

To subscribe  
**GULF TIMES**  
Newspaper  
Please call  
**444 666 35**



TENNIS | Page 3

Players on edge after Sinner, Swiatek doping cases



FOOTBALL | Page 4

Arsenal's Saka out for 'many weeks' with hamstring injury

To advertise here,  
PLEASE CALL  
**444 666 21**

Tuesday, December 24, 2024  
Jumada II 23, 1446 AH

# GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

South Africa aim for place in WTC final in series against Pakistan

Page 2

ARABIAN GULF CUP

# Expect more surprises: Qatar coach ahead of Oman match

Garcia said it was important to bring new players into the side because "football never stops"

By Sports Reporter  
Kuwait City

**Q**atar's head coach Luis Garcia has promised more surprises in his line-up when his side take on Oman in their second match at the Arabian Gulf Cup in Kuwait today at 5:25pm. Garcia - who replaced Marquez Lopez earlier this month - said prior to the opening 1-1 draw with UAE on Saturday that star player Akram Afif would not be playing, but his captain not only started, he scored his side's goal from the penalty spot. "I can only say that Akram is always ready to help the national team," said Garcia at the pre-match press conference held yesterday. "We will see what happens. There will be new players on the pitch."

Garcia said it was important to bring new players into the side because "football never stops" and added that every player was fighting for their place to ensure the future of the national side is bright.

Asian champions Qatar went some way to avenging a 5-0 defeat to UAE in the World Cup qualifiers last month with the draw, and he believes they can look forward with more confidence, starting with today's match at the Jaber al-Mubarak International Stadium.

"Every game is different, but we try to focus only on our team," he said. "We always try to get the victory and be better with the ball. We have a very good team spirit which is very important. But we need to play calmer. The last game was not easy after the 5-0 defeat to the same team. We have some new players. But, I am sure we can make one another step forward in this match."

"We can only promise hard work from our side. The players will give everything. There is no one staff member who can promise results. Football is a game with mistakes. We have to solve the mistakes and do less of them, and be better for the next game. The team is ready to do something good and build up from the back and to try to play good football, because I love to play good football."

"Oman is a very difficult match. They are a dynamic team with fast players. We have to take care when we are attacking to be balanced on the transition. It will be a very tough match."

Meanwhile, Oman's head coach is hoping that star playmaker Salaah al-Yahyaie will be fit for their crucial match against Qatar. Oman drew 1-1 with hosts Kuwait in Saturday's opening game, coming back from a goal down to earn a point for a four-way tie at the top in Group A.



Qatar forward Mohammed Muntari trains with teammates in Kuwait City yesterday.

It makes the second round of matches even more intriguing with Oman coach, Rasheed Jaber, saying his players will be approaching the match with tougher mental strength. "With all four teams on a point it makes tomorrow's match even more important," said Jaber.

"We know where we need to improve going into the final third and with the players' decision making. We want to improve the players' reading of the match and achieve a good result to take the pressure off going into the third and final group match."

Jaber said that he hopes al-Yahyaie will play a part in the match after reporting back to training following injury, adding that it is important to have his best players available against Qatar.

"Qatar are a very good football team, the champions of Asia, but the Gulf Cup is different as last night's Bahrain win over Saudi Arabia (3-2) showed," he said. "We

hope to have Salaah fit because he is a very important player to us. But I can promise our fans that we will do our very best to make them happy and go as far as we can in this tournament. We are very confident in our players."

Meanwhile, Kuwait head coach Juan Pizzi was confident that his side can upset tournament favourites UAE to boost their chances of reaching the semi-finals.

The host nation faces an in-form UAE, who, like Kuwait, were held to a 1-1 draw in their opening match of the tournament.

"I won't be making any promises that we will win over the UAE, but we will be trying our best to seek it," said Pizzi. "Saturday showed just how much the crowd is behind us and we really appreciated the support. We have a squad of 26 players, including those who are injured, but I have an idea who will be participating in this match."

UAE head coach Paulo Bento played

down his side's favourites tag by saying that they expect a tough game against Kuwait. Bento said that "being called favourites doesn't help our preparation", with all to play for in Group A with all four teams sitting on a point.

"Being called favourites doesn't help our preparation, at least I don't think much on that," said Bento. "I said previously that it is not important to be favourites or not in this competition as anything can happen. I don't feel more pressure because of it. We make our normal preparation but I cannot control the expectation and opinions of other people. This is my first time as a coach in this competition which is a challenge, but on the other hand we as a technical staff already have experience in the World Cup, Euros and Asian Cup. It's a challenge because it is the first time for us and we have short times between matches to prepare the team."



Qatar's head coach Luis Garcia.



Oman players train yesterday, on the eve of their match against Qatar.

TENNIS

## Alcaraz to make Qatar ExxonMobil Open debut

**T**he Qatar Tennis Federation has confirmed that Spanish star **Carlos Alcaraz**, currently ranked World No 3, will compete in the Qatar ExxonMobil Open 2025. Scheduled from February 17-22, the ATP 500 tournament will take place on the hard courts of the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex and will feature a stellar lineup of the world's best tennis players.

The 21-year-old Alcaraz is eager to begin his 2025 campaign with a strong showing in his debut appearance in Qatar. A four-time Grand Slam champion, Alcaraz enjoyed a stellar 2024 season, claiming titles at French Open and Wimbledon. He also triumphed at the Indian Wells Masters and the ATP 500 event in Beijing, while earning a silver medal at the Paris 2024 Olympics - cementing his reputation as one of the sport's brightest talents.

Tournament Director Karim Alami expressed his delight over Alcaraz's participation, saying: "We are thrilled to welcome Carlos Alcaraz to Doha for the first time, especially as the Qatar ExxonMobil Open enters a new era as an ATP 500 event. His presence reflects the tournament's growing prestige on the global tennis stage. Alcaraz is a phenomenal young talent whose skill and charisma are sure to ignite excitement among fans and elevate the competitive spirit of this year's event. We look forward

to an unforgettable tournament."

Alami also acknowledged the pivotal role of ExxonMobil Qatar as the title sponsor, thanking them for their unwavering support in enhancing the tournament's profile and ensuring its continued success as a marquee event in the region.

Rashid bin Rashid al-Hajri, Vice-President and Manager of Government and Public Affairs at ExxonMobil Qatar, shared his excitement, stating: "We are excited to welcome Carlos Alcaraz to the Qatar ExxonMobil Open 2025, now recognised as an ATP 500 event. His first appearance in Doha adds a special element to this year's competition."

He added: "Alcaraz is a fan favourite, and we eagerly anticipate seeing him in action at the Khalifa International Tennis Complex. We remain committed to working with the Qatar Tennis Federation to deliver a memorable experience for players and fans alike."

The 2025 edition of the Qatar ExxonMobil Open is headlined by World No 1 Jannik Sinner, along with other top-ranked players, promising an electrifying week of tennis action.

This year marks a significant milestone in the tournament's history, with its elevation to ATP 500 status after 32 years. The upgrade is accompanied by increased prize money, solidifying the event's status as a premier tennis competition.



## Tickets on sale for Trophée des Champions match

**Doha:** Tickets went on sale yesterday for Trophée des Champions, which will see Ligue 1 champions and French Cup winners Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) take on Ligue 1 runners-up AS Monaco on January 5 at Stadium 974 in Doha.

The Local Organising Committee for Football Events has announced that tickets will be available for purchase from <http://www.roadtoqatar.qa/> and priced at QR80 for Category 1 and QR30 for Category 2.

Fans will be allowed to purchase up to 10 tickets per person. A number of accessible seating options will be available for disabled supporters. Fans are reminded to purchase tickets only from the official site to avoid any potential issues such as counterfeit or invalid tickets. Further information can be found on the official ticket sales page. The match will kick-off at 7:30pm local time and see some of the world's best players take to the field at Stadium 974, one

of Qatar's iconic venues that was built for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. The 40,000-capacity venue recently hosted two successful matches at the FIFA Intercontinental Cup Qatar 2024. The one-off fixture that recognises the best team in France is being organised by the Local Organising Committee for Football Events and supported as a title sponsor by Visit Qatar, the main marketing and promotional arm of Qatar Tourism.

The one-off fixture follows a host of successful sporting events that Qatar has hosted over the last two decades, including the FIFA World Cup, FIFA Arab Cup, FIFA Club World Cup, Gulf Cup, IAAF Athletic World Championships, Asian Games, Italian SuperCoppa and many more. The country boasts some of the best sporting infrastructure in the world as well as operational expertise amongst its Local Organising Committee teams and national sporting institutions.

CRICKET

# SA aim for place in WTC final in Pakistan series

The hosts must win one of the two Tests to qualify for the final

Reuters  
Pretoria

South Africa are within touching distance of a place in next June's World Test Championship final at Lord's but must win at least one of their two Tests against Pakistan, which start with the Boxing Day encounter in Pretoria.

A run of five successive Test victories in the last five months - over the West Indies, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka - has catapulted South Africa to first in the WTC standings and given them a strong chance of a place against either Australia, India or Sri Lanka in the one-off final in London.

They get two chances to advance to the WTC final, hosting a second test at Newlands in Cape Town from Jan 3-7, and with home advantage and a winning record against Pakistan will be expected to do so.

The young South African side have exceeded expectations and gained momentum since success in Guyana in August set them on a winning streak.

Meanwhile Pakistan have never won a Test series in South Africa, and lost their last seven Tests there.

The tourists also arrived without coach Jason Gillespie, who dramatically quit this month and



South Africa's Kagiso Rabada (right) and Temba Bavuma set the field during the third ODI against Pakistan at The Wanderers Stadium in Johannesburg on Sunday. Both players are expected to play key roles in South Africa's two-Test series against Pakistan starting on Thursday. (AFP)

has been replaced by former fast bowler Aqib Javed.

But a home series triumph over England in October will have boosted Pakistan, as will the 3-0 whitewash of South Africa in a One Day International series that concluded at the weekend.

Promising 22-year-old batter Saim Ayoub was outstanding in the ODIs, with two centuries, and

Salman Ali Agha, Mohammad Rizwan and Naseem Shah also contributed. They have stayed on for the two-Test series, where Shan Masood captains the team.

Pakistan do look light on bowlers, where South Africa have Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen leading a fiery attack on surfaces favouring the quicks.

They will also be trying to get

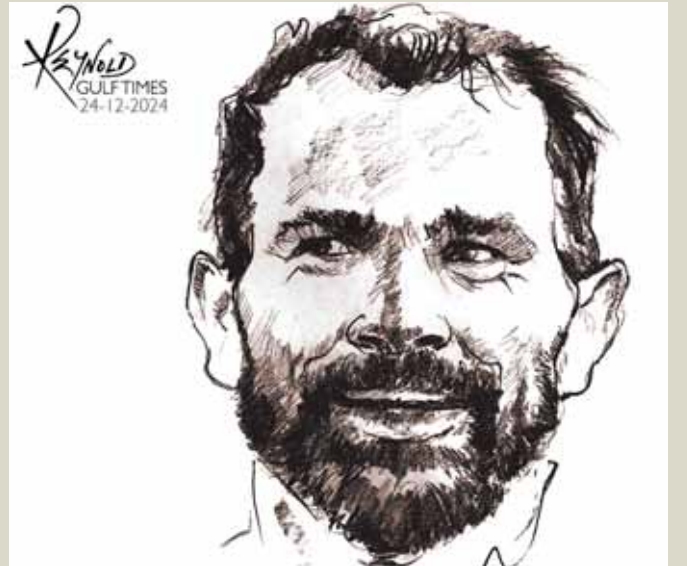
all-rounder Wiaan Mulder back in after he broke a finger against Sri Lanka last month.

There is, however, doubt about the availability of key left-arm spinner Keshav Maharaj, whose adductor strain forced him to sit out the ODI series. Both he and Mulder are in the test squad named last week but must still pass fitness Tests.

## SOUTH AFRICA VS PAKISTAN TEST SERIES FACTBOX

FIXTURES	
First Test Dec 26-30 Centurion, Pretoria	
Second Test Jan 3-7 Newlands, Cape Town	
SOUTH AFRICA	
World ranking: 3	
<b>Captain:</b> Temba Bavuma	
<b>Coach:</b> Shukri Conrad	
<b>Top ranked batter:</b> Temba Bavuma (7)	<b>Top ranked bowler:</b> Kagiso Rabada (2)
<b>Squad:</b> Temba Bavuma (captain), David Bedingham, Corbin Bosch, Matthew Breetzke, Tony de Zorzi, Marco Jansen, Keshav Maharaj, Kwena Maphaka, Aiden Markram, Wiaan Mulder, Senuran Muthusamy, Dane Paterson, Kagiso Rabada, Ryan Rickelton, Tristan Stubbs, Kyle Verreynne	
PAKISTAN	
World ranking: 7	
<b>Captain:</b> Shan Masood	
<b>Coach:</b> Aqib Javed	
<b>Top ranked batter:</b> Saud Shakeel (9)	<b>Top ranked bowler:</b> Noman Ali (10)
<b>Squad:</b> Shan Masood (captain), Aamir Jamal, Abdullah Shafique, Babar Azam, Haseebullah, Kamran Ghulam, Khuram Shahzad, Mir Hamza, Mohammad Abbas, Mohammad Rizwan, Naseem Shah, Noman Ali, Saim Ayub, Salman Ali Agha, Saud Shakeel	
TEST HEAD-TO-HEAD	
Matches: 28	
South Africa wins: 15	
Pakistan wins: 6	
Draws: 7	
LAST THREE SERIES 2021	
Pakistan beat South Africa 2-0 in Pakistan 2018-19	
South Africa beat Pakistan 3-0 in South Africa	
2013 Pakistan and South Africa drew 1-1 in United Arab Emirates	

## INDIA MEDICAL TEAM RULES OUT SHAMI FOR AUSTRALIA TESTS



New Delhi: Cricket powerhouse India suffered a blow yesterday when a medical team ruled out pacer **Mohammed Shami's** participation in the final two matches of the ongoing five-match series against hosts Australia. Shami has missed the first three matches of the series - locked at 1-1 - but was expected to join the Indian pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah for the Boxing Day Test. The right-arm pacer has been on a road to recovery and has played a few domestic matches since his right heel surgery, which kept him away from international cricket for months. "However, his left knee has exhibited minor swelling due to increased joint loading from his bowling workload," Devajit Saikia of the Board for Control of Cricket in India (BCCI) said in a statement yesterday. Both Indian fans and critics expected Shami to join Bumrah, rated as one of the best fast bowlers of this generation, for

the final two games. Bumrah has stood out for his match-turning performances in Australia but critics have argued that he has lacked support from the other end in Shami's absence. "Based on the current medical assessment, the BCCI Medical Team has determined that his (Shami's) knee requires more time for controlled exposure to bowling loads," Saikia added. "Consequently, he has not been deemed fit for consideration for the remaining two Tests of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy." Earlier, India's ace off spinner-all rounder Ravichandran Ashwin announced a sudden retirement after the third game. With series on the line, Australia had added teenage opener Sam Konstas to the 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.

FOCUS

## Uncapped Jacobs in NZ squad for SL T20s

Reuters  
Colombo

Big-hitting batter **Bevon Jacobs** was the only uncapped player in the New Zealand squad for the Twenty20 and one-day international series against Sri Lanka over the New Year.

Jacobs, who caught the eye with some explosive batting in the domestic game and was last month snapped up by the Mumbai Indians in the Indian Premier League (IPL) auction, will only be considered for the three T20 matches.

"He's a promising player with a lot of talent and we're looking forward to exposing him to international cricket," selector Sam Wells said of the 22-year-old, who was born in South Africa but raised in Auckland.

"He's clearly got a lot of power with the bat, but he's also shown

in the longer formats that he has a decent technique and temperament."

Rachin Ravindra, Daryl Mitchell and Matt Henry all return to the squad after missing the recent short-format tour of Sri Lanka to prepare for the test series against England.

The two series, which start with the first T20 at Mount Maunganui on Dec. 28, will be the first in charge for new white ball skipper Mitchell Santner with Luke Ronchi taking the coaching reins as Gary Stead enjoys a break.

**Squad:** Mitchell Santner (captain), Michael Bracewell, Mark Chapman, Jacob Duffy, Zak Foulkes\*, Mitch Hay, Matt Henry, Bevon Jacobs\*, Tom Latham\*\*, Daryl Mitchell, Will O'Rourke\*\*, Glenn Phillips, Rachin Ravindra, Tim Robinson\*, Nathan Smith, Will Young\*\*.

\* T20s only  
\*\* ODIs only



COMMENT

## Unfazed Konstas ready to answer Australia's call

Reuters  
Melbourne

Sam Konstas does not yet know whether he will make his debut in the cauldron of the fourth Test against India on Thursday but the Australian teenager says some advice from former opener Shane Watson will hold him in good stead if he does. The 19-year-old's parents will be at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Dec 26 along with 59-Test all-rounder Watson and his wife Lee, who manages Konstas, to support the youngster if he gets handed his baggy green cap.

Brought into the squad as a replacement for the peremptorily dumped makeshift opener Nathan McSweeney, Konstas said the advice from Watson about facing the likes of Jasprit Bumrah had been fairly straightforward.

"Just another day at it, back myself and be fearless," Konstas recalled when he spoke to



reporters on Monday. "I admire Shane Watson a lot. I like to take the game on and put pressure on the bowlers. He's a legend of the game and hopefully I can do that this week on my debut. It's pretty simple - just back myself and just 'see ball, hit ball' really."

Konstas has been in prolific form in first class cricket this season, including a century against an Indian selection in the tour match in Canberra and a 73 against India "A" on his last visit to the MCG.

After Australia's top order struggled for runs in the first three Tests of a series that remains in the balance at 1-1, a huge wave of momentum built up behind the case for Konstas' call-up to the team.

"It's a huge honour, as a kid I've always dreamed of it," he added.

"I'm trying to keep it as simple as possible, get my prep right and see what happens.

"It's happened really quick... I wasn't too fazed. But I feel like I'm a pretty relaxed person and I'm just trying to live in the moment."

CHESS

## QCA Board of Directors restructured as future tournament plans unveiled

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The Qatar Chess Association (QCA) yesterday announced the restructuring of a new Board of Directors headed by Mohammed al-Mudahka, who will lead the work of the association during the new session 2024-2028.

QCA stated that the new Board of Directors is headed by al-Mudahka and includes Dr Ghanem al-Sulaiti and Omar Saleh al-Marri, in addition to the continuation of Hamad al-Tamimi as the Executive Director.

The QCA General Assembly meeting reviewed the most important achievements of Qatar chess

in 2024, where the positive outcome achieved by the team during the past events was emphasised, especially organising the fourth edition of the Qatar Masters which received great praise from officials of the international federation FIDE as well as the Arab federation.

After the meeting, the president of QCA discussed the most important goals of the next stage and preparations for hosting the fifth edition of the Qatar Masters Championship in 2025, and the plans to expand the base of the game in Qatar and spread it in society, stressing the importance of continuing the chess project in schools and developing it.

The meeting also stressed on the importance of the national teams'

overseas participations. The team's participation in a number of upcoming events was also confirmed, most notably the World Rapid and Blitz Chess Championship being hosted by New York City, USA, from December 26-31, in which Qatari national team champion Jo Shen is participating.

A Qatar team will also participate in the Muscat International Championships to be held from December 26-31, and the Kuwait Chess Festival (from January 4-14), expressing his aspirations to make more efforts that will help QCA achieve its vision, develop the game of chess, and build a large base for it to eventually have a strong presence in international tournaments.

Mohammed al-Mudahka, Presi-

dent of QCA, stressed that the success of the fourth edition of the Qatar Masters, which concluded on December 13, was the result of great efforts made by the organizing committee, and the great efforts of the Ministry of Sports and Youth.

Al-Mudahka also noted the importance of the local championships for age groups that QCA organises throughout the year and which have become a major part of the agenda as they help in spotting emerging talent.

Al-Mudahka thanked former members, expressing his great confidence in the new council's continued efforts to chart an ambitious future for the game at all levels. He added he expects more success in the coming years.



Qatar Chess Association president Mohammed al-Mudahka.

TENNIS

# Players on edge after Sinner and Swiatek doping cases

'EVERYTHING WE TAKE, WE'RE AWARE OF THE SITUATION AND HOW EASILY THINGS CAN BE CONTAMINATED'

Reuters  
Bengaluru

As Jannik Sinner and Iga Swiatek prepare for the new season after a year in which they fell foul of doping rules, positive drug tests due to contamination are a genuine fear for many of their fellow professionals.

The star duo spent small fortunes on quickly proving how the banned substances had entered their systems but other players, many of whom do not have huge financial resources at their disposal, are understandably jittery.

"A lot of the players I know are quite apprehensive," former US Open champion Emma Raducanu told British media this month.

"Everything we take, we're aware of the situation and how easily things can be contaminated. There are certain supplements that I may want to take, but I can't take them because they're sold over the counter and not batch tested."

Raducanu said it costs over \$1,000 to batch test supplements.

Russian former world number five Andrey Rublev echoed Raducanu's comments, saying he was "super afraid" to ingest anything he was not absolutely sure about.

London-based academic Andrea Petroczi, who is involved in research on anti-doping, said surveys showed increasing concerns among elite athletes around the world about doping violations caused by contamination. "(They) expressed fear and anxiety about unintentionally violating anti-doping rules that could have grave consequences on their reputation, careers and livelihoods," Petroczi told Reuters via email.

**EXTRAORDINARY PRECAUTIONS**

Many athletes take precautions,



Jannik Sinner



Iga Swiatek

Petroczi said, including meticulously checking medications, avoiding any unnecessary treatments, relying on third-party tested supplements and recording batch numbers of supplements and medicines.

Some go as far as maintaining logs and avoiding certain foods in specific countries, but they understand that even the highest levels of vigilance cannot completely eliminate the risk of contamination or environmental exposure. "Importantly, it's also

crucial to acknowledge that the resources and strategies required for this level of vigilance aren't universally accessible," added Petroczi, a professor of public health at Kingston University.

"There is a clear 'Global North'/'Global South' divide, with disparities in education, resources and support systems, leaving many athletes more vulnerable."

Sinner was cleared of wrongdoing after he was able to satisfy doping authorities that trace

amounts of the anabolic androgenic steroid clostebol in his system came from his physiotherapist during massages.

An appeal against that verdict by the World Anti-Doping Agency, however, means that Australian Open and US Open champion Sinner still has a potential ban of up to two years hanging over his head. Swiatek accepted a one-month ban after a positive test for hormone and metabolic modulator trimetazidine, which she said was the result of contamination of

her sleep medication. The world number two told Polish television station TVN24 that she had spent \$70,000 on a lawyer and just over \$15,000 on expert opinions in her defence of the case.

**LENGTHY DELAYS**

The speed with which Sinner and Swiatek's cases were dealt with also cast a harsh spotlight on the anti-doping system after former world number one Simona Halep and Briton Tara Moore criticised officials for lengthy delays in their

own cases. The tennis anti-doping programme was previously overseen by the International Tennis Federation before the seven governing bodies of the sport formed the independent International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) in 2021 after a comprehensive review.

Since the ITIA began handling anti-doping in addition to anti-corruption from 2022, Sinner and Swiatek's cases are the highest profile players to be investigated by the agency, as both were world number ones when they failed tests. The ITIA maintains that all doping cases are dealt with based on facts and evidence and not a player's name, ranking or nationality but it has not been able to completely see off allegations of a two-tier system.

Being unable to access legal representation and advanced analytical testing would impact an athlete's ability to fight a doping case, Petroczi added, and sports federations and anti-doping organisations had to address this disparity in resources.

"Efforts could include providing equitable access to expert support, ensuring transparency in processes, and exploring ways to mitigate the impact of resource gaps," Petroczi said.

Unlike other elite athletes, tennis players are effectively self-employed and time out of the game to serve or fight a doping ban means a loss of income. World number eight Rublev called for swifter rulings in cases of accidental contamination and some relaxation of rules. "Of course, you want to have a clean sport," he told the Tennis Majors website.

"But you also want (it to be) not so strict because then you make all the tennis players so afraid that even those situations (that are not your fault) cost you a year. It shouldn't be like that."

FOCUS

# Fonseca has big dreams after Next Gen triumph

Reuters  
Riyad

Brazilian teenager Joao Fonseca said his ATP Next Gen Finals triumph in Jeddah on Sunday had left him dreaming of emulating Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz by becoming world number one.

The 18-year-old from Rio de Janeiro lit up the tournament for players aged 20 and under, beating American Learner Tien in the title clash to earn over \$500,000 in prize money for remaining unbeaten throughout.

It capped a spectacular campaign for Fonseca, who rose to number 145 in the world rankings after beginning the season outside the top 700.

"It's amazing how I have improved physically and mentally. I've been very strong mentally,

winning matches against top 50 and top 20 players," said Fonseca.

"I'm proud of myself, but of course I want more. My dream is to become number one."

Former Next Gen champions Sinner and Alcaraz have both gone on to achieve that feat.

Sinner is the current world number one while Alcaraz reached the peak of men's tennis for the first time in 2022 as a 19-year-old, with both players enjoying success on the Grand Slam stage.

"It's a good pressure," Fonseca said of the challenge that lies ahead.

"Winning Next Gen shows I'm on the right path. I hope I can do the same or even better than what they've done and are doing and are going to do.

"I look forward to playing with them. I hope I can compete in big matches at the Grand Slams. It's where I want to go."



Brazil's Joao Fonseca celebrates with the trophy after winning the Next Gen ATP Finals in Jeddah. (Reuters)

**'Devastated' Australian star Purcell provisionally suspended for doping**

**SYDNEY:** Two-time Grand Slam doubles champion Max Purcell said yesterday he was "devastated" after taking a voluntary suspension for breaching anti-doping rules. The Australian, who is ranked 12th in the world for doubles, admitted to breaching regulations relating to the use of a "prohibited method". The International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) said he "requested to enter into a provisional suspension on December 10."

"Time served under provisional suspension will be credited against any future sanction," the ITIA added, with the ban coming into effect on December 12. Under the suspension, the 26-year-old is prohibited from playing in, coaching at, or attending any tennis event authorised by any of the sport's governing bodies or national associations. It means he will currently not be able to play in the Australian Open at Melbourne Park in January. Purcell said he told the ITIA he had "unknowingly received an IV infusion of vitamins above the allowable limit of 100mg". "I was fully convinced that I had

done everything to ensure that I had followed the WADA (World Anti-Doping Agency) regulations and methods," he said on Instagram, adding that he had been as transparent as possible. "This news was devastating to me because I pride myself on being an athlete who always makes sure that everything is WADA safe."

Purcell won the 2022 Wimbledon doubles title alongside fellow Australian Matt Ebden and the US Open crown this year, partnered by Jordan Thompson. Tennis Australia stressed that the breach related to a prohibited method, rather than a prohibited substance.

"The International Tennis Integrity Agency confirmed the breach relates to the use of a prohibited method, rather than the presence of a prohibited substance," it said in a statement carried by Australian media. "As the matter is currently under investigation, it is inappropriate to comment further at this time." The ITIA is the same organisation that charged top-ranked Jannik Sinner and Iga Swiatek over breaches of its anti-doping programme.

GOLF

# Team Langer beats Team Woods in PNC Championship playoff

Reuters  
Miami

Bernhard Langer of Germany sank an eagle putt on the first playoff hole on Sunday to deny Tiger Woods and his son Charlie their first win at the PNC Championship at the Ritz-Carlton Golf Club in Orlando.

Instead, Langer won the event for the sixth time - his fourth victory with son Jason Langer to go with two titles with his other son, Stefan Langer. Team Woods and Team Langer both tied the scoring record at the 36-hole family team event, following rounds of 59 Saturday with matching 57s Sunday for matching scores of 28-under-

par 116. The day will perhaps best be remembered for Charlie Woods' first-ever hole-in-one, which he hit at the 176-yard, par-3 fourth hole early in Sunday's round.

"It was awesome having Dad there. That was so much fun," the younger Woods said. "It was just a perfect 7-iron, little cut in there. Of course, never got to see it go in, so that sucks. But that's all right."

"We heard it up on the green on the right and left but we were totally unsure until the TV confirmed it. And we went nuts," Tiger Woods said. "I don't know what we did but we enjoyed it. It was an unbelievable moment." Charlie Woods, 15, said the shot ranked as the most fun he's ever had on a golf course: "It's not even close."

The 15-time major champion

and his son scrambled their way to an 8-under 28 on the front nine and a 7-under 29 on the back. But it was only enough to force a playoff with the Langers.

Bernhard Langer - the winningest player in PGA Tour Champions history - and his son made eight birdies on the back nine to reach 28 under for the event. The playoff hole was the par-5 18th, and after Team Woods had taken three shots, Langer calmly sank a right-to-left eagle putt for the win.

He let his putter drop to the ground and took off his cap in celebration before embracing Tiger Woods. They had played the final round together before heading to the playoff hole.

"I played with him probably a dozen times," said Bernhard

Langer, 67. "I was one of the first to play with him when he turned pro. But that was a long time ago. He's come a long way and won a lot of tournaments since. But they couldn't have been nicer."

He praised his son for handling the "out-of-body experience" of playing a round with Woods.

"It was really special to be able to be out there with Tiger, and yeah, the crowd was more than anything I've ever played in front of for sure," Jason Langer said. "I'm not that competitive these days. I play a couple amateur events a year. But definitely today was not something that I am used to."

This tournament was Tiger Woods' first public round of golf since he missed the cut at The Open Championship in July.



Bernhard Langer of Germany and his son Jason Langer pose with their trophies on the 18th green after putting in to win in a sudden-death playoff during the second round of PNC Championship in Orlando. (AFP)

**SPOTLIGHT**

# Tickets for Doha Equestrian Tour 2025 now on sale

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The Organising Committee for the Doha International Tour Equestrian Championships - Qatar 2025 announced the completion of all the arrangements at Al Shaqab, at the Longines Arena, which will be launched with the first round to be held from January 9-11.

The tour will see the participation of more than 150 riders, representing more than 25 countries, competing for a total prize pool of more than 400 thousand Euros.

Fans can purchase tickets from the official platform QTickets. Ticket prices for the general at-

tendance categories range from QR50 for 1 day for adults, QR25 for children aged 7-12 and QR12 for children under 7. Other options include free entry for children below 7 years, and hospitality packages and VIP tickets.

The Doha International Tour consists of six international championships, including a variety of categories and competitions. Mohammed Jaber al-Khayareen, the event director, said the aim of the championship was to provide an exceptional experience for fans of showjumping through a series of competitions that bring together the world's elite riders.

He pointed out that the new version of the Qatar 2025 Doha International Tour will include a group of international champion-

ships under its umbrella, making it a unique destination for all riders in the world, especially the top-ranked ones.

The international equestrian event also adds to Qatar's position of being a global sports destination and also helps promote tourism and opens up horizons between people and cultures more broadly.

**THE SCHEDULE**

**Doha Showjumping Tour Championships (First, Second and Third):**

**1. First round: January 9-11:** Categories: One-star, two-star, and four-star.

**2. Second round: January 16-18:** Categories: One-star, two-star, and four-star.

**3. Third round: January 23-25:** Categories: One-star, three-star, and five-star.

**4. Fourth Round - CHI Al Shaqab: February 13-15:** Consists of showjumping competitions, in addition to a competition for people with special needs.

- Participating categories for showjumping: one-star, three-star, and five-star. Two participating categories for people with special needs: three-star.

**5. Fifth Round - HH the Amir's Sword Festival: February 20-22:** Categories for showjumping: one-star, three-star, and five-star

**6. Sixth Round - Longines Global Champions Tour: February 27-March 1:** Categories for showjumping: One-star, three-star and five-star.



Event director Mohammed Jaber al-Khayareen.

**FOOTBALL**

# Arsenal's Saka out for 'many weeks' with injury

'We will continue to do that - finding ways and taking it with positive energy'

AFP  
London

**B**ukayo Saka will be sidelined for "many weeks" after suffering a hamstring injury in Arsenal's 5-1 win at Crystal Palace, with manager Mikel Arteta describing his loss as a "huge" blow.

The England winger went down midway through the first half at Selhurst Park on Saturday and had to be replaced by Leandro Trossard. "It is not looking good. He will be out for many weeks," Arteta said at a press conference yesterday, adding he could not be more specific. The Spaniard said the loss of the 23-year-old, who has nine goals and 13 assists in all competitions this season, would force him into a rethink.

"Obviously he's a big player for us," he said. "You just have to see the impact that he has on the team, but it's going to be a really good exercise for all of us to think about ways to overcome another challenge, because we've already had a lot in the season."

Arteta said Saka was "gutted" and "really emotional" after discovering the extent of his injury.

He also revealed that fellow winger Raheem Sterling had injured his knee and would be out for a number of weeks.

"We have to look internally at what we have and be creative," said the Gunners boss, adding that



he did not know if the club would sign a winger in the January transfer window.

Saka was filmed leaving Selhurst Park on crutches, souring what had been a comprehensive second win over the Palace in four days. Arteta, whose third-placed team face Premier League strugglers Ipswich on Friday, said he was confident that Saka would be back well before the end of the season.

"It's part of the development of a player," he said. "At some stage, at this level, you are going to get

injured - unfortunately badly.

"It could have been worse, it could have been something else that can take you out for a year. It's how you react to that, how you overcome that situation."

Arteta said he was "putting some ideas together" about how to cope in the winger's absence.

"We went through the period (this season without) Martin (Odegaard), we went through the period with five, six defenders missing, we went through the period without many other players," he said.

"We will continue to do that - finding ways and taking it with positive energy." Asked if the congested fixture schedule had played a part in Saka's injury, Arteta said the issue was more to do with consistently high workloads over many seasons.

"For example, Bukayo and Declan (Rice), they played over 130 games in two seasons," he said.

"So what's going to happen in the second one, the third one or the fourth one, if that continues the same way? Probably it's unsustainable."

**ANNOUNCEMENT**

# Lusail International Circuit appoints al-Mohannadi as CEO

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**A**bdulaziz Ali al-Mohannadi has been appointed as the new Chief Executive Officer of Lusail International Circuit (LIC), effective January 1, 2025.

LIC said in a statement yesterday: "With over 15 years of diverse experience spanning the energy, projects, and event management sectors, Abdulaziz brings a wealth of expertise and strategic vision to the role. Abdulaziz is renowned for his contributions to high-profile events, most notably his role in the successful organisation of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. As Executive Director of Operations at Lusail International Circuit, his experience provided seamless execution of the Formula Qatar Grand Prix 2024."

Upon his appointment, Abdulaziz stated: "It is an honour to take on the role of CEO at Lusail International Circuit, a venue with a proud history in motorsport. My focus will be on maintaining the circuit's high

standards of excellence, and ensuring its role as a key destination for motorsport enthusiasts. Together with our team, I look forward to building on LIC's achievements and contributing to its continued success in the years ahead."

LIC also expressed its gratitude to Amro al-Hamad, for his leadership and contributions during his tenure as a CEO of LIC.

"Amro's guidance played an important role in establishing LIC as a world-class venue and setting the foundation for its future successes. He will continue to serve as the Executive Director of the Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation, driving Qatar's global success in motorsport and fostering emerging talent," LIC added in a statement.

Under Abdulaziz's leadership, LIC is poised to further enhance its reputation as a premier destination for global motorsport events. His appointment aligns with the Qatar National Vision 2030 to elevate Qatar's standing on the international stage while fostering the local talent and culture of motorsports.



Abdulaziz Ali al-Mohannadi

**FOCUS**

# Qatar Airways Premier Padel Tour calendar unveiled

Agencies  
London, Doha

**P**remier Padel, the leading official professional padel tour worldwide, yesterday announced its eagerly anticipated 2025 calendar - with 24 tournaments across 16 countries, following its successful first season as a global tour.

The 2025 season will feature at least 7 new locations including Miami, Buenos Aires, Cancun and Germany for the first time - significant additions across both the North and South American regions and Europe.

The Qatar Airways Premier Padel Tour will start on 10 February 2025 - opening with the Riyadh Season P1. There will be two major new highlights in the 2025 calendar in March, with the tour travelling for inaugural tournaments in Miami and Cancun - held at the Rafa Nadal Academy in Cancun - before returning to Chile for a second time.

Following a short return to Europe for tournaments in Belgium and the heartlands in Spain, the tour will make its way to Paraguay in May before debuting in the Argentinian capital of Buenos Aires.

Europe will host several tournaments between June and October - including a mid-season break scheduled in August - with a return to several recognised countries and locations including Italy (Rome, Milano), Spain (Valadolid, Malaga, Madrid), France (Bordeaux, Paris) and The Netherlands (Rotterdam). The European leg will also include the first tournament in Germany.

The Tour will then return to the Middle East for tournaments in Egypt (NewGiza) and the UAE (Dubai) with the regular season concluding with the Mexico Major at the end of November. The International Padel Federation (FIP) will

host its first edition of the FIP Intercontinental Cup in August, the equivalent of the Ryder and Laver Cup - ahead of the planned mid-season break - and FIP World Cup Pairs tournament in November.

In terms of the four Majors, the 2025 season will see the world's best players return to Qatar (14-19 April) and Italy (9-15 June) for two Major tournaments in the first half of the year, with France (8-14 September) and Mexico (24-30 November) hosting the remaining Major tournaments. The Qatar Airways Premier Padel Finals will return to Barcelona in 2025 for its second edition from 8-14 December.

The top 16 ranked players in the FIP Race Ranking - in both the men's and women's competitions - will qualify for the Premier Padel season finale.

Nasser al-Khelaiifi, Chairman of Premier Padel, said: "We are very proud to announce Premier Padel's fantastic 2025 calendar, as we continue to propel the sport to new frontiers and take all aspects of the professional tour to the highest level. The 2025 calendar - developed in partnership with players and partners - shows our clear commitment to accelerate the global growth of padel and provide new and existing fans and players with an incredible experience of the Tour for many years."

Luigi Carraro, President of the International Padel Federation (FIP) and Vice Chairman of Premier Padel, said: "This is another thrilling chapter for FIP and Premier Padel and the sport of padel as a whole. Our 2025 calendar brings professional padel to new and established markets and a more efficient schedule for players and fans. This magnificent calendar supports the exciting global growth of padel as one of the world's most dynamic and fastest growing sports and is another milestone in our bid for Olympic inclusion."

2025 QATAR AIRWAYS PREMIER PADEL TOUR		
SAUDI ARABIA	RIYADH SEASON P1	10-15 FEB
SPAIN	SPAIN P2	24 FEB-02 MAR
MEXICO	CANCUN P2	10-18 MAR
USA	MIAMI P1	17-23 MAR
CHILE	SANTIAGO P1	24-30 MAR
QATAR	QATAR MAJOR	14-19 APR
BELGIUM	BRUSSELS P2	21-27 APR
SPAIN	SPAIN P1	28 APR-04 MAY
PARAGUAY	ASUNCION P2	19-25 MAY
ARGENTINA	BUENOS AIRES P1	26 MAY-01 JUN
ITALY	ITALY MAJOR	09-15 JUN
CHINA	VALLADOLID P2	23-29 JUN
FRANCE	BORDEAUX P2	30 JUN-06 JUL
SPAIN	MALAGA P1	14-20 JUL
SCANDINAVIA	SCANDINAVIA P2	28 JUL-03 AUG
ARGENTINA	FIP INTERCONTINENTAL CUP	04-10 AUG
SPAIN	MADRID P1	01-07 SEP
GERMANY	PARIS MAJOR*	08-14 SEP
GERMANY	GERMANY P2 (Munich)	15-21 SEP
GERMANY	GERMANY P2 (Frankfurt)	22-28 SEP
NETHERLANDS	ROTTERDAM P1	29 SEP-05 OCT
ITALY	MILANO P1	06-12 OCT
MEXICO	NEWGIZA P2	27 OCT-01 NOV
ARGENTINA	FIP WORLD CUP PAIRS	03-09 NOV
USA	DUBAI P1	10-16 NOV
MEXICO	MEXICO MAJOR	24-30 NOV
SPAIN	BARCELONA FINALS	08-14 DEC

## Holders PSG edge through on penalties in French Cup

Paris Saint-Germain began their defence of the French Cup by edging out Ligue 1 rivals Lens on penalties in the last 64 on Sunday, with goalkeeper Matvey Safonov their hero in the shootout. Starting in the absence of Gianluigi Donnarumma, who was recovering from a facial injury suffered against Monaco in midweek, Russian Safonov saved penalties from both M'Bala Nzola and Andy Diouf as PSG won the shootout 4-3 following a 1-1 draw. Earlier, Abdoukodie Khusanov had given Lens the lead in the second half in the far north of France, only for Goncalo Ramos to quickly equalise for PSG. The Ligue 1 leaders beat Lyon in last season's final to win the French Cup for a record-extending 15th time. Fifth-tier minnows Espaly from south-central

France will now face PSG in the next round in mid-January, in what is a dream tie for the lower-league side. Elsewhere on Sunday, Marseille cruised to a 4-0 win away at Saint-Etienne in another all-top-flight tie. Saint-Etienne had Ibrahim Sissoko sent off before the midway point in the first half, and Marseille took full advantage as Mason Greenwood fired them ahead moments later with his 11th goal of the season. Adrien Rabiot made it 2-0 before the break and both Luis Henrique and Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg found the net in the second half. Marseille will be at home to Lille in a heavyweight tie in the last 32. Monaco were 4-1 winners way at minnows Union Saint-Jean in Toulouse, and will next go to Reims, who also won away at lower-league opposition on Sunday.



PSG players celebrate their victory over Lens in the French Cup round of 64 match at the Bollaert-Delelis Stadium in Lens. (AFP)