



Stokes out as Root returns to England ODI squad

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Mbappe strikes as Real Madrid down Sevilla in La Liga

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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

atar'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 a 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 end-

ing 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 outcome players in every line.

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

iverpool 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-yearold 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 goal-keeper 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 ReporterDoha

efending 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

Stadium in Kuwait City.

Iraq's lone goal came in the 65th minute through striker Aymen 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 Mo-

hammed 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 Marhoon 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 Aymen 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.

London

ngland 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.

all-rounder Ben "Durham 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 state-

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 hamstring issues. With England facing a fivematch 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 Mc-Cullum, 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 limitedovers 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.:

SOUAD

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),

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

Johannsburg

aim 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 vesterday.

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; Muqeem 4 for 52) by 36 runs

COMMENT

Teen Konstas ready for Indian pace challenge

Sydney

leenage opener Sam Kon- \boldsymbol{stas} 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

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 Mc-Sweeney paid the price, Khawaja is also under pressure after a lear spell.

Konstas is not a guaranteed starter, with Josh Inglis and allrounder 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 arents straight away, and the

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 vesterday 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 officially, 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

FOCUS

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



Indian pace bowler Akash Deep

Reuters Melbourne

ndian 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 Crick-

et Ground. The 37-vear-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 fivematch 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 245run 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 cold see that on everybody's face, everyone was enjoying," Akash said yesterday.

ROXING

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 Krassyuk after winning his fight against Tyson Fury in Riyadh. (Reuters)

AFP

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

leksandr 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 karatestyle 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 heavy-weights.

The 2012 Olympic heavyweight gold medallist, 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

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 provious."

"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 breathholds, juggling and his partypiece: 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.

GOL

Parry ends 14-year title wait with Mauritius Open victory

AFF Paris

> ohn 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 was he has wen three

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 vesterday.

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 matchup 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 caddie. "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. Hamand-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

"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

mid 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-Attiyah. 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-Mutairi 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-Attiyah, 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 teammate from the Brothers Team, Abdullah al-Muhtasib, achieved his first-ever podium finish in the championship by taking second place. Qatari driver Saud al-Attiyah 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.

Mbappe strikes as Real Madrid down Sevilla

'We can see on the pitch that I click better with my teammates'

ylian Mbappe scored a screamer and set up another goal as Real Madrid thrashed Sevilla 4-2 yesterday to move second in La Liga above stuttering rivals Barcelona.

After Atletico Madrid beat Barca on Saturday to claim top spot at Christmas, Carlo Ancelotti's side also took advantage with a comfortable home win which leaves them a point behind the leaders.

Madrid coach Ancelotti said ahead of Sevilla's visit that Mbappe's adaptation period had ended following his summer switch from Paris Saint-Germain and the French forward proved the coach right with a strong performance and his 14th goal of the season across all competitions.

Fede Valverde also netted a brilliant effort from range, with Rodrygo Goes and Brahim Diaz on the scoresheet for the hosts too.

Isaac Romero and Dodi Lukebakio scored for Sevilla, although they were thoroughly outplayed on veteran defender Jesus Navas' final game for the club.

"I think that we know each other better, my arrival changed a lot of things, and now, as the coach said, the adaptation is over and I feel very good in the team," Mbappe told Real Madrid TV.

"We can see on the pitch that I click better with my team-mates and now we're all playing better."

Mbappe, back after a brief absence with a thigh injury, scored for Madrid in midweek as they won the Intercontinental Cup.

It was welcome relief for the forward after missing two penalties in recent weeks against Liverpool and Athletic Bilbao, as well as suffering criticism for his form.

"I know I've got much more my legs than I'm showing, but in the last games I've played better," Mbappe added. "The Bilbao game was good for me, I hit the bottom, I missed a penalty and it was a mo-



Real Madrid's forward Kylian Mbappe (second from left) and teammate Brahim Diaz (left) celebrate a goal during the La Liga match against Sevilla at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)

ment to realise that I have to give everything for this shirt and show my personality."

With Vinicius Junior suspended, Mbappe took the reins and broke the deadlock in the 10th minute as Madrid brought the ball out from the back and worked it to Rodrygo on the left flank.

The Brazilian squared to Mbappe on the edge of the area, who took one touch to control, another to set himself and with his third, smashed a fierce effort past the helpless Alvaro Fernandez.

Madrid's second, 10 minutes ater, was even better, with Valverde firing a screamer into the top corner from over 30 yards out after a short corner routine.

Ancelotti's side were in full flow and the third followed in the 34th minute when Lucas Vazquez crossed for Rodrygo, who finished with aplomb.

Sevilla hit back within a minute. with Romero nodding home from Iuanlu Sanchez's cross after good work by Dodi Lukebakio.

Sevilla came out strongly in the second half and Romero should have added a second but fired straight at Thibaut Courtois when well placed.

Instead it was Madrid who stretched their lead, with Mbappe dinking a superb pass through for Diaz to finish clinically. Sevilla brought on Navas after the hour mark and he was applauded by the Santiago Bernabeu, with this his 705th and final appearance for the club, far more than any other player. Madrid and Sevilla players together gave the retiring Spanish great - a World Cup winner in 2010 and two-time Euros champion - a guard of honour at the start of the game.

Navas, 39, won four Europa Leagues and two Copa del Rey trophies with Sevilla, but his final appearance ended in disappointment for the Andalusians, who were outplayed in the Spanish capital. Fernandez saved from Rodrygo after Mbappe rounded the goalkeeper and passed the ball back to his Brazilian strike-partner, as Madrid looked for a fifth.

Lukebakio pulled one back lat on for Sevilla as Madrid were able to finish an impressive year, in which they became Spanish and European champions, with a good

Three and easy as Dortmund move into Bundesliga top six

orussia Dortmund scored three goals in a devastating five-minute spell to beat Wolfsburg 3-1 and end the year in the top six of the Bundesliga.

Dortmund came into this game without a win in their previous three league outings but produced some stylish attacking moments to blow Wolfsburg away on the road.

Dutchman Donyell Malen got things moving, turning in Ramy Bensebaini's corner from close

The visitors doubled their lead through the impressive young Germany star Max Beier, who met Julian Brandt's through ball with a sublime first-time finish with the outside of his right foot.

Beier turned provider just two minutes later, cutting back a low cross for an unmarked Brandt to find the bottom corner.

Wolfsburg were stunned, having conceded in the 25th, 28th and 30th minutes and the rest of the contest was a damage limitation exercise for Ralph Hasenhuettl's side, although they pulled one back in the second half through Denis Vavro.

Dortmund had Pascal Gross sent off just after the hour but it didn't threaten to derail a win that keeps them within two points of third place.

On a good weekend for the teams from Germany's Ruhr region, Bochum beat relegation rivals Heidenheim 2-0 for their first victory of the Bundesliga

Rooted in last place in the table, Bochum took an early lead courtesy of striker Moritz Broschinski, whose expert low volley was reward for Ibrahima Sissoko's quality cross from the right.

Bochum, who brought in veteran coach Dieter Hecking last month in the hope of igniting their season and saving them from relegation, appeared the hungrier of the sides.

When the second goal came, it was no less than Bochum deserved. Matus Bero created space on the edge of the box and drilled in from 15 yards, putting the hosts in complete control before the break.

Heidenheim improved after the restart but the damage was already done and Bochum, who had lost 11 of their previous 14 games, closed it out for a precious three points.

Bochum stay bottom going into the winter break but end the calendar year having picked up four points from their last two games and stay within two points of Holstein Kiel, who are directly above them in 17th.

Meanwhile, 16th-placed Heidenheim are in freefall.

Last season, their first in the Bundesliga, was a huge success, finishing eighth and qualifying for Europe. But they are now coming to terms with their seventh-straight Bundesliga defeat and sit just two points ahead of



Dortmund's German forward Maximilian Beier (right) celebrates with teammate Donyell Malen after scoring a goal during the Bundesliga match against VfL Wolfsburg in Wolfsburg yesterday. (AFP)

4TH DOHA B INTERNATIONAL HORSE SHOW

Senior Stallion D Shajei wins gold, Galerida best Senior Mare

By Sports Reporter

he fourth and final day of Qatar Racing & Equestrian Club (QREC)'s 4th Doha B International Horse Show saw exciting contests in a combination of beauty, grace and power as top horses jostled for top championship prizes at the outdoor arena of Qatar Equestrian Federation yesterday. D Shajei, owned by Hajas Hajlan al-Hajlan, claimed the top honours as the best in Senior Stallions Championship and being awarded gold by the international jury.

Al Thumama Stud's Galerida won gold in the Senior Mares Championship. In the Junior Colts Championship, AJ Tayam, owned by Nasser Mohammed al-Hajri, won gold while Mzoon Al Diriyah, owned by Mesfer Mohammed al-Hairi, won gold in the Junior Fillies' Championship class. Azzam Umm Aludham, owned by Nasser Mohammed al-Hajri, won gold as the best Yearling Colts while the gold among Yearling Fillies went to SAA Deem, owned by Sulaiman Abdullah Sulaiman Alajmi.

While engineer Nasser Mohammed al-Hajri, owner of Umm Aludham Stud, honoured the winners of Senior Stallions Class, Hamad Saif al-Kuwari, Head of General Services and Facilities at OREC, awarded the winners of Senior Mares Championship and Yearling Colts Championship.

Sheikh Nawaf bin Nasser al-Thani, owner of Al Nasser Stud, awarded the Juniors Championship winners.



Connections of D Shajei celebrate with the trophy. PICTURES: Juhaim



RESULTS: Senior Stallions: Gold: D Shajei owned by Hajas Hajlan al-Hajlan; Silver: Areeb Al Nasser owned by Rashid Faraj al-Marri; Bronze: Fakhir BHM owned by Dr Nagham Sehaim Fahad

Senior Mares: Gold: Galerida of Al Thumama Stud; Silver: D Fala of Al Salem Stud; Bronze: DA Magic Moment owned by Nasser Mohammed Mesfer al-Hajri. Junior Colts: Gold: AJ Tayam owned by Nasser Mohammed al-Hairi: Silver: Omeir Al Sraiva of Al Sraiya Stud; Bronze: Bahi Al Jaham of Al Jaham Stud. Junior Fillies: Gold: Mzoon Al Diriyah owned by Mesfer

Mohammed al-Hairi: Silver: Resalah Al Khasab of Aliumail Stud: Bronze: Joud Al Hamad owned by Sheikh Hamad Khaled Hamad Alsabah.

Yearling Colts: Gold: Azzam Umm Aludham owned by Nasser Mohammed MA al-Hajri; Silver: Lazzaz Al Barig owned by Franklyn Delano Hollloman Jr; Bronze: Moth'hel Al Hawajer owned by Abdulaziz Soud Faraj Almutairi

Yearling Fillies: Gold: SAA Deem owned by Sulaiman Abdullah Sulaiman Alaimi; Silver: BG Eman of Al Suwaida Farm: Bronze: Asma Aljassimya of Al Thamer

SERIE A

Atalanta fight back to take top spot

talanta surged back to the top of the Serie A standings with a Charles De Ketelaereinspired 3-2 win at home to Empoli yesterday , while inconsistent Roma thrashed Parma 5-0.

De Ketelaere was twice on target for Atalanta in the topsyturvy encounter - his second goal proving to be the winner with just four minutes left on the clock. Ademola Lookman was also on the scoresheet to ensure Gian Piero Gasperini's side leapfrogged Napoli back into top spot.

The Bergamo-based side restored their two-point buffer over Napoli, who had moved a point ahead of them following day. Lorenzo Colombo gave 11thplaced Empoli the lead at the Gewiss Stadium on 13 minutes.

But De Ketelaere hit back to level for the Europa League champions four minutes after the half-hour. Recently crowned African player of the year, Lookman got his 12th goal of the season in all competitions to put Atalanta in front in first-half added time. Sebastiano Esposito pegged back Atalanta on 57 minutes, converting from the penalty spot.

As the game crept towards a disappointing draw that would have still sent Atalanta back top on goal difference, Belgian midfielder De Ketelaere popped up with his fifth league goal this term in the 86th minute. The 23-yearold showed skill and composure to glide along the edge of the box until a chance presented itself, and he then fired off a disguised

left-footed shot which flashed

past the goalkeeper. Earlier, Roma bounced back from last weekend's surprise 2-0 loss at Como, which had left Claudio Ranieri's side within two points of the drop zone, to thump Parma in the Italian capital. Paulo Dybala hit a brace, with goals also coming from Alexis Saelemaekers, Leandro Paredes and Artem Dovbyk as Roma moved to 10th place. Parma remain one point above the drop zone in 16th spot. Dybala converted a penalty and Saelemaekers slammed home a volley to give the home side a 2-0 lead inside the opening quarter of an hour. The Argentinian netted his second six minutes after the break. Paredes then scored from 12 yards in the 74th minute and Ukrainian striker Dovbyk put the cherry on top for the Romans with seven minutes remaining.

Qatar ExxonMobil Open 2024 named ATP 250 Tournament of the Year for the 6th time

Doha: The Oatar ExxonMobil Open 2024 Tournament was named as the ATP 250 Tournament of the Year for the sixth time (2015, 2017, 2019, 2021-22, 2024). That tournament saw Russian Karen Khachanov win the singles title, while the duo of British Jamie Murray and New Zealand's Michael Venus won the doubles. The Qatar ExxonMobil Open 2025 Men's Tennis Tournament, to take place at Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex February 17-22, will be part of ATP Tour 500 Series, after having been upgraded for the first time in over three decades.

Italian world number one player Jannik Sinner will lead the starstudded field, alongside Serbian star Novak Djokovic

In a press statement, Qatar ExxonMobil Open Tournament Director Karim Alami expressed his happiness at receiving the Best ATP 250 Tournament award for the sixth time, noting that this achievement is the result of the organizing committee's commitment to providing an outstanding sporting experience for both players and tennis fans alike. Alami stressed that the Oatar Tennis Federation will continue working to deliver an exception-

al experience with the tournament's upgrade to the ATP Tour 500 Series, focusing on further enhancing the tournament's success in the coming years. He also thanked ExxonMobil Qatar, the title sponsor, for its continuous support over the years, adding that the company has been a key partner in this journey toward excellence. The Tournament Director concluded by thanking the players for placing their trust in the event through giving it their votes once again, reflecting the tournament's prominent standing in the world of tennis. (QNA)