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CRICKET | Page 2

Australia picks teen batsman Sam Konstas for Boxing Day Test



MOTORSPORT | Page 3

Tsunoda looks the big loser in Red Bull's F1 reshuffle

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FOOTBALL

Gutsy Al Duhail beat Al Arabi 2-1 to corner prestigious QSL Cup glory

Page 4

ARABIAN GULF CUP 26

Team excited ahead of UAE clash, says Qatar coach Garcia

'The team's morale is high. We understand the significance of this tournament for the Qatari people'



Qatar coach Luis Garcia and UAE coach Paulo Bento (below) address the media in Kuwait City.



By Sports Reporter
Kuwait City

Three-time champions Qatar feel 'excited' about facing a fresh challenge at Gulf Cup 26, new coach Luis Garcia said yesterday. Asian champions Qatar, who will be without mercurial playmaker Akram Afif, face the United Arab Emirates (UAE) today. Kuwait and Oman are the other two teams in Group A along with Qatar and the UAE.

In Group B, Saudi Arabia are joined by Bahrain, Yemen and Iraq who won the tournament at the start of 2023 in Basra.

The hugely popular eight-team tournament will be played from Dec 21-Jan 3.

"I'm truly excited to work with Al Annabi and I'm driven by a strong ambition to achieve great things in this tournament," Garcia said yesterday.

When asked about the upcoming match against the UAE, Garcia stated: "We're highly focused on facing the UAE team. The first match is always challenging, but every match is crucial. We have a young team that will work diligently to achieve positive results in the Gulf Cup."

Addressing the recent loss to



the UAE in the World Cup qualifiers, Garcia said: "The team's morale is high. We understand the significance of this tournament for the Qatari people, and we're motivated and fully focused on achieving positive results. Our players possess a professional mindset, and we've moved on from the last match and the World Cup qualifiers. The players are ready to represent Qatar at their best and deliver exceptional performances."

Regarding addressing the team's mistakes, Garcia said: "I'm committed to improvement and have focused on all aspects of the game - defence, attack, and midfield. I'm confident that we can achieve good results in this tournament."



Qatar players during a training session in Kuwait City yesterday.

TODAY'S FIXTURES

Kuwait vs Oman 8:00pm

Qatar vs UAE 10:00pm

We're collectively analysing the issues and focusing on the team as a whole. I'm striving to balance defence and attack, creating a more cohesive and solid team."

He added: "We know the importance of this tournament for Qatar, and I'm aware of the capabilities of my players. This team has previously won the Asian Cup, and we'll approach every match with a final-like mentality."

Garcia yesterday also provided an update on Afif's delayed arrival in Kuwait.

"I've known Akram for nine years, and I'm aware of his commitment, seriousness, and profes-

sionalism. He's currently dealing with some personal circumstances, and we're working hard to ensure he's ready to join the national team. Ultimately, he's human, and we respect his personal situation. Akram is part of the 26-player squad for the tournament, and if circumstances permit, he'll be joining us in Kuwait."

Paulo Bento, the UAE coach, said during a press conference yesterday: "Ours was a difficult preparation due to lack of time to prepare the players and the strategy. Some of the players played their last league game on the 17th so we just met them yesterday

(Thursday) and then we had to travel. It is our role and obligation to try and do our best even in these kinds of conditions."

Bento added: "Training yesterday was important of course. Today, we can't make many things because it is the day before the game. We will try our best to perform in the best possible way to make a good game."

When asked about Afif's absence from the match, Bento told reporters: "We try to prepare the strategy looking at different possibilities, and we think always that the opponent will play with the best players, and of course Afif is one of their best (players). We know how influential he is in their style of play, especially in the offensive process. But if he doesn't play, it will not be a different game or become easier because their coach will find other solutions. So, we focus on our strategy and our team only."

When asked if his side were the favourites for the title, Bento said: "Did you ask them (the fans) why they consider us as favourite? We are not the favourite. We are one of the teams that wants to make the best (results) for the country and show a good organisation as a team. That's it. We will try to keep competing in the proper way and in a good spirit."

SPOTLIGHT

Kuwait players feeling positive, says coach Pizzi

By Sports Reporter
Kuwait City

Kuwait head coach Juan Antonio Pizzi yesterday said his team was brimming with confidence going into today's Gulf Cup 26 opener against former champions Oman.

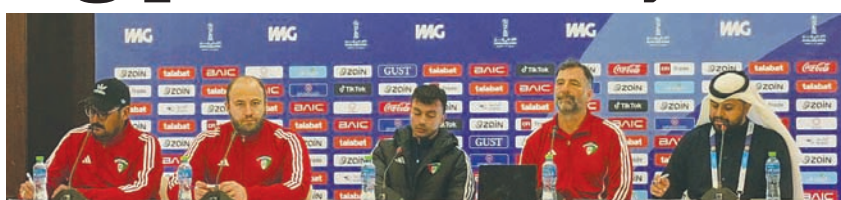
"We are feeling positive going into the game because we have good preparations at our camp in Qatar. It will be a very difficult competition but we are happy with how we have prepared," coach Pizzi said yesterday.

"No, there's no pressure. We are feeling very positive. There is no pressure on the players who have gone through some tough training and preparations to be ready. We

need the support of the fans to be behind us. We have prepared for both defence and offence in preparing for this tournament. All situations have been worked on so that we will be ready for the competition," he said.

When reminded that it has been 25 years since Kuwait beat Oman, Pizzi said: "No, statistics are history and in the past and we don't care. We are just focused on the first game and, again, we need the support of the fans behind us to make a difference." He added: "The preparation has been really excellent. But we have to now perform in the games. The players must be at their maximum level so that Kuwait can perform at our best to be in with a chance."

Oman head coach Rasheed Jabir said yesterday: "We have had good preparations



Kuwait's head coach Juan Pizzi during a press conference in Kuwait City yesterday.

- we are ready for this competition and have been working hard since our World Cup qualifiers last month. All the teams are here to compete for the competition so it will be very tough."

When reminded about Oman's 4-0 win over Kuwait in the World Cup qualifiers, Jabir said: "It is a different match this time.

Kuwait have had a good preparation and it is the opening game so it will be difficult and especially in front of their fans.

"The pressure is always there and we can cope with it. We have ambition to get good results in this competition. This match against Kuwait is the first step which is very important and we will learn from any mis-

takes made to perform better and hopefully win. We learned from past experiences that the Khaleeji has surprise results, and there is always pressure from playing in such a big competition.

"Except for Iraq, not everyone got the results they wanted in the latest World Cup qualifiers. If we reach the final and if we play all the games, it is five matches. The Arabian Gulf has different situations for all of the teams here, with all of us knowing that the results are very important to change the minds of the media and fans.

"We are here to compete and qualify through the group. But the first step is against Kuwait so we are not looking beyond that. We have to be prepared mentally as well as physically for this competition," Jabir said.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Australia pick Konstas for Boxing Day Test

Reuters
Melbourne

Australia have dumped Nathan McSweeney after three Tests and rushed uncapped teenager **Sam Konstas** into the squad for the Boxing Day Test against India in the search for more runs from the top order.

Makeshift opener McSweeney scored 72 runs from 212 deliveries at an average of 14.4 over six innings as Australia were thrashed in the series opener, won handsomely in the second Test and drew the third in Brisbane this week.

Konstas has been scoring runs for fun in first class cricket this season, including a century against

an Indian selection in the tour match in Canberra.

The 19-year-old also became the youngest player to score a half-century in the Big Bash League this week on his debut in Australia's domestic T20 competition, making 56 from 27 balls for Sydney Thunder.

"Sam gets a call up to the Test squad for the first time. His style of batting offers a point of difference and we look forward to watching his game develop further," said head selector George Bailey.

"We remain confident Nathan has the ability and temperament to succeed at Test level in the future. It was a difficult decision to leave him out."

Experienced wicketkeeper-batsman Josh Inglis and all-round-

er Beau Webster, both uncapped, also remain in the squad as options to replace McSweeney in the opening partnership with Usman Khawaja if Australia decide not to field Konstas. McSweeney was not the only top order batter struggling for runs in the series with Khawaja averaging 12.6 and number three Marnus Labuschagne 16.40 despite a half-century in the second Test in Adelaide.

"It has clearly been a challenge at the top of the order for batters throughout the series and we want to provide the option of a different line up for the next two matches," Bailey added.

Jhye Richardson and Sean Abbott are in the squad as cover for Josh Hazlewood but Scott Boland is expected to take the injured fast

bowler's place in the pace attack in the fourth Test, as he did in the second.

"In the absence of Josh Hazlewood, Jhye provides further options in the fast bowling space," Bailey said. "It has been pleasing to see his successful return throughout the early part of the domestic summer."

The fourth Test starts at Melbourne Cricket Ground on Dec 26 with the fifth and final match taking place in Sydney from Jan 3.

Australia squad: Pat Cummins (captain), Usman Khawaja, Sam Konstas, Marnus Labuschagne, Steve Smith, Travis Head, Alex Carey, Mitchell Marsh, Beau Webster, Josh Inglis, Mitchell Starc, Nathan Lyon, Scott Boland, Sean Abbott, Jhye Richardson.



CRICKET

Bangladesh win final T20I, sweep Windies series

Jaker Ali smashes blistering 72 to set up win for the visitors



Bangladesh players and team officials celebrate their T20I series win over West Indies. Bangladesh won the three-match series 3-0. (@BCBTigers)

AFP
Kingstown, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

Jaker Ali's blistering unbeaten 72 highlighted a dominant Bangladesh effort as the visitors thrashed the West Indies by 80 runs in the third and final T20 International to sweep the series 3-0 at the Arnos Vale Stadium in St Vincent on Thursday.

Benefiting from a huge reprieve when he thought he had been run out on 18, the attacking right-hander took heavy toll of an un-inspired Caribbean team, belting six sixes and three fours off just 41 balls to pace his side to a challenging 189 for seven after skipper Litton Das opted to bat first.

Beaten in the first two low-scoring matches at the same venue, the West Indies were never in the hunt for a consolation victory after losing Brandon King to the second delivery of their reply and were eventually bundled out for 109 off 16.4 overs.

All-rounder Romario Shepherd top-scored with 33.

Wrist-spinner Rishad Hossain led the rout with three for 21 while there were two wickets each for fellow spinner Mahedi Hasan, the "Man of the Series," and seamer Taskin Ahmed, who had the distinction of starting the slide when the trapped King leg-before and then sealed victory by bowling local hero Obed McCoy.

Debutant opener Parvez Hossain Emon, playing in the absence of the injured Soumya Sarkar, set

the tone for the Bangladesh innings with 39 off 21 balls before "Man of the Match" Jaker took over the show with a display typical of his uninhibited batting style. However, it could all have been very different had the on-field run out decision against him stood following a terrible mix-up with Shamim Hossain. A fuming Jaker, believing that a second run was always on, could not disguise his rage when Shamim opted to return to the striker's end and bowler Roston Chase effected the dismissal.

Yet even as he continued to vent his frustration in the dressing room, television replays showed he had made his ground at the striker's end just before his partner returned to safety, meaning that Shamim was the man

eventually on his way back to the pavilion. All was forgiven at the end of the innings, though, as Shamim was first to embrace his teammate after his power-hitting drained any enthusiasm left in a deflated West Indies side.

BRIEF SCORES

Bangladesh 189-7 off 20 overs (Jaker Ali 72 n.o., Parvez Hossain Emon 39, Mehidy Hasan Miraz 29; Romario Shepherd 2-30, Roston Chase 1-15, Gudakesh Motie 1-30) **vs West Indies 109 all out off 16.4 overs** (Romario Shepherd 33, Johnson Charles 23, Nicholas Pooran 15; Rishad Hossain 3-21, Mahedi Hasan 2-13, Taskin Ahmed 2-30) **Result:** Bangladesh won by 80 runs **Toss:** Bangladesh

SPOTLIGHT

'Life is short': Skiing legend Vonn makes comeback in St Moritz

AFP
St. Moritz, Switzerland

US ski legend **Lindsey Vonn** will make her return to World Cup skiing today in St Moritz at the age of 40, after a near six-year absence and with the 2026 Winter Olympics her ultimate goal.

Fans and sceptics alike will be watching closely as Vonn, arguably the greatest speed racer in the sport's history, hits the slopes for the first of two super-G events this weekend at the Swiss resort.

"Why are you doing this? It's a question I've been asked a lot lately. So I will tell you why..." Vonn, a winner of 82 World Cup races, wrote this week on her Instagram account.

"My life has taken me on a crazy roller coaster of ups and downs but despite everything I've been through, my 'why' has always been, and always will be, my love for skiing."

Today, 20 years after her first World Cup win, Vonn will take to the start gate with Sofia Goggia, Lara Gut-Behrami and Cornelia Huetter, heavyweights in a discipline the American once dominated.

"I feel stronger now than I did in my mid, late 20s, and I feel like the passion for skiing has never gone away," Vonn said last week in Beaver Creek, where she served as a forerunner for the downhill and super-G races.

"So now that I have the chance to physically do what I love. Why? Why would I not try? Life is short. You gotta live every day as to the maximum, and that's all I'm doing."

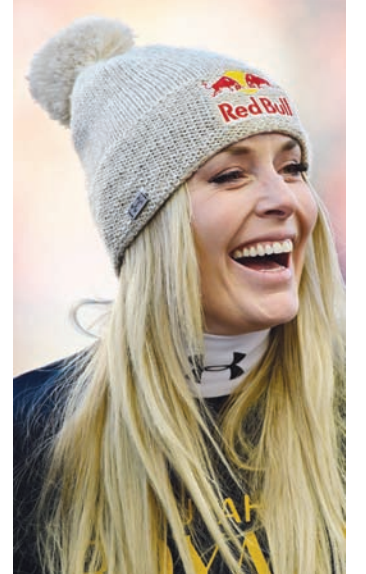
TITANIUM KNEE

Vonn left the sport in 2019 after a series of major injuries but she has been free of pain since a right knee replacement in April, when part of the bone was cut off and replaced by two titanium pieces.

She was the most decorated women's skier with 82 World Cup victories when she retired. Her mark has since been eclipsed by fellow American Mikaela Shiffrin's 99.

Vonn, the 2010 Olympic downhill champion, also won 20 World Cup titles, including four overall crystal globes, eight world championship medals and secured 137 World Cup podiums.

As the months went by, there were whispers in the skiing world that Vonn was back in training and perhaps targeting a comeback. Her return followed that of another legend in the form of Marcel Hirscher.



The Austrian, now competing for the Netherlands, however seriously injured his knee in early December and ended his season - and his second career - after only three races.

While Hirscher's return was generally welcomed, Vonn's decision to come out of retirement was not universally celebrated, with some former skiers suggesting she was putting herself at serious risk.

"I'm getting pretty tired of people predicting negative things about my future," Vonn responded on social media. "Did they all become doctors and I missed it, because they talk like they know more than the best doctors in the world."

Italy's Federica Brignone, 34, is the oldest woman to win a World Cup race, triumphing in the season-opening giant slalom in Soelden in October.

Vonn said that while she plans to take her comeback day-by-day, she also signalled that her overriding goal is to compete at the highest level once more.

"I don't need the spotlight or attention," she said. "I don't need to prove anything to anyone."

Vonn took part in two super-Gs in a lower-level competition at Copper Mountain in the United States earlier this month and finished 19th and 24th, just over two seconds behind the winner each time.

"You know me well enough to know that success is not just participating," she said.

"I know my way back to a competitive level might take a race or two, but I certainly intend on getting back to where I was before."

The next Winter Olympics take place in Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo in 2026.

"Ultimately, if I can make it to Cortina, that would be my goal."



Katir banned for four years after falsifying documents

Montreal: Spanish runner **Mohamed Katir** has been banned for four years by the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) for falsifying documents during a probe into his whereabouts failures for which he was already suspended for two years earlier this year.

Katir had admitted to three whereabouts failures during 2023.

Under WADA's "whereabouts" rule, all athletes must make themselves available to drug testers for one hour a day for out-of-competition testing.

Under the World Athletics anti-doping rules, three whereabouts failures within a 12-month period result in a rule violation. The 26-year-old, who won the silver medal in the 5,000m at the World Athletics Championships last year, will serve both bans

concurrently, extending his ineligibility to compete until February 2028.

"Katir...was found to have falsified travel documents (namely a travel itinerary, boarding pass and booking confirmation) in an attempt to mislead investigators," the AIU said in a statement.

However, the Disciplinary Tribunal that ruled in the case denied the AIU's request to have Katir's results to be disqualified from March 9, 2023 because he had not benefited from a competitive advantage, the statement added.

"The vast majority of our elite athletes respect the strict rules and processes of the sport and they should take heart at the action being taken to ensure a level playing field," AIU head Brett Clothier said.



MOTORSPORT

Tsunoda looks the big loser of Red Bull's F1 reshuffle

'I think he's very determined. He knows that things change very quickly'

Reuters
London

Yuki Tsunoda will represent experience and continuity at Racing Bulls next year but, passed over for promotion, the Japanese looks to be running out of road at the Red Bull-owned Formula One team.

A flurry of Red Bull announcements culminated yesterday with 20-year-old Isack Hadjar confirmed as Tsunoda's teammate.

The Frenchman takes the seat vacated by New Zealander Liam Lawson, who joins four times champion Max Verstappen at the main team after Mexican Sergio Perez was dropped.

Tsunoda, 24, will be starting his fifth year with the team previously known as AlphaTauri and RB and has close ties to Red Bull's engine partners Honda. The Japanese manufacturer is leaving Red Bull at the end of 2025, however, to work with Aston Martin.

"We're acutely aware that if we're not able to provide an opportunity for Yuki (at Red Bull) in all honesty this year, does it (keeping him on) make sense?" Red Bull team boss Christian Horner told reporters.

"You can't have a driver in the support team for five years. You can't always be the bridesmaid. You've either got to let them go at that point or look at something different."

Horner said he had spoken with Tsunoda, a fan favourite currently enjoying time off in Japan, and the driver was determined to show what he could do. "I think he's very determined. He knows that things change very quickly," said the Briton.



"Who would have thought nine months ago that we'd be sitting here talking about Liam Lawson being our driver for 2025?"

"Things change quickly in this industry and he's aware of that and he knows that he needs to be the one demonstrating that he's the one knocking on the door."

Italy-based Racing Bulls, who have had several name changes after Red Bull bought Minardi in 2005 and renamed them Toro

Rosso, have always been a feeder for the title-winning main Milton Keynes team.

Drivers to have come through their ranks include four times world champions Sebastian Vettel and Verstappen as well as race winners Daniel Ricciardo, Pierre Gasly and Carlos Sainz.

Hadjar is one of a group of young prospects coming into the sport and Red Bull also have Arvid Lindblad as an exciting talent on the horizon. Horner rates the 17-year-old, who has both British and Swedish nationality, particularly highly after a strong rookie season in Formula Three including a Silverstone double win.

FOCUS

Russian skaters allowed to compete as neutrals in 2026 Winter Olympics

AFP
Lausanne

Russians will be able to qualify for the ice skating competition at the 2026 Winter Olympics as neutral athletes, the sport's governing body said yesterday.

The International Skating Union (ISU) announced "a pathway to allow a limited number of individual neutral athletes (AIN) to participate under strict conditions in designated Olympic qualifying events for the 2025/26 season".

The decision applies to figure skating and speed skating disciplines, the ISU said.

"Recognising that competing in the Olympic Winter Games is the pinnacle of any skater's career, the ISU has carefully examined the feasibility of implementing the IOC's recommendations on creating a pathway to facilitate the participation of athletes affiliated with ISU Members in Russia and Belarus in the Olympic Winter Games Milano Cortina 2026," the ISU said. Just 15 Russian athletes were permitted to take part in the Paris Olympics this summer, competing as neutrals.

The athletes had to qualify for the Games and pass a double

check, first by the international sports federations and then by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), to prove they did not actively support the war in Ukraine or have any links with their countries' armies. The ISU said it "noted the peaceful participation of AINs at the Olympic Summer Games in Paris 2024 and with this perspective in mind, reaffirms its commitment to fostering safe, peaceful, and fair competitions at Milano Cortina 2026".

Only one neutral athlete - including one pair in pairs skating and one couple in ice dancing - from Russia and its ally Belarus will be eligible to participate per event in designated qualifying events for the 2026 Games with no relay or team participation, the ISU added.

At the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, Russian athletes had to compete under the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) flag due to a two-year ban imposed by the World Anti-Doping Agency for state-sponsored doping.

Russian forces invaded Ukraine days after those Olympics, triggering sanctions from the IOC.

Russia's Sports Minister and head of the Russian Olympic Committee Mikhail Degtyarev welcomed the ISU decision.

LEAGUE CUP

Spurs survive Man United comeback to reach semis

AFP
London

Tottenham survived two calamitous errors from stand-in goalkeeper Fraser Forster on Thursday to beat Manchester United 4-3 and set up a League Cup semi-final against Liverpool, staying on track for their first trophy since 2008.

The home side were cruising at 3-0 in the 54th minute of a captivating tie in London after two goals from Dominic Solanke and one from Dejan Kulusevski.

But Forster's mistakes allowed substitutes Joshua Zirkzee and Amad Diallo to pull the score back to 3-2 with 20 minutes to go.

It was one-way traffic after that, with United totally on top, but Spurs scored a fourth as Son Heung-min found the net from a corner and they held on despite a late Jonny Evans goal.

Tottenham will face Premier League leaders Liverpool in the two-legged semi-finals, with Arsenal taking on Newcastle.

Spurs boss Ange Postecoglou said his injury-hit team inflicted pain on themselves but gave a passionate defence of his gung-ho approach.

"It should have been a lot more comfortable there, but having said that, I still can't get away from the fact that this group of players have done an unbelievable job at the moment to get us through this," he said.

The Australian added: "I know people will say, 'Well, don't take any risks' and all that sort of stuff, but we wouldn't be scoring four goals and five goals.

"It's the hardest thing in the game to do, score goals, and we're doing it with bare bones."

Tottenham, 10th in the Premier



Tottenham Hotspur's striker Dominic Solanke celebrates scoring the opening goal during the English League Cup quarter-final against Manchester United in London. (AFP)

League, have not won silverware for 16 years, when they lifted the League Cup under Juande Ramos.

But they are now just one stage away from a Wembley final in March, with Postecoglou still on track to deliver on his bold statement that he always wins a trophy in his second season at a club.

New United boss Ruben Amorim is back down to earth

GOLF

Brown and Pepperell share second round lead at Mauritius Open

Reuters
Port Luis

Denmark's Hamish Brown made a fast start to card his second successive 68 for a share of the second round lead with England's Eddie Pepperell at eight under-par in the DP World Tour's Mauritius Open at Mont Choisy Le Golf yesterday.

Brown sunk three birdies in a row from the third to the fifth holes, and two more on the back nine but a bogey on the par three 17th for the second day in a row meant he had to settle for a four under-par round.

"It was good conditions, not too much wind today," Brown said. "It (the course) is fairly wide, you don't have to do too much off the tee. It is more into the greens. They are a bit tricky to putt on as well. We have only played two rounds so there is a lot of golf left."

Brown, born in Denmark to a Scottish father, is level with Pepperell, who was the overnight leader and carded a 70 yesterday. They are one shot ahead of South African Christo Lamprecht (68) and another Dane, Jacob Skov Olesen (70), in tied third.

Dunlap named PGA Tour Rookie of the Year

Nick Dunlap, a 20-year-old American who became the first player to win PGA Tour titles as an amateur and a professional in the same season, was named PGA Rookie of the Year on Thursday.

Dunlap became the second-youngest player to capture

the Arnold Palmer Award after Jordan Spieth, who was 20 years and two months when he took the honour in 2013 - nine months younger than Dunlap.

After starting the year as a University of Alabama sophomore, Dunlap won the PGA American Express crown in January while playing on a sponsor exemption in only his fourth career PGA Tour start. That made him the first amateur to win a US PGA Tour event since 1991 when Phil Mickelson captured the Northern Telecom Open.

Four days after the triumph in the California desert, Dunlap turned professional and accepted a place on the PGA Tour, making his pro debut the next week at Pebble Beach.

Dunlap then won the Barracuda Championship in July for his unprecedented amateur-pro win double.

After sharing fifth in the St. Jude Championship, the PGA's first FedEx Cup playoff event, he finished 49th in the Cup standings and joined his fellow top-50 finishers in earning berths to 2025 signature events.

"Nick carved out his place in the PGA Tour record book. To begin 2024 as a collegiate golfer and end it with two PGA Tour victories and among the top-50 players in the FedEx Cup is truly impressive," PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan said.

PGA Tour members who played in at last 15 events this year voted on the award from November 25-December 4 and Dunlap received 57% of the votes to be selected over fellow Americans Max Greyserman and Jake Knapp and France's Matthieu Pavon.

Former boxing world title holder Jacob dies

French former boxing world title holder Thierry Jacob has died at the age of 59, the mayor of his home city Calais announced yesterday. Jacob took the WBC super bantamweight title in 1992, defeating Mexico's Daniel Zaragoza in front of his local fans in Calais. "We begin this day with sad news. Thierry Jacob died overnight, so young," Natacha

Bouchart, mayor of the northern port city, announced on Facebook. Jacob turned professional in 1984, retiring a decade later with a 39-6 record, losing his WBC title at his first defence against American Tracy Harris Patterson in New York. One of his sons, Romain Jacob, followed him into the ring, claiming the European super featherweight belt in 2014.

Australia head swim coach Taylor reappointed

Australia's head swimming coach Rohan Taylor was yesterday reappointed to take the country's powerhouse team through to the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. Taylor was instrumental in steering Australia to a record nine gold and 21 medals overall at the Covid-delayed Tokyo Olympics behind only the United States. He repeated the feat at the Paris Games this year when they collected seven gold among 19 medals. "I am honoured to be leading the Olympic programme to LA and privileged to be working with the coaches, athletes and high performance leadership that make our Dolphins team successful," he said. "None of us exist in isolation and the quest for excellence is ongoing across all programs." His first task will be preparing a team for the World Swimming Championships in Singapore next year, and then the 2026 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow as they build towards Los Angeles.

FOOTBALL

Al Duhail beat Al Arabi 2-1 to clinch QSL Cup

Michael Olunga, Benjamin Bourigeaud scored the goals for the winners; Isaac Lihadji scored for runners-up

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Goalkeeper Bautista Burke produced a stunning performance as Al Duhail prevailed over Al Arabi 2-1 in a thrilling final to lift the QSL Cup at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.

The Argentine was instrumental in Al Duhail's triumph, frustrating Al Arabi side with his exceptional saves throughout the match.

The 22-year-old goalkeeper made two crucial saves in stoppage time besides earlier denying the rivals' golden chance to equalize as he stopped an Al Arabi penalty kick from Hasan Mohammed Alaaeddin diving full length to his right in the 81st minute.

Earlier, Michael Olunga (27th minute) and Benjamin Bourigeaud (39th minute) scored the goals for Al Duhail, while Isaac Lihadji scored for Al Arabi in the 55th minute.

Both of Al Duhail's goals came from the assist of livewire Under-21 player Ghanem al-Minhali, who also stood out with his performance.

The final had a slow start, with either team trying to make forays and gauge the rival defence. But Al Duhail soon changed gears and in a sudden burst of charge made a fast move down the left as al-Minhali sent in a flying cross which was equally superbly taken on the volley by Olunga with his left foot



Al Duhail players and officials celebrate after winning the QSL Cup at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.

strike rattling the Al Arabi net for The Red Knights to gain the lead.

Al Arabi tried to retaliate immediately and in the 31st minute Rodrigo Sanchez (Rodri) made an attempt at the Al Duhail goal, but his shot was cut off by an alert Burke.

Seven minutes later, Al Duhail on a counter broke into the Al Arabi danger area, but this time Karim Boudiaf's kick went straight to goalkeeper Mohammed Ibrahim.

The disappointment for Al Duhail, however, lasted only a minute as al-Minhali provided a fine pass to Benjamin, who went on to strike from inside left of the box for his team to go up 2-0.

Al Duhail again came close to scoring in the 43rd minute and again it was al-Minhali making a cross from the left, but this time Olunga's solid header was pushed over the bar by a leap-

ing goalkeeper Ibrahim. In the second half, a determined Al Arabi came about charging at Al Duhail and soon were almost rewarded in the 49th minute as Alaaeddin lunged in front of the goal to reach for a cross from captain Abdullah al-Marafi, but fell while being tackled by Al Duhail's Lucas Verissimo.

Alaaeddin still managed to kick the ball into the goal. The referee,

however, after a VAR check ruled out the goal as the ball had hit Alaaeddin's hand before going in.

Al Arabi hit back a few minutes later, with Lihadji latching on to a fabulous diagonal through pass from Rodri before going on to push the ball past an advancing Burke.

The goal also added a spring to Al Arabi's feet as midway through the session they became robust in both their attack and defence,

also making some rough tackles in a bid to fetch the equaliser. With minutes ticking, the game got more exciting and a frenetic action inside the Al Duhail danger area saw Al Arabi's al-Marafi fall down with Al Duhail's Ibrahim Kader's (Bambi) boot hitting his shoe as the latter went for a clearance kick.

The referee called for a penalty against Al Duhail and reconfirmed his decision after a VAR check.

The spot kick was a golden chance for Al Arabi to equalise, but Burke foiled Alaaeddin's attempt, much to Al Duhail's big relief.

Later, with 10 minutes added to the game as stoppage time, there was more thrill for the large number of fans at the stadium as Burke stood tall guarding Al Duhail's fort.

First, he cut off a strong kick Helal Mohammed's kick from a short distance and later staved off a substitute Abdullah al-Sulaiti's attempt.

With two minutes left, there was more drama as Bambi pushed Rodri a few yards outside the box and the referee awarded Al Arabi a free-kick, but it went on to hit the Al Duhail wall, the dying moments, tempers ran high as Al Duhail's Luis Alberto making a charge with the ball was held by Al Arabi's Luiz Martin Junior.

The referee flashed the latter with a yellow card before soon blowing the final whistle as Al Duhail players celebrated a memorable victory.

SPOTLIGHT

Dias injury latest blow in City's calamitous run

Reuters
Manchester

Manchester City will be without defender Ruben Dias for three to four weeks with a muscle injury, manager Pep Guardiola said yesterday, another blow for the reeling champions whose hopes of hanging on to the Premier League title are dwindling.

City travel to Aston Villa today hoping to right the ship amid the worst run of results in Guardiola's managerial career that has them languishing fifth in the league table.

They also have just one victory to show for their last 11 games across all competitions.

Dias was injured in City's calamitous 2-1 derby loss to Manchester United on Sunday.

"It was a muscular injury, (after) 75 minutes against Manchester United he felt something. He is so strong and he stayed on the pitch and now he is injured," Guardiola told reporters yesterday.

Fellow defender Manuel Akanji,

however, returned to training this week after suffering an injury early this month, "which is good for us," Guardiola said.

City lost to United in spectacular fashion last weekend, leading in the 88th minute before their cross-town rivals scored two goals in less than two minutes.

Guardiola looked disconsolate after, and pointed the finger squarely at himself for the shocking run, telling reporters during a long and heartfelt post-game press conference that "I am not good enough."

His mood had improved by Friday.

"I just finished a game where we were close to winning and we lost. For the sequences that happened I was not happy," Guardiola said. "I tried to be honest with myself here right now in six or seven days ago, (but) if you fall down six times you have to stand up seven."

"I am fine. I am a normal person with feelings like all of us. When a situation is going well we are better and when it is not going well professionally we are more (focused) on what we have to do."

Just two points and two places

behind Guardiola's team in the league table, Aston Villa will climb over City with a victory on Saturday at Villa Park.

Unai Emery's team have also had significantly more success than City in their Champions League campaign, where they are fifth in the standings with two games left in the league phase while City are languishing in 22nd.

"I'm not surprised. Top, excellent manager. (They had good success) qualifying for the Champions League and the results in the Champions League they speak for themselves," Guardiola said.

"They are handling it well because when I have been in many clubs handling both competitions, they have done really well."

City lost 1-0 at Villa Park just over a year ago before rebounding to thrash Emery's side 4-1 in early-April. Guardiola said, however, there was little he could glean from those games.

"Why do you have to compare what happened?" the Spaniard said.

"The past is the past, this is a new moment, you have to deal with it."



Arteta says 'best is yet to come'

Mikel Arteta says the "best is yet to come" as he celebrated five years in charge of Arsenal yesterday. The Spaniard, appointed on December 20, 2019 won the FA Cup in his first season before leading the Gunners back to the Champions League. Arsenal, who have not won the Premier League since 2004 under Arsene Wenger, have re-established themselves as an elite club, finishing as runners-up to Manchester City over the past two seasons. They are currently six points behind leaders Liverpool ahead of Saturday's match at Crystal Palace. Arteta said he had enjoyed his time at the Emirates, where he also captained the team as a player. "It's gone really fast and I'm really grateful to be in the position that I'm in right now, and that I have a lot to learn, a lot to improve and the best is yet to come," he said. The 42-year-old said he was aiming for the "big trophies, without losing the rest of the things that we have built". Arsenal have been drawn against Newcastle in the League Cup semi-finals and are third in the Champions League table after six matches.

HORSE RACING

Al-Malki's Jungle Mate claims Ras Laffan Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Ibrahim Saeed Ibrahim al-Malki-owned and trained Jungle Mate delivered a stunning front-running performance to win Ras Laffan Cup at the QREC's Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.

In the hands of jockey Tomas Lukasek, the three-year-old gelding secured a dominant 7½-length victory in the 1,100m sprint for three-year-old+ Thoroughbreds, securing his second straight win in just three starts this season. Al Jasra Stud's Crush and Run came second.

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

In the penultimate race of the day, Rammah, in the colours of Hamad Nasser al-Naimi, won the 1,200m contest - Purebred Arabian Handicap (75-95) for the three-year-old+.

Jockey Jefferson Smith rode



Connections of Jungle Mate celebrate after the three-year-old gelding won the Ras Laffan Cup yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim

the Ahmed Kobeissi-trained eight-year-old gelding to beat Mohammed bin Fahad A H al-Attiya-owned and Mohammed Ghazali-trained Al Zain by 2½ lengths.

In the card opener, Mashhoor, in the silks of Saif Rashid Saif a 1-Khayarin, convincingly won the 1,700m Thoroughbred Handicap (45-65) race for three-year-old+.

The Ahmed al-Jehani-trained 4-year-old gelding defeated Nasser Saeed M S al-Eida-owned and Jassim Ghazali-trained Dawn Vega by three lengths.

RESULTS
15th Al Rayyan Meeting - Ras Laffan Cup
WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

- 1. Ras Laffan Cup, Thoroughbred Open Race, 3YO+, 1,100m**
Jungle Mate, Ibrahim Saeed Ibrahim al-Malki, Tomas Lukasek
- 2. Purebred Arabian Handicap (75-95), 3YO+, 1,200m**
Rammah, Ahmed Kobeissi, Jefferson Smith
- 3. Thoroughbred Handicap (60-80), 3YO+, 1,700m**
Blessed Boy, Rashid Mohammed



Jockey Tomas Lukasek guided Jungle Mate to victory yesterday.

- 4. Local Thoroughbred Handicap (40-60), 3YO+, 2,500m**
Dukhan, Mohammed Hussain Afroz, Maxim Bozzio
- 5. Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (55-75), 3YO+, 1,700m**
Mukabr, Dr Fahad Salman al-Hajri, Salman Fahad al-Hajri
- 6. Thoroughbred Handicap**

- (0-75), 3YO+, 1,200m**
Ethan Dun, Hamad al-Jehani, Meteb Ali al-Marri
- 7. Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate, 4-6YO, 2,500m**
Farhan, Mohammed Ghazali, Lukas Delozier
- 8. Thoroughbred Handicap (45-65), 3YO+, 1,700m**
Mashhoor, Ahmed al-Jehani, Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi