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FOOTBALL

Al Duhail, Al Arabi all set for challenge, eye QSL Cup glory

THE FINAL WILL BE PLAYED AT THE SUHAIM BIN HAMAD STADIUM TODAY AT 5.30PM

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Duhail and Al Arabi will battle it out for the QSL Cup trophy when they meet in the final at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium today at 5.30pm.

The clash is sure to produce great excitement given the strong challenge between both teams and their good show throughout the tournament.

While Al Duhail made it to the final beating Al Wakrah 3-1 in the semi-final that went into extra time after a 1-1 draw in regular time, Al Arabi made the grade defeating Umm Salal 2-1.

Both Al Duhail and Al Arabi had earlier faced-off in the fourth round at the Al Khor Stadium where Al Arabi edged Al Duhail 1-0 and the Red Knights would be keen to make up for that and win their first title of the season.

Meanwhile, Al Arabi would also be eager to clinch the title they missed last season having lost to Umm Salal 3-1 in a penalty shoot-out in the final.

Al Duhail's star coach Christophe Galtier, addressing the media on eve of the final, said, "The team is missing the efforts of more than 12 players due to international commitments. We made a great effort in the last match after it went into extra time, but we focused on the physical efforts to prepare the players for the final and we hope to win our first championship this season.

"The team has 6 to 7 young players who will be on the list to rely on and I hope that we will appear at the desired level and cap the great efforts we have made since the beginning of the tournament by winning the title.

"I am trying to combine youth with experience. We tried during the past days to improve the game and focus on the physical and psychological side. The final against Al Arabi is of great importance



Al Duhail's star coach Christophe Galtier and Al Arabi coach Yeray Rodriguez pose with the QSL Cup yesterday.



Al Arabi players celebrating Qatar National Day.

and everyone is looking forward to winning the championship."

Al Duhail player Ahmed Abdelmaksoud said, "The final matches do not favour any team and the chances are therefore equal as both teams have international players of the highest level. So we have to do our best and, God-willing, our efforts will be capped with success and that we will win the cup."

Al Arabi coach Yeray Rodriguez said the ball is now in the players' court and it is now for them to deliver their best.

"We have prepared well for the match despite the short time and studied the opposing team and analysed their style of play. Now the ball is in the players' court to present their best in this match," said Rodriguez.

"I have great confidence in all our players. Al Arabi are a distin-

guished team with a great history and always play for titles. The mixed fortunes in results happen in football and there is nothing to worry about as the team is able to rise from its slump. The good thing is that the players' morale is in a state that calls for optimism in this match," he said. "Regarding the absences, I would say that the team has 22 players and whatever the absences, the important thing is to focus on the existing group, and we hope to perform well and win this match."

Al Arabi player Helal Mohammed, said, "The team's presence in the final for the second time in a row is a good thing, but all players are looking forward to winning the title after losing out on it last season.

"We faced Al Duhail in the group stage and beat them. Cup matches are different from league



Al Duhail players in action during a training session in Doha yesterday.

matches and no matter the advantage on paper, that does not mean that one team is superior to the other. Chances are equal for

both teams. We have great confidence in ourselves and our ability to achieve the title.

"Our team is ready and our as-

pirations are great in order to win the cup and we will try to do our best to win. Simple details will help decide the title."

ANNOUNCEMENT

Coach Garcia names Qatar squad for Arabian Gulf Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Talismanic Akram Afif will be spearheading Qatar's squad along with Almoez Ali at the 26th edition of Arabian Gulf Cup "Gulf 26" which will kick-off at the Jaber International Stadium in Kuwait when hosts Kuwait take on Oman tomorrow (December 21).

Qatar's 26-man squad was announced yesterday with players making the grade from coach Luis Garcia's preliminary list following a brief training camp in Doha.

Garcia's squad was revealed by Qatar legend Younus Ahmed in a video posted on Qatar Football Association's (QFA) social media handle. The squad also includes Al Gharafa's Assim Madibo, who is set to make his return to the national team.

Afif and Ali will be leading Qatar's attack with Al Rayyan starlet Ahmed al-Rawi - making a comeback. Lucas Mendez will be leading the defence line in the absence of injured Pedro Miguel. The QFA also announced that Mohammed

Ayash will miss the tournament as he pulled up a hamstring during the training camp.

Twice Asian champions Qatar will kick off their Group A campaign against the United Arab Emirates tomorrow at the newly-built Jaber Al Mubarak Al Sabah Stadium and will play their next tie against Oman on Tuesday. Al Annabi's final group stage match will be against hosts Kuwait at the Jaber Al Ahmad International Stadium on December 27. The top two teams from each group will advance to the semi-finals to be played on December 31, with the final set for January 3, 2025.

SQUAD: Marwan Sherif (Al Ahli), Meshaal Barsham (Al Sadd), Salah Zakaria (Al Duhail), Ahmed al-Rawi (Al Rayyan), Ahmed Fathy (Al Arabi), Akram Afif (Al Sadd), Ibrahim al-Hassan (Calahorra), Almoez Ali (Al Duhail), Al Hashemi al-Hussain (AD Alcorcon B), Bahaa al-Leithi (Al Ahli), Jassim Jaber (Al Arabi), Rabeh Boussafi (Al Gharafa), Sultan al-Brake (Al Duhail), Tarek Salman (Al Sadd), Assim Madibo (Al Gharafa), Abdulaziz Khalid (Al Wakrah),



Qatar goalkeepers Salah Zakaria (left) and Meshal Barsham during a training session in Doha yesterday.

Abdullah al-Ahraq (Al Duhail), Abdullah Youssef (Al Gharafa), Abdelrahman Moustafa (Al Ahli), Mohamed Khaled (Calahorra), Mubarak Shanan (Al Duhail),

Mohammed Muntari (Al Gharafa), Moustafa Meshaal (Al Sadd), Homam Al Amin (Al Duhail), Lucas Mendez (Al Wakrah), Yusuf Abdurisag (Al Sadd).

PRIVATE JET TO CARRY FANS TO KUWAIT FOR GULF CUP OPENER

A private jet will carry Qatari fans to Kuwait to support Al Annabi in their Gulf Cup 26 opener against the UAE tomorrow. Qatar Football Association (QFA)'s Marketing and Communications Director Khaled al-Kuwari told Qatar News Agency (QNA) the aircraft would land in Kuwait tomorrow (19:00) and the fans would be transferred to the Jaber Al Mubarak Stadium where the game kicks off at 22:00. The move comes as part of a QFA campaign to back the national

team in the tournament scheduled for December 21-January 3, added al-Kuwari, also the tournament's media committee chairman. He elaborated the QFA campaign also includes catalysing content and footages targeting all society segments on the QFA social media accounts. The AFC Asian Cup title-holders are eyeing a fourth Gulf Cup trophy after they had secured gold in 1992, 2004 and 2014.



Qatar striker Almoez Ali during a training session in Doha yesterday.

ANNOUNCEMENT

India to play Champions Trophy on neutral ground, not on Pakistan soil

AFP
Karachi

India will play next year's Champions Trophy matches on neutral ground after refusing to visit tournament host and arch-rival Pakistan, the International Cricket Council said yesterday following weeks of wrangling.

The announcement ended a month-long standoff after India told the ICC it would not send its team to Pakistan because of security fears and political tensions.

Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) had earlier refused to play the Champions trophy on a so-called hybrid model, but backed down after settling on neutral venues - yet to be announced - for both sides in ICC tournaments.

"India and Pakistan matches hosted by either country at ICC events during the 2024-2027 rights cycle will be played at a neutral venue, the ICC board confirmed," said a statement released by the council.

"This will apply to the upcoming ICC Men's Champions Trophy 2025 (hosted by Pakistan)."

The agreement will extend to the ICC

Women's Cricket World Cup 2025 hosted by India, and the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2026 hosted by India and Sri Lanka, the statement added.

The nuclear-armed, cricket-obsessed neighbours have fought three wars since being carved out of the subcontinent's partition in 1947 and that rivalry is often reflected in cricket matters.

Former Pakistan captain Wasim Akram described the decision as "the best solution" but a loss for his country's young cricket fans.

"Like millions of Pakistan fans I would have wanted the whole tournament to be played in Pakistan, and India touring our country," Wasim told AFP. "But if this is the solution then it's the best one."

"It's not a win for any country but I am saddened that this is a loss for millions of Gen Z Pakistani fans who wanted to see (Virat) Kohli, Rohit (Sharma), (Rishabh) Pant, (Jasprit) Bumrah playing in their country."

The Champions Trophy will also feature Australia, England, New Zealand, South Africa, Afghanistan and Bangladesh.

Former pacer Mohammad Amir said he wanted to host Kohli at his house in Lahore. "It is disappointing that India will



Cameras take photographs of the 'ICC Champions Trophy' during its unveiling ceremony at the National Stadium in Karachi on November 21, 2024. (AFP)

not be playing in Pakistan," Amir told AFP on the phone from Sri Lanka. "I would have loved to host Kohli at my home but it's not to be."

Amir, who retired from international cricket last week, said Indian players would have been overwhelmed by the welcome in Pakistan.

"Had they come to Pakistan they would have realised how much fan following they have here," said Amir. "We went to India for the Twenty20 World Cup in 2016 and were welcomed with open hearts by the fans."

India's latest defiance is a progression of New Delhi's refusal to play bilateral cricket with Pakistan, initiated after the 2008 attacks on Mumbai which India blamed on militants based across the border.

Pakistan was also forced to host last year's Asia Cup on a hybrid model with India's matches and the final hosted in Sri Lanka.

Pakistan did, however, play in India during the 2023 ICC World Cup.

The arch-rivals only meet in ICC multi-national events like ODI and T20 World Cups, with the last bilateral series held when Pakistan toured India in 2012-13.

India last toured Pakistan to feature in the 2008 Asia Cup and have not played a bilateral series across the border for 18 years.

In the last few years, Pakistan has hosted the world's top teams after improving security, emerging from cricketing isolation that began after a militant attack on the Sri Lankan team bus in 2009 in Lahore.

SECOND ODI

Klaasen efforts in vain as Pakistan beat South Africa

The visitors win three-match ODI series 2-0 with one tie remaining

Reuters
Cape Town

Shaheen Shah Afridi produced a spell of high-quality seam bowling as Pakistan claimed their One-Day International series against South Africa with a game to spare following a comprehensive 81-run victory at Newlands yesterday.

Pakistan have an unassailable 2-0 lead ahead of the third and final fixture in Johannesburg on Sunday. South Africa surprisingly sent the visitors into bat on a ground where it is known to be difficult to chase under lights, and Pakistan posted an above-par 329 all out.

Heinrich Klaasen provided the only real resistance for South Africa with an excellent 97 from 74 balls but was the last man out as they were dismissed for 248 in 43.1 overs, having been outplayed in all facets of the game.

Captain Mohammad Rizwan scored 80 from 82 balls to anchor the Pakistan innings, but the impetus for their total came from a superb 63 from 32 deliveries by Kamran Ghulam.

Former skipper Babar Azam provided 73 in 95 deliveries with the visitors profiting from some sloppy South African fielding as they dropped numerous catches and were not accurate enough with the ball. Debutant fast bowler Kwena Maphaka, 18, returned figures of 4-72 in his 10 overs, the pick of a disappointing bowling effort from South Africa.

Several of the home side's bat-



Pakistan's players watch a review for the wicket of South Africa's Aiden Markram (not pictured) during the second one day international at Newlands Cricket Ground in Cape Town yesterday. (AFP)

ters got starts but Pakistan picked up wickets at regular intervals and Klaasen ran out of partners in the chase. Afridi showed superb control as he ripped through the South African middle order, re-

moving the dangerous Miller for 29 to take the game away from the home side.

BRIEF SCORES
49.5 overs Pakistan 329

(Rizwan 80, Babar 73, Ghulam 63, Maphaka 4-72) **beat South Africa 248 in 43.1 overs** (Klaasen 97, Tony de Zorzi 34; Afridi 4-47, Naseem 3-37) **by 81 runs**
Next match: Dec 22, Sunday.

CHAMPIONS TROPHY TUG OF WAR SHOWS INDIA'S 'STRANGLEHOLD' ON CRICKET



National flags of India (left) and Pakistan (right) are displayed before the start of their ICC Men's Cricket World Cup match at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad on October 14, 2023. (AFP)

New Delhi: Pakistan's loss of several Champions Trophy matches underlines India's dominance of cricket - and that "stranglehold" could tighten with an Indian now heading the global governing body. The 50-over tournament returns in February after an eight-year absence but India's longstanding refusal to tour arch-rival Pakistan forced the hosts to concede some of their duties. India will instead play matches on neutral ground, the International Cricket Council (ICC) said yesterday following weeks of wrangling, a decision that reflects the ease with which India can force its will on the game. Under the agreement, Pakistan will also play in upcoming ICC tournaments hosted by India in other countries, yet to be decided.

"Any market or industry overpoweringly dependent on a single competitor will be distorted accordingly," journalist and author Gideon Haigh of the Cricket Et Al website told AFP. "The same applies to sport unless it has a strong independent governance," he added. "This, cricket obviously does not have." This month Indian cricket boss Jay Shah took up his role as the latest chairman of the International Cricket Council (ICC) - the third Indian to lead the global governing body in the past decade.

At 36 he is the youngest person ever to ever serve the role. India's supremacy stems from the outsized revenues of its cricket board, flush with cash from its role as custodian of the most popular sport in the world's most populous country. The Indian Premier League alone has generated billions in revenue since its inception in 2008, turning the country's cricket board into one of the richest governing bodies in sport.

"Jay Shah's move to the ICC entrenches India's stranglehold on the game," *Wisden* Almanack editor Lawrence Booth told AFP. "Everyone recognises their financial contribution to cricket, but it is important now that Shah exercises his latest position of power with responsibility, and ensures the sport as a whole is looked after." Instead, Shah's ascension has coincided with the second instance of Pakistan being forced

to partially renounce its hosting responsibilities in as many years. A similar outcome followed a running dispute last year over the hosting of the 50-over Asia Cup, where India's refusal to play across the border forced drastic changes to the tournament months before it began. Pakistan eventually had to abandon hosting rights to most of the matches, with India playing their fixtures in Sri Lanka, where they won the final.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars against each other since they were carved out of the subcontinent's partition in 1947. The intensity of their rivalry has often been reflected in cricket matters. But relations have been especially frosty over the past decade since Hindu-nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office. Modi's chief political ally and right-hand man is India's powerful home minister Amit Shah - the father of new ICC chief Jay Shah. India have not played a bilateral series against Pakistan since Modi's election, officially on safety grounds given Pakistan's past history of militant attacks targeting the sport.

Pakistan paused hosting international cricket after a deadly attack on the visiting Sri Lankan team bus in Lahore in 2009, but resumed hosting in 2015. Every top cricketing nation has since returned to tour the country - except for India. Any cricket match between India and Pakistan is among the most watched events on the global sporting calendar. But the impasse means that both countries now only compete against each other in international tournaments, including during the ODI World Cup in India last year. Unlike India, Pakistan crossed the border to play.

"In my opinion, ICC should withhold the hosting rights for both countries until these issues between them are resolved," former Pakistan wicketkeeper Rashid Latif recently told Indian media. "Why aren't India and Pakistan getting banned? Because ICC has a lot of stake on them." As with the Asia Cup last year, India's refusal to travel to Pakistan for the Champions Trophy ruffled the hosts, who fought the decision for weeks until they were forced to compromise. But Pakistan has failed to find sympathy.

FOCUS

Atal ODI century guides Afghanistan to big win

AFP
Harare

Sediqullah Atal scored his maiden one-day international century as Afghanistan crushed Zimbabwe by 232 runs in Harare yesterday to take a 1-0 lead in the three-match series.

Atal (104) and Abdul Malik (84) put on 191 runs for the first wicket and an unbeaten 29 from captain Hashmatullah Shahidi lifted the tourists to 286-6 off 50 overs.

Zimbabwe, who won the toss, were in trouble from the outset when replying with Ben Cur-

ran run out off the final ball of the first over. Only Sikandar Raza (19 not out) and Sean Williams (16) reached double figures and the home team were bundled out for 54 in 17.5 overs at Harare Sports Club.

Afghan bowlers Allah Ghazanfar (3-9), Naveed Zadran (3-13) and Fazalhaq Farooqi (2-15) wreaked havoc. "I am very happy with my performance and that of the team. We won a fantastic game of cricket," said player-of-the-match Atal. "Abdul and I coped well. We supported each other and that is why we did well and the team did well. I did become a little nervous as the century drew near." Shahidi said: "I was very im-

pressed with the way the openers batted. The credit goes to them. We outclassed them in all departments."

BRIEF SCORES
Afghanistan 286-6 in 50 overs (Sediqullah Atal 104, Abdul Malik 84, Hashmatullah Shahidi 29 not out; Newman Nyamhuri 3-53, Trevor Gwandu 2-70) **v Zimbabwe 54 in 17.5 overs** (Sikandar Raza 19 not out, Sean Williams 16; Allah Ghazanfar 3-9, Naveed Zadran 3-13, Fazalhaq Farooqi 2-15)
Result: Afghanistan win by 232 runs
Series: Afghanistan lead 1-0 with one match to play on Saturday



Afghanistan's Sediqullah Atal celebrates his century against Zimbabwe.

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar Stars League participates in third edition of FIFA Diploma in Club Management

In continuation of the strong partnership between FIFA and Qatar Stars League (QSL), and on the sidelines of FIFA Intercontinental Cup Qatar 2024, QSL participated in the organisation of third edition of FIFA Diploma in Club Management at the St. Regis hotel from December 13 to 18, 2024.

The opening session was attended by Gianni Infantino, President of FIFA, Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain, President of Qatar Football Association (QFA) and QSL, Hani Taleb Ballan, CEO of QSL, Dr Ahmed Khellil Abbassi, Executive Director of Competitions and Football Development at QSL, Ornella Desiree Bellia, Director of Professional Football Relations and Development at FIFA, CEOs and representatives of QSL clubs, a large number of dignitaries, personalities, international stars and former players.

Since its launch in 2021, the FIFA Diploma in Club Management aims to expand the network of senior club executives around the world, former international players and coaches working in club administration, and prepare individuals with skills and ambitions to acquire the latest knowledge and specialised expertise necessary to achieve success.

It also attracts a number of prominent figures from around the world to explain and analyse information and share experiences,



Gianni Infantino, President of FIFA, and Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain, President of Qatar Football Association and QSL, during the third edition of FIFA Diploma in Club Management in Doha. **Right:** Hani Taleb Ballan, CEO of QSL speaks on the occasion.



with a special focus on prevailing trends in club operations, stadium management, administrative and legal affairs, marketing and communications, sports strategies,

youth academies, governance, leadership and negotiation skills. Al-Buenain welcomed all attendees, saying, "On behalf of QFA and QSL, I'm pleased to wel-

come everyone to Doha. I would like to extend a special welcome to Mr. Infantino, Ms. Ornella and all guests and participants in this programme, which we're pleased

to host. The FIFA Diploma in Club Management is innovative and contributes towards refining and developing the administrative expertise of all participants. The quality of the presenters and attendees reflected the professional level of its content. I appreciate FIFA's support through this programme to contribute towards refining the expertise of all administrators and stakeholders from QSL clubs. We're also pleased that this event was held in conjunction with the FIFA Intercontinental Cup Qatar 2024. In conclusion, I can only thank you and wish everyone success."

Infantino commented, "We've to keep developing club football

around the world and it's important for us to make sure that we can share these experiences with all our partners and stakeholders, so we've to focus and work professionally for the benefit of football, both on and off the pitch. When it comes to off the pitch, we've these programmes that allow all participants to exchange and gain a lot of administrative experience that'll help them in the future, which will reflect positively on football. I wish all participants the best of luck in the third edition of FIFA Diploma in Club Management."

Commenting on the occasion, Ballan said: "We have a series of continuous co-operation with FIFA, both in terms of technical and administrative aspects, and in line with our continuous efforts to achieve the highest standards of professionalism and provide high-quality, enjoyable competitive football."

He added: "This programme is based on our collective belief that education and sports go hand in hand, and we at QSL have a number of initiatives and programmes that aim to enhance and develop the work, which benefits professional football in Qatar. In this regard, I thank all our partners and clubs, and FIFA and the entire work force for giving us the opportunity to communicate with representatives of global football community in this distinguished educational programme."

MOTORSPORT

Lawson set to join Verstappen at Red Bull

New Zealander, 22, replaces Perez

Reuters
Auckland

New Zealander Liam Lawson will replace Sergio Perez in the daunting role of teammate to four times world champion Max Verstappen at Red Bull next season, the Formula One team said yesterday.

Mexican Perez's departure was announced on Wednesday and Lawson's promotion from Red Bull's sister team RB had been expected.

The 22-year-old made his F1 debut at the 2023 Dutch Grand Prix as a five-race stand-in for injured Daniel Ricciardo and returned for the last six races of this season when the Australian was dropped.

"To be announced as an Oracle Red Bull Racing Driver is a lifelong dream for me, this is something I've wanted and worked towards since I was eight years old," he said in a team statement.

"It's been an incredible journey so far. I want to say a massive thank you to the whole team at VCARB (RB) for their support, the last six races have played a huge part in my preparation for this next step.

"I am super excited to work alongside Max and learn from a world champion, I have no doubt I will learn from his expertise. I can't wait to get going."

Team boss Christian Horner said Lawson's performances had shown he was "a real racer, not afraid to mix it with the best and come out on top".

"His arrival continues the



Liam Lawson of New Zealand looks on from the grid during the F1 Grand Prix of Las Vegas at Las Vegas Strip Circuit on November 23, 2024. (AFP)

team's long history of promoting from within the Red Bull Junior Programme and he follows in the footsteps of championship and race-winning drivers such as Sebastian Vettel and of course, Max Verstappen," he added.

"There's no doubt that racing alongside Max, a four-time champion and undoubtedly one of the greatest drivers ever seen in F1, is a daunting task, but I'm sure Liam can rise to that challenge and deliver some outstanding results for us next year."

A series of teammates have struggled to match Verstappen's

superb pace at Red Bull since he arrived there in 2016, also promoted from within, and the role has become something of a poisoned chalice.

Perez joined in 2021 and had a strong 2023 season, finishing second overall in the championship but still a massive 290 points behind Verstappen, who won a record 19 of 22 races with his teammate taking only two.

The Mexican's form has collapsed this season, finishing eighth overall, while Verstappen went on to take his fourth title in a row.

Before him Alex Albon (2019-2020, now at Williams) and Pierre Gasly (2019, now at Alpine) were tried and found wanting.

Ricciardo, who partnered Verstappen at Red Bull from 2016 to 2018, beat the future champion in their first full season together but was behind in 2018 and then jumped ship for Renault.

Lawson's promotion opens a vacancy at RB, who will be re-named Racing Bulls next season, with French-Algerian Isack Hadjar expected to take it after finishing the season runner-up in Formula Two.

Draper out of Davis Cup tennis tie

London: Jack Draper confirmed yesterday he has withdrawn from both the United Cup and Great Britain's Davis Cup clash with Japan because of a hip injury. But the British number one tennis player still hopes to be fit to compete in singles competition at next month's Australian Open, which falls in between the two team events. Draper had been due to fly to Australia on Monday before partnering with Katie Boulter for Britain at the United Cup, an international mixed team tournament in Sydney starting on December 30.

"As I work to get on top of my hip

injury and get match-fit, I have unfortunately been advised not to play in the United Cup," said Draper in a statement yesterday. "While we are very positive about competing in the Australian Open this year, I know I won't be able to jump straight into a packed schedule as I manage and strengthen my hip. (I'm) gutted as I was really looking forward to playing in the United Cup for the first time." The 22-year-old now plans to travel to Melbourne later this month as he bids to be fit for the first Grand Slam tournament of 2025, which starts on January 12.

TENNIS

ATP paid \$1.3mn to 26 players in 2024 under minimum wage plan

Reuters
London

The ATP distributed \$1.3mn to 26 players as part of its on-trial financial security programme in 2024 and will step up its commitment by boosting minimum wage figures for next year, the governing body of men's tennis said.

Launched earlier this year as part of a three-year trial, the Baseline programme guarantees minimum income for the top 250-ranked singles players each season and ATP chief Andrea Gaudenzi called it a "game-changer" for them.

"We're giving players the financial support they need to overcome challenges and build a sustainable career - whether they're navigating injuries, setbacks in performance, or entering the tour for the first time," Gaudenzi said.

"With \$1.3 million distributed to players in year one of Baseline, the impact is already clear. With expansions set for 2025, this is just the beginning."

While the leading players on tour earn huge sums of money, including from endorsement deals,

their lower-ranked colleagues largely depend on tournament earnings to make ends meet.

Many players endured severe financial struggles during the Covid pandemic when the season was temporarily halted, prompting big names like Roger Federer, Rafa Nadal and Novak Djokovic to call for a solution.

This year, a total of 17 players were paid as part of the minimum guarantee plan where the ATP covered any shortfall when earnings fell below the threshold, while three benefited from the income protection plan after injury-hit campaigns.

One player received money from two plans.

Seven rising players received financial aid as part of the newcomer investment plan after breaking into the top 125 for the first time.

The ATP will raise guaranteed minimum thresholds in 2025 to \$200,000 (up from \$150,000) for singles players ranked 101-175 and \$100,000 (up from \$75,000) for those ranked 176-250. The threshold for the top 100 remains at \$300,000. It means all players who ended 2024 in the top 250 will earn a minimum of \$100,000 next year if they play 15 events.

United Cup can be breeding ground for innovation, says tournament director

Bengaluru: Tennis has been slow to embrace innovation partly due to its success in a golden era dominated by global superstars but the sport must now strive to move with the times, the tournament director of the United Cup said yesterday. Stephen Farrow, who oversees the popular \$10mn mixed team event that signals the start of the new season, is keen to continue collaborating with the ATP and WTA to spark changes that can

deliver a richer experience for players and fans. "I think tennis is just a very traditional sport and certainly in more recent years it has been incredibly successful," Farrow told Reuters via phone from Sydney. "We've had some of the greatest players ever to play the game. Obviously with Roger Federer, Serena Williams, Rafa Nadal and Novak Djokovic, we got so many great champions that tennis has done really well. "We've seen that at the Grand

Slams. We had over a million people come to the Australian Open last time. So when you see so many people coming in through the door, there's probably less pressure to try and look at ways that you can innovate. "There's a lot that's right about tennis ... but all sports have a duty to renew themselves and continue looking at ways to enhance the game." Farrow said that although tennis was among the first sports to

adopt technology, specifically Hawk Eye replays and electronic line calling, it had held itself back from widely implementing features that have since become common elsewhere. He pointed to the huge success of courtside team zones that help ramp up the atmosphere at the United Cup and where players and coaches can access live statistical data and analysis. "We also introduced strategy rooms at the ATP Cup, the United

Cup and the Australian Open where you've got access to this data and analysis that coaches can go into with their players to brief them," Farrow added. The 18-team United Cup, which runs from Dec. 27-Jan. 5, will introduce 60-second timeouts - activated when a red buzzer is pushed - during the often crucial mixed doubles matches, giving competitors the chance to catch their breath and talk tactics. A maximum of one timeout per

team can be used. "We really see ourselves as an event in which innovation is a big part of the DNA," said Farrow, who took charge as director of tournaments, player and international relations at Tennis Australia in 2021. "We can try things out, which hopefully we can then go on to introduce at the Australian Open and more widely in due course." Speeding up matches at the United Cup is another goal that Farrow hopes to achieve in future.

HORSE RACING

Al Ghazali Stud's Mared Al Jasra lands Muaiether Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Ghazali Stud's Mared Al Jasra returned to winning ways quickly and in style as Jassim Ghazali ward won the Muaiether Cup yesterday.

At the Al Rayyan Racecourse, the four-year-old colt, Marco Casamento in the saddle, surged forward in the final 200m to claim an impressive victory by 4½ lengths to win the 1700m Purebred Arabian Handicap for the four-year-olds+.

This was the second win for the son of Mared Al Sahra in just three starts so far this season. Mared Al Jasra registered his first win of the season in the Al Beshariyah Cup - Purebred Arabian Premium Maiden race - on November 24.

Hamad al-Jehani also enjoyed a fine day yesterday grabbing three titles with Laabbij sealing the first win for the trainer by winning the Thoroughbred Handicap 45-65 with Szczepan Mazur in the saddle.

Al-Jehani celebrated his hat-



Connections of Mared Al Jasra celebrate after the colt won the Muaiether Cup yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim

trick and Mazur marked his second title of the day when Roma recorded victory in the Local Purebred Arabian Conditions - the penultimate contest of the day.

Earlier, Silver Jubilee secured a second triumph for al-Jehani winning the Thoroughbred Handicap by a short head under jockey Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi.

Al Kazim, Casimir De Cod-

ines, Nah'ash Al Shahania and Al Ghaith also notched up victories yesterday.

RESULTS
14th Al Rayyan Race Meeting - Muaiether Cup
WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1 - Muaiether Cup - Purebred Arabian Handicap 80-100 (Class

2)
Mared Al Jasra, Jassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento
2 - Local Purebred Arabian Conditions (Class 2)
Roma, Hamad al-Jehani, Szczepan Mazur
3 - Thoroughbred Handicap 65-85 (Class 4)
Silver Jubilee, Hamad al-Jehani, Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi



Jockey Marco Casamento guided Mared Al Jasra to victory yesterday.

4 - Purebred Arabian Novice Plate (Class 5)
Al Kazim, Mohammed Ghazali, Jefferson Smith
5 - Purebred Arabian Handicap 50-70 (Class 5)
Casimir De Codines, Abdulrahman Abdulwahed, Khadija Abdulwahed
6 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate (Class 6)

Nah'ash Al Shahania, Rudy Andre Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier

7 - Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate (Class 6)
Al Ghaith, Zuhair Mohsen, Gavin Matt Ryan
8 - Thoroughbred Handicap 45-65 (Class 6)
Laabbij, Hamad al-Jehani, Szczepan Mazur

FOOTBALL

PSG win but lose Donnarumma to facial injury

'To not give a red in a situation like that, it's a big call'



Paris Saint-Germain's Italian goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma receives medical help after sustaining an injury during the French L1 match against AS Monaco at the Louis II Stadium in Monaco yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain came from behind to extend their unbeaten start to the Ligue 1 season with a 4-2 win away to Monaco on Wednesday but lost goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma to a gruesome facial injury.

The bloodied Italy international was left requiring 10 staples after suffering lacerations to the right side of his face when he was caught by the studs of Monaco defender Wilfried Singo.

"I don't know if the referee was badly positioned but VAR needed to intervene, you have to protect the players," said PSG captain Marquinhos.

"To not give a red in a situation like

that, it's a big call." Singo avoided any punishment for his clumsy but unintentional collision as Donnarumma was replaced by Matvey Safonov before Desire Doue gave PSG the lead with his first league goal for the reigning champions.

That came after Achraf Hakimi rattled the post with an intended cross, but Monaco hit back with two goals in seven second-half minutes.

Eliesse Ben Seghir converted a penalty awarded for a handball by Marquinhos to level.

Maghnes Aklouché then crossed for Brel Embolo to poke Monaco in front on the hour and put PSG's record 31-game unbeaten Ligue 1 away run in jeopardy.

Ousmane Dembele soon equalised and Goncalo Ramos headed in a corner shortly after coming on to swing the match back in PSG's favour.

Lee Kang-in's long-range effort was tipped onto the post by Monaco goalkeeper Philipp Koehn before home coach Adi Huetter was sent off for his reaction to a penalty appeal being turned down following a challenge on Embolo.

Dembele struck again deep into stoppage time to seal victory and signal his return to form after reports of tension with PSG coach Luis Enrique in recent weeks.

The result opens up a 10-point gap between PSG and their closest challengers Marseille and Monaco, the last team to beat the capital club away from the Parc des Princes in March 2023. Luis Enrique's side go to Lens on Sunday in the last 64 of the French Cup in their final game of the year before a rematch with Monaco in the Champions Trophy in Doha on January 5.

4th Doha International Arabian Horse Show begins



Roma, owned by Mohammed Faleh Shafi Alajmi, won the first place in the Fillies 2 Years Old 2A class while BG Eman of Al Sawaida Farm topped the Yearling Fillies 1A class on the opening day of Qatar Racing & Equestrian Club's 4th Doha International Arabian Horse Show which began at the outdoor arena of the Qatar Equestrian Federation (QEF) yesterday. The four-day event is seeing the participation of 300 horses representing farms and studs from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and the UAE aiming for prestigious titles of the Show. The European Conference of Arab Horse Organisations (ECAHO)-affiliated event is being overseen by international judges from various countries. The contests of each class will qualify winners to the champions of colts, fillies, mares and stallions categories. The top three winners in each class will be awarded gold, silver and bronze medals. PICTURES: Juhaim



Wolves appoint Vitor Pereira as head coach

Wolverhampton Wanderers announced yesterday they had appointed Vitor Pereira as their new head coach as they battle for Premier League survival. The 56-year-old Portuguese manager has left Saudi Pro League club Al Shabab to join Wolves on an 18-month contract after the Midlands side, battling to avoid relegation, sacked Gary O'Neil. The widely travelled Pereira was close to replacing Rafael Benitez as Everton manager in 2022. During an extensive managerial career, Pereira has won two Primeira Liga titles with Porto and the Greek Super League with Olympiakos. The BBC reported Tuesday that Wolves would pay around one million euros (\$1mn) to bring Pereira to the English top flight. Wolves chairman Jeff Shi said: "We are delighted to welcome Vitor Pereira to

Wolves as the new head coach of our men's first-team. Vitor is a highly respected and experienced coach who has achieved success across different leagues and will bring a new approach for the test ahead. "This is a challenging moment for the club, and we want to thank Vitor for taking on this responsibility. We have full confidence in his ability to guide us back on track, alongside the players and staff, and the entire club will be united in supporting him to achieve success." Wolves, second bottom in the Premier League, said Pereira took his first training session with the club yesterday and would be in charge for their match away to fellow relegation candidates Leicester - five points above them in the standings - on Sunday. (AFP)

MOTORSPORT

MENA Karting Nations Cup 2024 to see fierce competition

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The MENA Karting Championship Nations Cup 2024, December 17-21, being hosted by the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) is currently underway at the Lusail International Circuit.

The 'Nations Cup' format gives opportunity to the competitors taking part to represent their countries and compete for the honour of being named MENA champions. This year, 16 nations will be represented: Qatar, Algeria,

Egypt, Bahrain, Turkiye, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Syria, Iran, Kuwait, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan, and the UAE.

The 2023 champions included Team Qatar who marked victories in a number of categories, alongside winners from Morocco, UAE, Lebanon, and Oman, ensuring the 2024 championship will be rife with fierce competition and talented racing displays.

Six categories will be represented at the MENA Karting Championship Nations Cup: Micro Max, Mini Max, Junior Max, Senior Max, DD2, and DD2 Masters, alongside the R390 Sprint and

R390 Endurance, with opportunities for drivers ranging from 8 years old to over 30.

Founded in 2020 by FIA President Mohammed Ben Sulayem, this year marks the second year in a row that the event is hosted by the QMMF and held at the Lusail circuit.

The MENA Karting Championship Nations Cups shall conclude a successful 2024 for Qatar and the Lusail International Circuit following their hosting of the FIA Formula 1 Qatar Grand Prix at the start of December and the WEC official prologues and Qatar 1812km in February and March.

