulaziz al-Torki, who placed third with Faradiba in 51.11 seconds.



FEI certified judge Nasser Mubarak al-Hajri and Director of the Al Shaqab League Khalid Sanad al-Nuaimi pose with podium winners of the Youth Champions 105cm class at Al Shaqab yesterday. Faris Saad al-Qahtani took the top spot, ahead of Khaled al-Hady and Ibrahim Yousef al-Mahmoud.

Khalid Sanad al-Nuaimi, Director of the Al Shaqab League, praised the strong start to the second edition of the Championship. He said: "We witnessed remarkable performances in the opening round of this season, building on the great success of the inaugural edition. Last year's championship introduced a unique concept, and this season, we have focused on early preparations and incorporating innovative ideas, including team competitions that attracted significant interest and elevated the level of competition."

Al-Nuaimi added: "We also organised summer and international training camps in Europe to enhance the riders' skills, which positively impacted the championship's strong start. Increasing the number of rounds this season will further contrib-

ute to developing riders' abilities, which is our main objective. Many surprises are in store for the riders throughout the season."

Al-Nuaimi also highlighted Al Shaqab's significant role in advancing equestrianism in Qatar, stating: "At Al Shaqab, we aim to elevate the level of riders. The growing emphasis on equestrian sports in recent years has led to the discovery of many talents. We continuously collaborate with the Equestrian Federation and other international organisations to support riders and help them reach the highest standards in the sport."

Today, four more exciting competitions will take place. The day will kick off with Introductory Class 2 - Optimum Time 60cm at 1:00pm, followed by the Amateur Class - Optimum Time 90cm at 3:05pm.



Hamza al-Kuwari, Director of Corporate Services at Al Shaqab, crowned the winners of the Future Riders competition during the Al Shaqab League.

The Junior Champions 115cm class will start at 5:05pm, and the day will conclude with the Al Shaqab Champions 130cm at 6:30pm. This final competition of the day will offer a total prize pool of QR70,000.

For the 2024-2025 season, the league has introduced a Team Competition, featuring a unique Team Competition Draw. Each team will be named after legendary Al Shaqab Champion Horses, including iconic stallions such as Marwan, Al Adeed, Gazal, Wadi, Farhoud, Kahil, Hariry, Afreen, Siwar and Shahaleh. This exciting addition honours Al Shaqab's rich legacy while fostering unity and pride among competitors.

In addition to the competitions, the Al Shaqab League is also hosting the Hayakum Festival, offering a wide range of fun activities for children and families, along with an assortment of food and beverage options from local cafes and restaurants.



Abdulla Ahmad al-Musafri celebrates after winning the Introductory 80cm class.

SPOTLIGHT

Crowned youngest world chess champ, teen prodigy Gukesh eyes 'greatness'

AFP
Singapore

Newly crowned world chess king Gukesh Dommaraju said becoming a champion was a dream that was more than a decade in the making, as he underlined his ambition to strive for "greatness".

Gukesh was just seven when he watched compatriot Viswanathan Anand lose the world chess title in November 2013 to challenger Magnus Carlsen of Norway - a match that fired up his dream to bring the crown back to India.

Eleven years later in Singapore on Thursday, the 18-year-old beat China's Ding Liren after a gruelling tournament of 14 match days to become the youngest undisputed world chess champion.

Speaking to reporters after the match, Gukesh cited the 2013 game as a defining episode for his success.

"I was in the stands and I was looking inside the glass box (where the players were) and I thought it will be so cool to be inside one day," he said of the tournament in his hometown of Chennai.

"When Magnus won, I thought I really want to be the one to bring

back the title to India. And this dream that I had more than 10 years ago has been the most important thing in my life so far," he added.

"I've been dreaming about...living this moment for like more than 10 years."

And this is just the beginning, Gukesh said, underlining his plan to be more than a one-hit wonder.

He wants to stay at the top "for the longest time possible", to ultimately attain Carlsen's eminence as the highest rated chess player in history.

'Mental toughness'

The teenager said he felt the jitters in the opening game in Singapore on November 25 which his more experienced opponent won.

But as the tournament wore on, he gained more confidence, winning a total three matches, including the dramatic final game, and settling for a draw in nine.

Thursday's final match was already heading for a draw and most pundits and spectators at Singapore's Resorts World Sentosa were resigned to the tournament extending to rapid-fire tiebreaker games on Friday, which would have favoured Ding.

The Chinese grandmaster be-



India's Gukesh Dommaraju celebrates with the World Chess Championship 2024 trophy after beating China's Ding Liren, during an award ceremony held in Singapore yesterday. (AFP)

came world champion last year in similar fashion by beating Russia's Ian Nepomniachtchi in Kazakhstan in the quick-fire playoffs - akin to a penalty shootout in football.

But the teenager tenaciously pressed on, forcing a blunder by

Ding. Gukesh admitted that it was "humiliating" losing the first game.

"No matter how you prepare for it, you come here as an 18-year-old and you lose the first game like the way I did... It was quite tough

to handle that," he said. But he chanced upon his idol Anand in the lift who told him he had 13 more games to go.

"It was a nice reminder... I needed some mental toughness at that point," he said.

'Level of greatness'

Former five-time world chess champion Anand was among the first to congratulate the young champion, along with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi who also praised the 18-year-old.

"It's a proud moment for chess, a proud moment for India...and for me, a very personal moment of pride," Anand said in a post he tweeted on X.

Modi described Gukesh's feat as a "remarkable accomplishment" which he said was "the result of his unparalleled talent, hard work and unwavering determination".

Ding resigned after making an endgame blunder, and took home \$1.15mn while Gukesh got \$1.35mn of the \$2.5mn prize fund.

But the teenager underlined that the world title crown was just part of a bigger dream.

"Becoming world champion does not mean I'm the best player in the world," said Gukesh.

"Obviously there's Magnus," the Indian teen added.

"So it's also a motivating factor that...there is someone at a very, very high level and someone that will keep me doing the right things, working hard and trying to reach the level of greatness that Magnus has achieved."

CRICKET

Hendricks hits century as South Africa win

The hosts take 2-0 lead in the 3-match series

Reuters
Centurion

Opener Reeza Hendricks smashed 117 runs from 63 balls to guide South Africa to a seven-wicket victory over Pakistan in the second Twenty20 International at Centurion Park yesterday as they claimed the three-match series 2-0 with a game to spare.

Pakistan elected to bat first and, boosted by an unbeaten 98 from 57 balls by opener Saim Ayub, posted 206 for five in their 20 overs.

But on a good batting wicket, South Africa overcame a sluggish start to reach their target with three balls to spare as the brilliant Hendricks scored a maiden T20 International century that included 10 sixes.

He put on 157 in a partnership with Rassie van der Dussen, who was unbeaten on 66 from 38 balls as the latter guided the hosts over the line.

It is a record for the third wicket for South Africa, while Hendricks reached 50 for the 18th time in T20 Internationals, the most for South Africa and one more than Quinton de Kock.

Hendricks, the Player of the Match, said yesterday: "Quite pleased to get three figures. It's been a while since I reached that milestone, nice to contribute. It's



South Africa's Reeza Hendricks celebrates after scoring a century during the second T20 international against Pakistan at Supersport Park in Centurion yesterday. (AFP)

been a while since we won a series so that's obviously a very special night."

He added: "First over, five dots and got away, and so the moment I got that away, things started to click. I'm happy that I found the middle and things worked out in the end. One of those nights, the

shots I played came off, obviously it was a tactic to target the short boundary (on the leg side)."

When asked about partnership with Rassie van der Dussen, he said: "...playing with Rassie back at the Lions, so we kind of know each other, team needed a massive partnership at that time, and

it's always nice to bat with Rassie; he played an unbelievable knock himself."

The third and final match of the series will be staged in Johannesburg today, before the teams play three One-Day Internationals and two Tests in an all-format tour.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Bangladesh's Shakib banned from bowling in ECB competitions

AFP
London

Bangladesh all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan has been banned from bowling in England and Wales Cricket Board competitions due to an illegal action.

Shakib was reported by umpires during the spinner's one-game appearance in the County Championship for Surrey in September this year.

The 37-year-old left-arter was signed specifically for the crucial clash with title rivals Somerset on a Taunton pitch that was expected to help spin bowling.

Shakib took nine wickets across both innings' in Surrey's 111-run defeat, with his team going on to win the title despite that loss.

An ECB statement read: "Bangladesh all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan has been suspended from bowling in ECB competitions following an independent assessment of his bowling action."

"Shakib's action was reported by the standing umpires while he was playing for Surrey in the County Championship match against Somerset in September," the statement added.

"Shakib completed an independent assessment at Loughborough University earlier this month, which found that the elbow extension in his bowling action exceeded the 15 degree threshold as defined in the regulations."

"This suspension takes effect from the receipt of the independent assessment on 10 December 2024."

Shakib, who has not signed a contract with an English county for the 2025 season, is ineligible to bowl in ECB competitions until he has passed an independent re-



Shakib Al Hasan bowling for Surrey in county cricket.

assessment of his bowling action. He has played 71 Tests, 247 one-day internationals and 129 Twenty20s for Bangladesh, taking a combined 712 wickets.

Of late, Shakib's career has been marred by controversy stemming from his role as a Member of Parliament in the now overturned Awami League government in Bangladesh, following protests in which several hundred civilians - mostly university students - were killed in July and August.

He has retired from T20Is and eventually withdrew from travelling to Bangladesh (he is based in the USA with his family) for what would have been his farewell Test in Mirpur in October, as protests - for and against him - were staged in Dhaka.

He has not played international cricket since then.

FOCUS

Rasooli shines as Afghanistan crush Zimbabwe to level T20 series in Harare

AFP
Harare

Darwish Rasooli made his first international fifty, while Naveen-ul-Haq and Rashid Khan each took three wickets as Afghanistan beat Zimbabwe by 50 runs yesterday to level their T20 series with one match remaining.

The teams meet again at Harare Sports Club today to decide who wins the first of three series, with three one-day internationals and two Tests to follow.

Afghanistan, who suffered a last-ball loss on Wednesday, won the toss and, thanks mainly to the recalled Rasooli who made 58, posted 153-6 off 20 overs.

Rasooli, one of three changes to the team, struck a six and six fours off 42 deliveries.

Azmatullah Omarzai (28) and Gulbadin Naib (26 not out) were other Afghans to make important contributions.

Leg-spinner Ryan Burl and seamer Trevor Gwandu took two wickets each for Zimbabwe.

In reply, Zimbabwe opener Brian Bennett struck 27, but once he departed, leaving the hosts struggling at 49 for four, only captain Sikandar Raza (35) proved a match for the Afghan attack. Just one of the other Zimbabwe batters - first-match hero Tashinga Musekiwa - reached double figures as Zimbabwe were dismissed for 103 in 17.4 overs.

Naveen, who finished with 3-19, and star leg-spinner Rashid (3-20) inflicted most of the damage, ably supported by Mujeeb Ur Rahman's 2-30.

"We are still struggling to establish a strong top order, but the way Darwish played was very impressive," said Afghanistan captain Rashid.

"We are always searching for someone who bats well at four. Darwish was looking good in the nets and we were waiting for him to take that form onto the pitch."

"The way the guys bowled was very impressive after missing our lines and lengths in the

first match. It was about keeping it simple and hitting the right areas." Raza said: "Our Achilles heel was once again our batting. We are still struggling to post good totals consistently."

"Our bowling and fielding were fantastic. It was a better wicket than on Wednesday, and we were confident we could reach the 154-run target. That is why this loss hurts so much."

"Afghanistan were semi-finalists at the recent T20 World Cup. So, if you want to beat them, you have to beat them in all departments"

BRIEF SCORES

AFGHANISTAN 153-6 IN 20 OVERS (Darwish Rasooli 58, Azmatullah Omarzai 28, Gulbadin Naib 26 not out; Ryan Burl 2-16, Trevor Gwandu 2-29) **V ZIMBABWE 103 IN 17.4 OVERS** (Sikandar Raza 35, Brian Bennett 27, Naveen-ul-Haq 3-19, Rashid Khan 3-20, Mujeeb Ur Rahman 2-30)

RESULT: Afghanistan win by 50 runs
SERIES: 1-1 with one match to play
TOSS: Afghanistan



Afghanistan players walk off the field after their victory during the second T20 international against hosts Zimbabwe at the Harare Sports Club yesterday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Crisis looms as Russia gets new Olympic chief

Sanctioned sports minister gets elected at Moscow gathering

AFP
Moscow

Russia named a sports minister sanctioned by the West as its new Olympics chief yesterday, as Moscow faces isolation from international sport over its Ukraine offensive.

Mikhail Degtyaryov, a member of the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, was elected head of the Russian Olympic Committee unopposed after previous president Stanislav Pozdnyakov unexpectedly resigned in October, the committee said.

Russian sport has faced a myriad of crises in recent years, with a state-sponsored doping scandal seeing the country stripped of dozens of Olympic medals and its athletes banned from taking part in the Paris Games this summer over the Ukraine conflict.

Moscow intensified its rhetoric against the International Olympic Committee (IOC) ahead of the Games, accusing the sporting body of "neo-Nazism" and vowing to hold its own "Friendship Games" to rival those held in the French capital.

Those plans were postponed several times until Russian President Vladimir Putin announced earlier this month they would be shelved indefinitely.

Just 15 Russian athletes were permitted to attend the Paris Olympics this summer, competing as neutrals.

"Today, Russian sport is facing unprecedented external pressure.



Russian Sports Minister Mikhail Degtyarev delivers a speech during the Olympic Assembly of Russia in Moscow yesterday. (AFP)

Thousands of our athletes are being discriminated against," Degtyaryov was quoted by the committee as saying in a speech ahead of his election.

"It is time for us to stop the aggressive rhetoric against our international colleagues.

"Many of them, including members of the IOC, have realised that global sport without Russia does not work.

"During numerous unofficial contacts, they explicitly say that they want Russia to return to the international Olympic movement."

Described as a favourite of Putin by the team of late opposition

leader Alexei Navalny, Degtyaryov has been a vehement supporter of Moscow's offensive in Ukraine.

The 43-year-old was appointed sports minister by Putin in May 2024, despite not being a member of the ruling United Russia party.

In 2014, he was sanctioned by the European Union over his support for separatist rebels in east Ukraine, and in 2023 was black-listed by the United States for helping conscript Russian citizens to fight in Kyiv.

From 2020 until this year Degtyaryov served as governor of the Far Eastern Khabarovsk region, where he was tapped by Putin to

replace popular governor Sergei Furgal after his controversial removal.

In 2022, he said he would gladly volunteer to fight in Ukraine but was unable to because he was a serving governor.

Residents of the region responded by creating a petition proposing to remove him from the post, clocking up tens of thousands of signatures.

Degtyaryov served as a lawmaker in the State Duma from 2011-2020, floating a number of outlandish proposals including changing the colours of the Russian flag to the former imperial black, yellow and white.

No decision on Sinner doping case before new year: WADA

Montreal: Tennis star Jannik Sinner's doping case will not have a decision from the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) before the end of the year, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) told AFP.

"There will be nothing by the end of the year," WADA director general Olivier Niggli said in an interview with AFP.

The Italian world number one twice tested positive for traces of the banned substance clostebol in March but was exonerated and allowed to carry on playing. An independent tribunal at the end of August, requested by the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) found that the Australian Open and US Open champion "bears no fault or negligence".

The ITIA accepted Sinner's explanation that the drug entered his system when his physiotherapist used a spray containing it to treat a cut, then provided massage and sports therapy to the player. WADA have appealed the decision to clear the 23-year-old and are seeking a ban of up to two years.

"It was considered in the decision that there was no fault on the part of Sinner. Our position is that there is still a responsibility of the athlete in relation to his entourage," Niggli said.

"So it is this legal point that will be debated (before CAS). "We do not dispute the fact that it could have been a contamination. But we believe that the application of the rules does not correspond to the case law."

While the ITIA were criticised for having revealed late the positive tests of Sinner and of women's world number two Iga Swiatek, Niggli believes that "athletes must be protected".

Swiatek last month accepted a one-month suspension after testing positive for the heart medication trimetazidine (TMZ) in an out-of-competition sample in August 2024.

"Personally, I think that protecting an athlete's reputation should be our first concern," said Niggli. "We live in a world where social media is what it is and means that a reputation can go up in smoke in a very, very short time," Niggli added.

GOLF

Kinhult opens up 3-shot lead after second round

Reuters
Mpumalanga, South Africa

Sweden's Marcus Kinhult carded a 68 in his second round to open up a three-shot lead at the halfway point of the DP World Tour's Alfred Dunhill Championship played at a sweltering Leopard Creek Country Club yesterday.

Kinhult, 28, sunk seven birdies but also carded three bogeys as he moved to 11 under-par for the tournament, opening up some daylight between himself and a trio of players on 8 under-par - South African Dean Burmester (67), Dale Whitnell (67) from England and Italian Andrea Pavan (69).

Kinhult is hunting a second win on the European circuit, his first



coming at the British Masters in 2019.

"It was hot," Kinhult said. "It was actually OK this morning, but after five or six holes I got the umbrella up and

tried to hide under that for most of the day.

"It was a good score today and I'm looking forward to two more rounds," he added. "Hopefully we can keep improving and we'll see where that takes us."

Overnight leader Andy Sullivan carded a superb blemish-free 64 on Thursday but could only manage a 73 in his second round and is four shots back.

TENNIS

'Special Ks' to reunite for doubles at Australian Open next month

Reuters
Melbourne

Thanasi Kokkinakis and Nick Kyrgios will team up for doubles at next month's Australian Open, and the entertaining local duo is aiming to dazzle crowds at the Grand Slam again.

Nicknamed the "Special Ks" as juniors, Kokkinakis and his best friend Kyrgios claimed their only major title in 2022 in Melbourne Park by defeating compatriots Max Purcell and Matt Ebden in a memorable final two years ago.

The pair thrilled fans throughout the tournament with their exciting play which produced a raucous atmosphere at matches and brought doubles more attention than normal.

"Everyone loved it last time, we loved it, it was so much fun," Kokkinakis told reporters.

"It's definitely not going to be the priority for us (but) we feel like



Thanasi Kokkinakis



Nick Kyrgios

we owe it to people to get back out there and have some fun. It's not something we've practised, but singles is definitely the goal.

"If you have a big five-setter, with all due respect, the last thing you want to do is go out and play doubles the next day, but we'll play it by ear and see how it goes."

Former Wimbledon runner-up Kyrgios has played only one singles tour match in the last two years due to knee, foot and wrist injuries but confirmed his return to the circuit before the first Grand Slam of 2025.

"It's going to be great for tennis, great for fans in Australia, fans all over the world," Kokkinakis added.

"He's a different cat. Obviously has a different sort of energy about him and he's a hell of a player, so I think people are going to love having him back. It's been a long time coming. I think he's been ready for a while now to play, but he wanted to make sure he's really ready before he steps back, so hopefully he can stay healthy."

The 2025 Australian Open will run from Jan 12-26.

NBA

Short-handed Celtics cruise past Pistons after Pritchard heroics



Boston Celtics guard Payton Pritchard (11) drives to the basket through Detroit Pistons guard Marcus Sasser (25) during the second half of their NBA game at TD Garden.

AFP
Los Angeles

The NBA champion Boston Celtics shrugged off the absence of All-Star Jayson Tatum, raining 20 three-pointers in a lopsided 123-99 victory over the Detroit Pistons on Thursday.

With Tatum sidelined by a sore right knee, reserve Payton Pritchard stepped up to lead the Celtics scoring with 27 points and 10 assists as they notched a 12th straight victory over the Pistons.

Pritchard drilled seven three-pointers and reached 500 for his career - the 10th Celtic to reach that mark.

"Payton's been awesome," NBA Finals Most Valuable Player Jaylen Brown said of Pritchard's contribution off the bench all season, which has him in the conversation for Sixth Man of the Year.

"We've all seen it coming," Brown said. "We've got a lot of talent on this team and he's capable of doing that each and every night."

Derrick White also made seven

from beyond the arc on the way to 23 points. Kristaps Porzingis scored 19 and Brown chipped in 14 as six Celtics players scored in double figures.

Reserve Luke Kornet was a perfect five-for-five from the field on the way to 12 points to help the Celtics bounce back from a loss to the Memphis Grizzlies on Saturday.

The Celtics improved to 20-5, one game behind the 21-4 Cleveland Cavaliers atop the Eastern Conference.

The Pistons, coming off a victory over the New York Knicks on Saturday, also got a strong contribution off the bench as Ronald Holland led Detroit's scoring with 26 points.

Cade Cunningham, who had his fifth triple-double of the season on Saturday, scored 18 points with eight rebounds and eight assists, but the Pistons connected on just seven of their 37 three-point attempts and never led after the first quarter.

In Miami, Tyler Herro scored 23 points and Bam Adebayo added 21 points and 16 rebounds to lead the Heat to a 114-104 victory over the Toronto Raptors.

Miami pushed their winning

streak to four games, rallying from a 16-point deficit early in the second quarter to lead 58-51 at halftime after which they never trailed. RJ Barrett posted a triple-double of 13 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists for Toronto and Grady Dick scored 22 points.

Miami's Jimmy Butler, the focus of trade speculation in the media this week, scored 11 points with five rebounds and four assists. Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said before the game that the trade talk swirling around Butler wouldn't be a distraction to the player or the team.

"This is this profession," Spoelstra said. "You can't get sick at sea over some narratives that are going on out there."

The Sacramento Kings, fuelled by Domantas Sabonis' 32 points and 21 rebounds, held off the Pelicans 111-109 in New Orleans.

DeMar DeRozan added 29 points for Sacramento, who led by 14 midway through the fourth quarter only for New Orleans to slice the deficit to two on CJ McCollum's three-point play with 1:24 remaining. The Pelicans, led by 36 points from McCollum, came up short on two ensuing possessions as the Kings held on.

FOCUS

Former champion Wawrinka accepts wildcard for 2025 Australian Open

Reuters
Melbourne

Three-times Grand Slam champion Stan Wawrinka was among nine players handed wildcards to compete at next month's Australian Open, tournament organisers announced yesterday.

The 39-year-old Swiss claimed the first of his three major titles at Melbourne Park in 2014, with that triumph earning him a career-high world ranking of number three.

"I'm incredibly grateful to receive a wildcard into the Australian Open in 2025," said Wawrinka, whose last appearance in a major quarter-final came at Melbourne four years ago.

"Melbourne holds such a special



Stan Wawrinka

place in my heart. It's where I won my first Grand Slam and is one of the greatest milestones of my career.

"The city, the people, the loud fans and the electric atmosphere make the Australian Open so spe-

cial to me and I'm really looking forward to getting back on the court in Melbourne."

Wawrinka, who won the French Open in 2015 and the US Open a year later, crashed out of the opening round of the Australian Open earlier in 2024.

He has slipped to 161 in the world rankings amid injury issues in recent seasons.

Local hopes including Ajla Tomljanovic, Daria Saville, Tristan Schoonkatte, Li Tu, James McCabe, Emerson Jones, Talia Gibson and Maya Joint were also given wildcards, with more recipients to be announced soon.

China's Zhang Shuai and Kasidit Samrej of Thailand have been granted wildcards earlier.

The 2025 Australian Open runs Jan 12-26.

Qatar players train ahead of Arabian Gulf Cup



Qatar's 29-member preliminary squad began training at the Aspire Zone for the Arabian Gulf Cup, which will be held in Kuwait from December 21-January 3. Qatar's new coach Luis Garcia, who replaced Marquez Lopez last week, kept a close eye on the training. Garcia is a former assistant of Lopez. Qatar, champions in 1992, 2004, and 2014, will begin their campaign for a fourth title with a match against the UAE on December 21, followed by games against Oman on December 24 and Kuwait on December 27.



West Ham to visit Antonio in hospital after 'miracle' escape from car crash

London: West Ham manager Julen Lopetegui and his players will visit Michail Antonio in hospital as the Jamaica forward recovers after his "miracle" escape from a car crash.

West Ham star Antonio was rushed to hospital after being cut out of his Ferrari following the accident in Epping last weekend. The 34-year-old needed surgery on a lower limb fracture and is reported to be facing weeks in hospital recovering from multiple injuries.

Antonio was able to speak to his team-mates via a video call from his hospital bed before they beat relegation rivals Wolves 2-1 on Monday. West Ham players wore 'Antonio 9' shirts while warming up at the London Stadium, with Jarrod Bowen holding up his teammate's shirt after scoring the crucial winner.

"We are going to visit him today or tomorrow," Lopetegui told reporters ahead of Monday's Premier League trip to Bournemouth. "But the main thing is we are very happy because he is recovering very well. We are very close to him and his family and we wish him the best for the next days. The best news about Michail Antonio was that he was able to talk with us before the Wolves match, because looking at the car crash, it was one miracle he was OK, so we are happy for him. Now for sure he is strong, he is recovering himself in the next months to be a man first and then a player."

AMORIM DENIES MAN CITY CONTACT BEFORE JOINING MAN UNITED

Manchester United manager Ruben Amorim insists he did not speak to Manchester City about replacing Pep Guardiola at the Etihad Stadium before making his move to Old Trafford. As Amorim prepares for his first Manchester derby tomorrow, the 39-year-old's link to City prior to his arrival at United has become a hot topic.

United hired the highly-regarded Amorim from Sporting Lisbon in November after sacking Erik ten Hag. Amorim had been mentioned as a contender to take over from Guardiola after City announced Sporting's director of football Hugo Viana would replace Txiki Begiristain at the end of this season.

Guardiola eventually ended speculation over his future by signing a new two-year contract shortly after Amorim's arrival in Manchester. Asked if he ever had a conversation about the prospect of joining City, Amorim told reporters: "Never. Never had and this was my only option. When Manchester United talked to me, I had no doubts because I had already something in my mind that it could be a possibility. With Manchester City or Hugo Viana? Nothing about that."

Amorim's side ended a run of two successive defeats with a 2-1 victory at Viktoria Plzen in the Europa League on Thursday. But United have won just three of Amorim's six games in charge and are languishing in 13th place after recent losses to Arsenal and Nottingham Forest underlined the extent of the rebuilding job he faces.

Yet, for the first time in years, City go into the derby mired in more turmoil than United after a dismal run of one win in 10 games in all competitions.

SPOTLIGHT

Arabi, Duhail to lock horns in QSL Cup final

Arabi edge defending champions Umm Salal; Duhail beat Wakrah in extra time



Al Duhail's Benjamin Bourigeaud (left) celebrates with Ghanem al-Minhali after scoring against Al Wakrah at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Arabi beat Umm Salal 2-1 in the semi-final yesterday to set up QSL Cup final with Al Duhail, who earlier had beaten Al Wakrah 3-1.

At the Hamad Bin Khalifa Stadium, Abdulla al-Marafi (3rd minute) and Alaaiddin Hassan (29th minute) were on target for Al Arabi as they prevailed over the defending champions Umm Salal, for whom Victor Lekhal scored their only goal in the 79th minute. Arabi were up and running from the word go and in the very third minute of play

al-Marafi, after being provided with a fine assist by Rodri, volleyed in the ball on the bounce beating the goalkeeper to his left. The Dream Team doubled its lead just before the half-an-hour mark with Rodri putting a through ball from near the centre for Isaac Lihadji to set it up for Hassan to score.

Left with an uphill task, Umm Salal looked at climbing back and in the 43rd minute came close as their tall captain Victor Lekhal's header hit the top of the crossbar and went out even as Al Arabi goalkeeper Mohamed Saeed Ibrahim tried to reach it with his fingertips.

The battle continued in the second session and in the 69th minute Al Arabi broke



Al Arabi and Umm Salal players vie for the ball at the Hamad Bin Khalifa Stadium.

through and Hassan went on to put the ball into the net but the flag went up. A VAR check by the referee confirmed the off-side.

Ten minutes later, Umm Salal eventually succeeded in scoring their first goal as Kenji Gorre provided a superb cross for Lekhal to strike. The move was initiated with a fine swept ball past Al Arabi players from near the centre.

Rejuvenated Umm Salal now upped their efforts hoping to fetch an equaliser but failed to find a good finish. In the 88th minute, Gorre sent across a cross to substitute Khaled Waleed but the latter stumbled over in a rush to strike in front of the goal.

Rodri looked to score another for Al Arabi in opening minute of stoppage time but his kick was cut off by Umm Salal goalkeeper Louay Ashour.

Earlier, Al Duhail overcame Al Wakrah in extra time at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium. The match went into extra time after Benjamin Bourigeaud had scored for Al Duhail in the 49th minute, while Ricardo Gomes equalised in the 58th minute for Al Wakrah from the spot, before Bourigeaud and substitute Ismail Ali scored the winning goals in the 108th and 111th minute respectively.

Farid Boulaya almost gave Al Wakrah the lead in the 34th minute, but his powerful strike from inside the box was saved by Al

Duhail goalkeeper Bautista Burke.

A minute later, Michael Olunga seemed to have broken the deadlock for the Red Knights when he found the back of the net, but his effort was overturned for an offside ruling. Another goal by Al Duhail, this time by Luis Alberto, in the 38th minute was also cancelled after a VAR check adjudged an offside in the build-up to the goal.

Al Duhail eventually broke the deadlock through Bourigeaud, who tapped home from an Olunga assist. The Blue Wave got a chance at redemption in the 58th minute from the spot, and Gomes did not hesitate to get things done for his side as he netted home a low but powerful, driven right-footed shot that located the bottom corner of Al Duhail's net.

Abdelaziz Mitwali's foul on a goalbound Olunga reduced Al Wakrah to 10 men in three minutes of added time. Despite all efforts from both sides, the match ended 1-1 in regulation time, paving the way for the extra time.

A defensive blunder on the part of Al Wakrah gave Bourigeaud the opportunity to fire home in the 108th minute as Al Duhail took the lead from a sublime assist by Olunga. Substitute Ali Heider extended the lead, following a pass by Alberto, in the 111th minute to further compound Al Wakrah's woes as Al Duhail reached the final.

FOCUS

England to face Serbia in World Cup qualifying

AFP
Paris

England were placed in a group with Serbia as the draw for the 2026 World Cup qualifiers in Europe took place yesterday. As they prepare to begin life under new coach Thomas Tuchel, England were also drawn alongside Albania, Latvia and Andorra in the five-team Group K. England, who have qualified for every World Cup since missing the 1994 tournament in the United States, played Serbia in their opening game at Euro 2024, winning 1-0 thanks to a Jude Bellingham goal.

Matches will take place between March and November next year, with the group winners qualifying directly for the World Cup in North America. The runners-up in each of the 12 qualifying groups will get a second chance via a series of play-offs, with Europe now contributing a total of 16 nations to the expanded 48-team competition.

The exact make-up of the groups is not yet completely clear as it depends on the outcome of the UEFA Nations League quarter-finals next March. Those ties will see reigning European champions Spain face the Netherlands, while



England's coach Thomas Tuchel arrives to attend the draw for the 2026 FIFA World Cup European qualifiers in Zurich. (AFP)

Germany play Italy, Portugal take on Denmark and France meet Croatia.

The groups in which these teams end up depend on whether they win and progress to the Nations League semi-finals next June, or are eliminated. France, who have been to the last two World Cup finals, will be in a group with Ukraine, Iceland and Azerbaijan should they reach the Nations League final four.

However, should they go out of the Nations

League to Croatia in the last eight, they will go into World Cup qualifying Group I with the Czech Republic, Montenegro, Faroe Islands and Gibraltar. Reigning European champions Spain, who also won the last edition of the Nations League, will be in a group with Turkiye, Georgia and Bulgaria should they defeat the Netherlands in their quarter-final.

The loser of Spain's tie against the Dutch will be placed in Group G with Poland, Finland, Lithuania and Malta. There are six groups of five teams who will begin qualifying in March, while the six groups of four teams will only start next September.

Scotland, who are bidding to qualify for a first World Cup since 1998, were drawn in Group C in which they will play Greece, Belarus and the loser of the Nations League quarter-final between Portugal and Denmark.

Greece and Scotland are also due to play each other in a play-off next March to decide who is in the top tier of the next edition of the Nations League. Wales were drawn in the same group as Belgium, as was already the case in qualifying for the 2022 World Cup, when both teams made it to the finals in Qatar. Those sides will also come up against North Macedonia, Kazakhstan and minnows Liechtenstein in Group J.

LA LIGA

Mbappe out of Rayo trip, Camavinga back

Reuters
Madrid

Royal Madrid forward Kylian Mbappe is out of their La Liga visit to Rayo Vallecano, but defensive midfielder Eduardo Camavinga is ready to return to the squad after recovering from a hamstring injury, manager Carlo Ancelotti said.

The 25-year-old France captain, who was replaced during the first half of Madrid's 3-2 win at Atalanta in the Champions League on Tuesday, was diagnosed with an injury to his left thigh and will now miss today's game against 12th-placed Rayo.

France international Camavinga, 22, picked up his injury during their 2-0 loss to Liverpool in the Champions League at An-

field in November. "Kylian is not serious, he won't be here tomorrow, but he will travel to Qatar (for Wednesday's FIFA Intercontinental Cup final) and there, we will assess the risk. Camavinga is fine, he's available for tomorrow," Ancelotti told reporters.

Mbappe, who moved to the Santiago Bernabeu from French champions Paris St Germain on a free transfer in June, is Madrid's leading goalscorer in La Liga with nine goals from 15 matches. "In the last few breaks he's been here, resting, working...you don't know. Fortunately he will only be out for a short period and he won't lose what he has achieved in recent times," Ancelotti said. Second-placed Madrid have 36 points from 16 matches and trail leaders Barcelona, who have played a game more, by two points.