

To subscribe
GULF TIMES
Newspaper
Please call
444 666 35



CRICKET | Page 2

Stokes out as Root returns to England ODI squad



FOOTBALL | Page 4

Mbappe strikes as Real Madrid down Sevilla in La Liga

To advertise here,
PLEASE CALL
444 666 21

Monday, December 23, 2024
Jumada II 22, 1446 AH

GULF TIMES SPORT



BOXING

Understated Usyk seeks recognition among legends

Page 3

ARABIAN GULF CUP

Garcia praises Qatar's 'fighting performance' against the UAE

Afif gave Qatar an early lead in the 17th minute before al-Ghassani struck the equaliser for the UAE

By Sports Reporter
Kuwait City

Qatar's head coach Luis Garcia commended his players for their tenacious performance in a hard-fought 1-1 draw against the United Arab Emirates in their opening Group A match of the Arabian Gulf Cup in Kuwait City on Saturday night.

Akram Afif gave Qatar an early lead, converting a penalty in the 17th minute before Yahya al-Ghassani struck the equaliser a minute into the first-half added time.

Reflecting on the match, Garcia - who served as assistant under Marquez Lopez before replacing him as the Qatar Coach - acknowledged the strength of the opposition and praised his team's resilience.

"We knew this would be a challenging match against a strong competitor. My players delivered a strong, fighting performance," Garcia said. "We retreated slightly after the first goal, but in the second half, the players showed great fighting spirit until the very last seconds. I am proud of their efforts on the field, and I believe the draw was a fair result."

Garcia highlighted Qatar's promising start to the game, emphasising that they could have extended their lead early on. "We began perfectly and had opportunities to double the score. However, the UAE team gained the upper hand in the second half. Despite this, we posed a significant threat with counterattacks and are overall satisfied with our performance," he said. Looking ahead, the Spanish coach expressed optimism about Qatar's future matches, while noting the importance of refining their approach. "The time between matches is short, but we must work on addressing mistakes. I'm proud of what the players have accomplished and will focus on building on these positives to enhance our performance in the upcoming games," Garcia concluded.

All four teams in Group A are level on



Qatar players sing the national anthem before their Arabian Gulf Cup match against the UAE in Kuwait City on Saturday.

one point and with the same goal difference after Saturday's opening matches, with Kuwait and Oman also finishing 1-1. Qatar's next challenges include a match against Oman tomorrow, followed by an encounter with hosts Kuwait on Friday.

Meanwhile, UAE's striker Fabio Lima said his team missed a "golden opportunity" against Qatar. The Brazilian - who scored four goals in the UAE's 5-0 thrashing of Qatar in the FIFA 2026 World Cup qualifier last month, said: "We could have returned with full points from this game to top the group. It could have made our passage to reach the knockout round much easier," Lima said.

"The players gave an excellent performance, and we were the most dominant and dangerous side on the pitch, but we couldn't convert the final shot into a goal. However, the result is not too bad with the game between Kuwait and Oman also ending in a 1-1 stalemate."

On his four goals against Qatar last month, Lima echoed the sentiments of his manager Paulo Bento, saying that every game was different and there was never any guarantee of repeating good results. "We faced the same opponent after a big win against Qatar when we last met," he said.

"Everyone expected a big win this time, and maybe another 5-0 win, and this is

completely untrue, because the match is different, and the competition is different. Qatar are a strong side and they have some outstanding players in every line.

"They played against us with the motive of not losing, so they were more defensive, and played for a draw, which they achieved at the end. Even with their defensive strategy, we created many scoring opportunities, but unfortunately we couldn't put the finishing touches on those chances we created. Now we have to focus on the upcoming matches and obviously play well for the remainder of the tournament if we have to go all the way, which obviously is the objective."



Qatar's head coach Luis Garcia.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Salah stars as Liverpool hit Spurs for six

AFP
London

Liverpool swept four points clear at the top of the Premier League as Mohamed Salah's masterclass inspired a memorable 6-3 rout of Tottenham, while Manchester United crashed to a humiliating 3-0 home defeat against Bournemouth yesterday. Salah delivered a sublime performance featuring two goals and a pair of assists as Arne Slot's side ran riot in north London. The 32-year-old is now Liverpool's fourth top scorer ever with 229 goals. Salah's brace took him past Billy Liddell, with only Ian Rush (346), Roger Hunt (285) and Gordon Hodgson (241) ahead of him.

The rampant Reds have won 21 of their 25 matches in all competitions under Slot and have a game in hand on Chelsea to strengthen their lead in the title race. This was a remarkable display of Liverpool's firepower as Luis Diaz and Alexis Mac Allister scored to put them in command. Dominik Szoboszlai grabbed Liverpool's third and Egypt star Salah took over after the break before Diaz netted again. Punished for Ange Postecoglou's insistence on sticking to his high defensive line, it was the first time since 1997 that Tottenham had conceded six goals in a home league game.

James Maddison, Dejan Kulusevski and Dominic Solanke scored for Tottenham, but an eighth league defeat this season leaves them languishing in 11th place as the pressure mounts on Postecoglou. United boss Ruben Amorim, who once again left Marcus Rashford out of his squad, is set for a miserable Christmas following the worst result of his brief reign.

Languishing in 13th place, United have suffered four defeats in nine matches in all competitions since Amorim arrived from Sporting Lisbon in November to replace the sacked Erik ten Hag. United's second successive loss after their League Cup exit at Tottenham on Thurs-



Liverpool's Mohamed Salah celebrates after scoring against Tottenham Hotspur. (Reuters)

day underlined Amorim's belief that their road back to the top will be long and arduous.

United, who have conceded first in their last six games, were booed off at half-time, while the final whistle was greeted by more jeers from the few fans who stayed until the bitter end. Amorim's decision to play without Rashford for the third consecutive game will face fresh scrutiny after United's wretched performance.

Amorim surprisingly omitted the 27-year-old England forward from the squad for United's win at Manchester City last weekend, prompting Rashford to hint he was willing to leave the club for a "new challenge".

Again, United were exposed at set-pieces in the 29th minute when Bournemouth's teenage defender Dean Huijsen punished poor marking at a free-kick to glance a header past goalkeeper Andre Onana. There was even worse to come for Amorim in the second half as Justin Kluivert doubled fifth-placed Bournemouth's

advantage with a 61st minute penalty following Noussair Mazraoui's foul on the forward.

Antoine Semenyo compounded United's misery two minutes later with a cool finish from Dango Ouattara's pass. With Liverpool playing late, second-placed Chelsea would have gone top, for at least a few hours, if they had won at Everton. But Enzo Maresca's side had to settle for a goalless stalemate that ended their five-match winning run in the league. Wolves boss Vitor Pereira enjoyed a dream debut as his side won 3-0 at relegation rivals Leicester. Replacing the sacked Gary O'Neil, Pereira made an immediate impact after leaving his role at Saudi Pro League side Al Shabab thanks to goals from Goncalo Guedes, Rodrigo Gomes and Matheus Cunha.

Third-bottom Wolves are within two points of fourth-bottom Leicester. Bottom-of-the-table Southampton held on for a 0-0 draw at Fulham as new manager Ivan Juric watched from the stands before officially taking charge.

SPOTLIGHT

Iraq edge Yemen, Bahrain stun Saudi

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Defending champions Iraq secured a hard-fought 1-0 victory over Yemen, while Bahrain stunned Saudi Arabia 3-2 in Group B matches of the Arabian Gulf Cup at Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah Stadium in Kuwait City.

Iraq's lone goal came in the 65th minute through striker Ayman Hussein, earning the Lions of Mesopotamia crucial three points. Iraq dominated the game, consistently pressing for an early lead but were unable to capitalise with Yemen's well-organised defence holding firm. In the 35th minute, Iraq came close when Ibrahim Bayesh dribbled past multiple defenders and unleashed a powerful shot that Yemen's goalkeeper Mohammed Aman saved.

The second half saw Iraq intensify their efforts, continuing to test Yemen's defence. In the 62nd minute, Ali Jassim fired a strong shot, but Aman was again up to the challenge. The breakthrough came just three minutes later. Hussein, the top scorer of the previous Gulf Cup, headed in a perfectly timed cross from Amjad Atwan, beating Aman to give Iraq the lead.

Yemen pushed for an equaliser in the final stages, creating a few half-chances, but Iraq's defence held firm to secure the win.

Later, Bahrain secured a thrilling win over Saudi. Bahrain led by two goals at half time thanks to strikes from Mahdi Abdul Jabbar in the 19th minute and Mahdi al-Humaidan in the 37th minute.

Musab al-Juwair scored a goal to reduce the deficit for Saudi in the 73rd minute, but Mohammed Marhoun scored Bahrain's third goal in the 76th minute. Saleh al-Shehri then scored another for Saudi with a penalty in 86th minute but the Green Falcons could not force an equaliser.



Iraq's Ayman Hussein celebrates scoring against Yemen.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Stokes out but Root back in white-ball plans



In-form Joe Root to play ODIs for first time since late 2023.

AFP
London

England Test captain Ben Stokes has been ruled out of next year's Champions Trophy one-day international tournament in Pakistan and the preceding white-ball tour of India, team management announced yesterday.

The 33-year-old star all-rounder was not considered after damaging a hamstring during England's defeat by New Zealand in the third Test at Hamilton earlier this month.

"Durham all-rounder Ben Stokes was not considered for selection as he continues to be assessed following a left hamstring injury sustained," said an England and Wales Cricket Board statement.

Stokes did not bat in the second innings of that match as England slumped to a 423-run defeat - a result that meant his side still won

a three-match series 2-1. He previously missed this year's home series against Sri Lanka and the first Test in Pakistan due to hamstringing issues. With England facing a five-match Test series at home to India starting in June before their pinnacle 2025/26 Ashes tour of Australia, team management have decided against risking inspirational red-ball skipper Stokes.

Key batsman Joe Root, who preceded Stokes as Test captain, returns to the ODI side for the first time since the 2023 World Cup in India. Fast bowler Mark Wood, who missed the recent Test tours of both Pakistan and New Zealand, with a bone-stress injury to his right elbow, is in both squads.

The India series and Champions Trophy will mark England's first limited-overs tour and tournament under coach Brendon McCullum, previously just in charge of the Test side.

Jos Buttler, who missed the recent ODI series against the West Indies with a calf injury, remains

captain of the two white-ball teams despite England surrendering both their 50-over and T20 world titles since November 2023.

But it is possible the dashing batsman, replaced as skipper in the Caribbean by all-rounder Liam Livingstone, may not keep wicket, as he has for much of his limited-overs career. Both the ODI squad for the India tour and the Champions Trophy, as well as the squad for five T20s in India in January, feature two other wicketkeepers in Test gloveman Jamie Smith, who missed the New Zealand series to attend the birth of his first child, and Phil Salt.

Meanwhile, 21-year-old rising star Jacob Bethell, who marked his debut Test series with three fifties in New Zealand, is included in both squads.

Leg-spinner Rehan Ahmed joins the T20 squad, while Root is selected only for the ODIs.

The tour party leaves for India on January 17, with the first match of a five-game series against T20

world champions India in Kolkata on January 22.

India and England will then play a three-match ODI series, in preparation for the Champions Trophy, starting in Nagpur on February 6.

Match dates for the Champions Trophy, which also features Pakistan as well as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, have yet to be announced, with the tournament due to run from February 19 to March 9. England ODI squad for India tour and 2025 Champions Trophy in Pakistan.:

SQUAD

Jos Buttler (capt/wkt), Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Jacob Bethell, Harry Brook, Brydon Carse, Ben Duckett, Jamie Overton, Jamie Smith (wkt), Liam Livingstone, Adil Rashid, Joe Root, Saqib Mahmood, Phil Salt (wkt), Mark Wood.

Note: Rehan Ahmed to join squad for T20 series in India with Root not involved

MATCH REPORT

Ayub the batting hero as Pakistan beat South Africa

Pakistan sweep the three-match series with win in Johannesburg



Pakistan's Saim Ayub celebrates after scoring a century during the third one day international match against South Africa at The Wanderers Stadium in Johannesburg yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Johannesburg

Saim Ayub scored 101 from 94 balls as a dominant Pakistan completed a clean sweep of their One-Day International series in South Africa with victory by 36 runs in the third and final clash at The Wanderers yesterday.

South Africa asked the tourists to bat in a game reduced to 47 overs per side due to rain and Pakistan amassed 308 for nine, boosted by Saim's second century of the series and his third in

nine ODIs. Former skipper Babar Azam (52 from 71 balls), captain Mohammad Rizwan (53 from 52) and Salman Agha (48 from 33) all provided useful contributions in support of Saim as Pakistan took advantage of a largely inexperienced home bowling attack.

Target reduced

South Africa had their target reduced by one run to 308 via the Duckworth-Lewis-Stern method but lost wickets at regular intervals, though series top scorer Heinrich Klaasen kept them in the game with 81 from 43 balls.

They were bowled out with

five overs remaining as debutant Corbin Bosch was left stranded on 40 not out from 44 balls.

Jubilation for the visitors, who did the previously unthinkable - whitewash South Africa on home soil. Pakistan have good pedigree, having twice won ODI series here, but this is the next level.

Pakistan captain Rizwan was at the centre of the celebrations as were the Pakistan support staff who came out to congratulate the team.

Their preparations for the Champions Trophy are going swimmingly, having also won in Australia last month; but for

South Africa, even considering the injuries they are carrying, there'll be some soul-searching, no doubt.

The teams start a two-match Test series in Pretoria on Thursday. South Africa need to win one of those fixtures to guarantee a place in next year's World Test Championship final at Lord's.

BRIEF SCORES

Pakistan 308 for 9 (Ayub 101, Rizwan 53, Babar 52; Rabada 3 for 56) **beat South Africa 271 all out** (Klaasen 81, Bosch 40 not out; Muqem 4 for 52) **by 36 runs** (DLS)

COMMENT

Teen Konstas ready for Indian pace challenge

AFP
Sydney

Teenage opener Sam Konstas says he is ready and equipped to take on India's feared pace attack in the Boxing Day Test after being called up to Australia's squad for the first time.

The 19-year-old is poised to open alongside veteran Usman Khawaja - twice his age at 38 - at a sold-out Melbourne Cricket Ground after Nathan McSweeney was axed after just three Tests.

"I'm very excited," he told Fox Sports after being dismissed for a three-ball duck playing for Sydney Thunder in the Twenty20 Big Bash League on Saturday.

"I want to be challenged and I've got a few plans against India's bowlers. I feel like I'm moving really nicely so hopefully I get that opportunity."

Australia's top-order has been terrorised by pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah over the first three Tests of the five-match series, which is locked at 1-1. While McSweeney paid the price, Khawaja is also under pressure after a lean spell.

Konstas is not a guaranteed starter, with Josh Inglis and all-rounder Beau Webster also in the squad as other options.



Should he pad up, he would become Australia's youngest Test debutant since skipper Pat Cummins took the field against South Africa at Johannesburg in 2011.

Konstas thrust himself into the frame after becoming the youngest player since Ricky Ponting to score two centuries in the same Sheffield Shield match.

He also slammed a century playing for the Prime Minister's XI against India.

Konstas was batting in the nets last week when he got the call from Australian selector George Bailey.

"I was so thrilled and called my parents straight away, and they were very emotional," he said.

"Mum was in tears, so I was trying not to cry. Dad was super proud. It's been an amazing journey with all the ups and downs."

Pakistan choose Dubai as Champions Trophy neutral venue

Karachi: Host nation Pakistan yesterday chose Dubai as a neutral venue for next year's Champions Trophy after India refused to travel to their neighbours for the tournament, officials announced. The International Cricket Council (ICC) on Thursday said that all matches involving India in the eight-team event would be held outside of Pakistan. As part of the same agreement, Pakistan will play at a neutral venue in any event hosted by India until 2027, a compromise reached after a month-long stand-off between the two arch-rivals. "Pakistan has chosen Dubai as the neutral venue for the Champions Trophy and it has been conveyed to the ICC of-

ficially, meaning India will play its matches there," said a Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) spokesman. The Champions Trophy will also feature Australia, England, New Zealand, South Africa, Afghanistan and Bangladesh with the event running from February 19-March 9, 2025.

The ICC is likely to announce a final tournament schedule later next week.

India stalled all bilateral cricket series with Pakistan after the 2008 attacks in Mumbai which were blamed on militants based across the border.

Pakistan and India now only play each other in multinational events such as the World Cup and Asia Cup.

FOCUS

Rohit's knee injury not serious, says paceman Akash Deep



Indian pace bowler Akash Deep.

Reuters
Melbourne

Indian pace bowler Akash Deep played down concerns over skipper Rohit Sharma's knee injury in the build-up to their fourth Test against Australia this week after the batsman was hit during a practice session on Sunday.

Rohit, who missed the opening Test to spend time with his newborn son and has been struggling for form since returning to the team, looked in discomfort after being struck on his left knee in the nets at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

The 37-year-old continued batting but later received care

from a physiotherapist and had an ice pack strapped to his leg, which he rested on a chair.

"Such injuries are quite common when you play cricket and it doesn't make much of a difference," Akash told reporters, adding that the practice wicket had been challenging.

"I think this was a wicket for white-ball cricket, so the ball kept a bit low and it was a bit difficult to bat on. But such blows happen and it's not a concern."

India battled hard

India battled hard to earn a draw in the rain-interrupted third Test in Brisbane to leave the five-match series locked at 1-1 ahead of the Boxing Day clash.

The tourists won the first

Test in Perth by 295 runs before crashing to a 10-wicket defeat in Adelaide.

"It's 50-50 right now. In the last match, even though we were behind, we built some confidence. This Test match will be very important for both teams," Akash said.

"Our mindset as fast bowlers is that we can get some quick wickets with the new ball and cause problems for them. We have seen in the three matches that we can create chances with the new ball."

"After 30 overs, however, you have to wait for the batsmen to make mistakes."

Akash said that the entire dressing room was happy when he and Jasprit Bumrah returned to the dressing room unbeaten at

the end of Day 4. On that day, Virat Kohli, Gautam Gambhir and Rohit Sharma celebrated wildly after India had crossed the 245-run threshold.

"The position that I bat it, if we can add 25 runs at the back end, it becomes very important," he said. "I always want to contribute with the bat. On Day 4 at the Gabba, my mindset was that I did not want to get out and thankfully by God's grace that worked out."

"When I went back to the dressing room, the mood had lifted up."

"When you save a follow-on, you get confident and you could see that on everybody's face, everyone was enjoying," Akash said yesterday.

BOXING

Understated Usyk seeks recognition among legends

Undefeated Ukrainian holds onto WBA (Super), WBO and WBC belts



Oleksandr Usyk during a press conference with promoter Alex Krassiyuk after winning his fight against Tyson Fury in Riyadh. (Reuters)

AFP
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Oleksandr Usyk has vanquished all before him but there are signs of frustration that the quietly determined Ukrainian does not get the recognition he deserves.

Usyk, 37, ended debate about this generation's top heavyweight when, deep into the night in Riyadh on Saturday, he saw off the previously unbeatable Tyson Fury for a second time.

Asked which of boxing's heavyweight greats he could not have beaten, Usyk gave an understated but telling answer.

"Oleksandr Usyk," he told reporters, before bowing karate-style and leaving.

There is no doubt that Usyk has earned his right to be mentioned alongside Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson and the other legends

on the list of undisputed heavyweights.

The 2012 Olympic heavyweight gold medalist, now 23-0 as a professional having been undisputed champion at both cruiserweight and heavyweight, has put together one of the all-time great careers.

According to Ring Magazine, the intelligent, gap-toothed fighter from Simferopol, Crimea, has "completed boxing".

Perhaps it's his shaky command of English, perhaps it's his unfashionable origins, but Usyk's camp feels he still flies under the radar.

"What else does Oleksandr need to prove? He's the best," asked his manager, Egis Klimas. "Does he need to prove anything else?"

Usyk, who shares a birthday with Ali, compiled an imperious amateur career, including the European and world titles along with Olympic gold.

His professional debut came at a mature 26 but within 15 fights he had become the first man to

unify all four cruiserweight belts. He then repeated the trick after six bouts at heavyweight, beating Fury in May to end a 25-year wait for a unified champion in the top division.

Way past midnight on Saturday, he was too fast, fit and accurate for the 6ft 9ins (206cm), 281lb (127.4kg) Fury, winning the rematch by unanimous decision.

The fight was "easier than the first one," said Usyk, who is running out of opponents and has teased a return to cruiserweight.

Usyk has beaten Anthony Joshua twice, and before facing Fury he knocked out Daniel Dubois, who challenged him to a rematch immediately after Saturday's fight.

The heady accomplishments are a long way from Usyk's start in boxing aged 15 when, already an accomplished street fighter, he realised it was cheaper than football. "I decided to go into a boxing gym soon because you don't need too expensive equipment for being

a boxer," Usyk told Ring Magazine a decade ago.

"On the other hand, I previously knew that I definitely can fight because of many winning street fights which I was involved in during my boyhood."

Usyk, nicknamed "The Cat" for his lightning reflexes, has employed unusual preparations including four-minute breath-holds, juggling and his party-piece: balancing six coins on the back of his hands, flicking them in the air and catching them.

The heir to an elite line of Ukrainian fighters, including the Klitschko brothers and Vasyl Lomachenko, is now happily making it pay in oil-rich Saudi Arabia.

Perhaps not surprisingly, after a reported \$190 million purse for Saturday's fight, the father of four says he's not done yet, despite his advancing years.

"Regarding the future, I do have will and power to go further," he said.

GOLF

Parry ends 14-year title wait with Mauritius Open victory

AFP
Paris

John Parry surged through the field with a closing 64 to take the Mauritius Open by two strokes yesterday, claiming his second European tour victory 14 years after his first.

"It's been a long battle back but worth every moment for this week," said the 38-year-old Englishman.

Parry started yesterday's final round five shots off the lead but chipped in for an eagle on the 12th and made seven birdies and just one bogey to finish on 14-under total of 274, two ahead of South Africans Dylan Naidoo and Christo Lamprecht.

"That eagle there just got me a little spark, with a couple of good chances coming up. And I just really didn't miss a shot

coming in so that was really key," he said.

After birdies at the 13th and 14th, the Englishman took the outright lead with a birdie on the 16th. He then birdied the final hole and waited in the clubhouse as the later starters limped home with their chances of victory already gone.

Eddie Pepperell, the overnight leader, shot a 74 to finish five strokes back in a tie for ninth.

Parry's previous tour level win was at the Vivendi Cup in France in September, 2010, when he was in his early twenties.

"It's massive," he said. "Five or six years ago I was close to giving up golf."

This year he has won three events on the second-tier Challenger Tour and yesterday's victory earned him a \$200,000 bonus and entry into some prestigious events later in the season.



England's John Parry poses with the trophy after winning Mauritius Open yesterday.

Tiger and son Charlie share halfway lead

Miami: Tiger Woods and his 15-year-old son Charlie combined for a 13-under par 59 to share the lead after Saturday's first round of the PNC Championship parent-child golf event.

Charlie Woods tapped in for birdie at the par-5 18th hole, the 13th birdie of the day for Team Woods in the 36-hole match between 20 duos at Ritz-Carlton Golf Club in Orlando. "We picked each other up, which was great, and Charlie made pretty much most of the putts," Tiger Woods said. Sharing the halfway lead were Fijian Vijay Singh and son Qass and Germany's Bernhard Langer and son Jason, who each had 11 birdies and an eagle on the day.

In a low-key return to competition following September back surgery that included golf carts and a family atmosphere, the elder Woods had his daughter Sam as his caddy. "I'm just trying to have fun out here," 15-time major champion Woods said. "I'm very rusty and it's a scramble, so we're just trying to have fun out there. Ham-and-egg each other. I think we did that great pretty much the entire day." Woods, who turns 49 on December 30, said he has "a long way to go" before he will be ready to compete in a PGA Tour tournament after his back operation and lingering leg issues from a 2021 car crash.

Woods hit well off the tee, saying, "It was OK," and Charlie noting, "You're keeping up with me. We're right there," Tiger Woods said.

ZHENG TO SKIP UNITED CUP, STAY FRESH FOR AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Australian Open runner-up Zheng Qinwen will kick off her 2025 season at the Grand Slam next month after deciding to skip the United Cup mixed team tournament starting this week, the 22-year-old said. Zheng was beaten in the final of the year's first major by Aryna Sabalenka in January but enjoyed

a successful campaign, claiming the Paris Olympics gold medal and WTA Tour titles in Tokyo and Palermo. The Chinese player, who was runner-up at the Wuhan Open and the WTA Finals, competed in 68 matches this season.

"After the long season that 2024 was for me, I need a few extra

weeks of rest, recovery, and good training to get ready for the new season," Zheng said on Instagram. "I had such a fantastic time at the United Cup in January of this year, and therefore will miss the event greatly.

"Still, I'm so excited to be back in Australia soon and I will see you

all in Melbourne in a couple of weeks."

China start their campaign in the December 27-Jan 5 United Cup in Perth against Brazil on Friday with Gao Xinyu as their number one women's player.

The Australian Open will begin on January 12.

DRAG RACING

Makhsid wins Qatar Drift Championship Round 4

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Amid the largest participation this season from Qatar's drift champions, Gulf drivers, and regional talents, the fourth and penultimate round of the 2024/2025 Qatar Drift Championship concluded with thrilling battles.

The championship is held under the gracious patronage of HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani, Chairman of Qatar Racing Club (QRC), and attended by Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani, the club's director.

The competition kicked off on Thursday with two-hour qualifying sessions. Each driver was given two attempts on the track, with their best score recorded. These sessions concluded with Ali Makhsid, the winner of the opening round, leading the standings.

He outperformed Salem al-Sarraf, who had won the previous two rounds, while Ahmed al-Amri secured third place after missing the last two rounds.

Ihab Falah, runner-up in the

previous two rounds, finished in fourth.

In the local category, Abdullah al-Muhtasib topped the standings, surpassing Saud al-Attayah. Yazan al-Jabsha, the category leader, came in third, followed by Khalid al-Shafai in fourth.

Based on the results of the qualifying sessions, the top 16 drivers advanced to the head-to-head knockout stage. The first round featured only six matchups instead of eight, as Nasser al-Muhtairi and Khalid al-Shafai were unable to compete due to issues with their cars. As a result, both Mohammed Khorshid and Abdullah al-Muhtasib advanced directly to the second round.

In the opening round, top qualifier Makhsid overcame Mohammed Jaber, while Mazen Nasser defeated Mesyer Abu Shaiba. Similarly, Ihab Falah secured a spot in the second round after beating Louay Abu Shaiba. On the other side of the bracket, there was a major upset as the championship leader and double-round winner Salem al-Sarraf was eliminated in the first round by Fahad al-Jadaei. Local category leader al-Jabsha



Qatar Racing Club Director Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani poses with the winners of the fourth round of the Qatar Drift Championship.

defeated Saud al-Attayah, while Ahmed al-Amri completed the lineup for the second round by beating Saud al-Abd al-Hadi.

In the second round, both Ali Makhsid and Mohammed Khorshid advanced to the semifinals,

with Makhsid defeating Mazen Nasser and Khorshid triumphing over Ihab Falah.

Al-Jabsha joined them in the semifinals by beating Fahad al-Jadaei, while Ahmed al-Amri completed the quartet after defeating

Abdullah al-Muhtasib in their head-to-head matchup.

The local category saw al-Jabsha crowned champion for the fourth consecutive time, securing the season title regardless of the final round's results. His team-

mate from the Brothers Team, Abdullah al-Muhtasib, achieved his first-ever podium finish in the championship by taking second place. Qatari driver Saud al-Attayah claimed third place.

The semifinals of the fourth round delivered a thrilling spectacle. The first showdown between al-Jabsha and Ahmed al-Amri ended in a tie, prompting the judges to order a rematch. Al-Amri emerged victorious in the replay, advancing to his first final of the season. In the second semifinal, Ali Makhsid defeated Mohammed Khorshid to secure his spot in the final. Khorshid went on to claim third place after defeating al-Jabsha in the battle for the final podium spot. This marked Khorshid's second podium of the season, having previously finished third in the second round.

The excitement reached its peak in the final, where Makhsid faced Ahmed al-Amri. Makhsid clinched his second victory of the season, adding to his win in the opening round, while al-Amri settled for second place. The final round of the championship is scheduled for March 2025.

