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ARABIAN GULF CUP

# Bahrain coach expects 'difficult final' against Oman

By Sports Reporter  
Kuwait City

**B**ahrain head coach Dragan Talajic has praised his "unbelievable group of sons" ahead of what promises to be a blockbuster Arabian Gulf Cup final at the Jaber Al Ahmad International Stadium in Kuwait today. The match is scheduled to kick off at 7pm.

Bahrain have blazed an impressive trail to the final, winning Group B with wins over Iraq and Saudi Arabia before overcoming hosts Kuwait in the semi-final.

But the 2019 winners face a strong Oman team that reached the final last time out in Iraq and are unbeaten in Kuwait and bidding to win their third Gulf title.

"We respect Oman a lot," said Talajic. "They are playing nice football. We have been watching them and beating Saudi Arabia in the semi-final was a big achievement, so congratulations to them for winning a hard group. It will be a very difficult final. But my boys will write history. My boys are an unbelievable group of sons. They will play for Bahrain, and for themselves. There is big pressure on us. But it has been an unbelievable 20 days without any problem between my sons. I am so proud of them and how they have played getting to the final."

Mahdi Abduljabber will be missing the final through suspension after his red card in the semi-final, and there are several injury worries, but the experienced Croatian is confident in his squad.

"There is no secret to what we do. It is all hard work. They are excellent players and are one family," he said.

Meanwhile, Oman head coach Rasheed Jaber has called on the region's football associations to show more faith in Arab coaches ahead of the final against Bahrain.



Bahrain goalkeeper Ebrahim Lutfalla and Oman players (right) train yesterday, on the eve of the Arabian Gulf Cup final.

Jaber has proved his worth as a master tactician in plotting the downfall of the likes of Qatar and Saudi Arabia during a pulsating two-week tournament that kicked off on December 21.

His chargers won Group A and remain unbeaten, but the discussion around foreign coaches was raised at the eve-of-final

press conference. "I don't think there is enough trust for the Arabic managers," said Jaber. "They (football associations) need to focus on them and change. Twenty-five years ago, there were great Arabic managers who made great results, and I think there should be more opportunities for more managers from their countries."



Historically, there is very little between the teams going into the final, with Oman winning 12 times, and Bahrain winning 11. Seventeen meetings have been drawn, but Oman reached the final last time out and are confident of adding to their two previous Gulf titles.

"We respect Bahrain. They are a strong team and have played well here," said Jaber. "Our preparation has been good. Most of the time has been spent on rehabilitation because this is the end of a tough schedule. This is the end of the tournament so

we need the reward with a positive result." Mandhar al-Alawi will miss the match after the red card received in the semi-final victory over Saudi Arabia, but central defender Mohammed al-Musalami is confident his teammates are well placed to become champions at an expected sold-out Jaber Al Ahmad International Stadium.

"Most of our players played in Iraq at the last tournament, so we have the experience of playing in a final, but we don't have the feeling to win a final which is what we must do tomorrow night," he said.

TROPHÉE DES CHAMPIONS

# Doha gears up to host PSG's showdown with Monaco

Victory tomorrow would see PSG claim the Trophée des Champions title for the 11th time in 12 years

AFP  
Doha

**P**aris Saint-Germain could lift their first silverware of the season when they play Monaco in the Trophée des Champions in Doha tomorrow, with the staging of the fixture in Qatar underlining the Gulf state's influence over football in France.

The game is the traditional curtain-raiser to the French campaign. While Spain and Italy have expanded their Super Cup into four-team competitions and taken them to Saudi Arabia, France has regularly staged the Champions Trophy overseas in recent years, since the 2009 edition was held in Montreal, Canada. This season, it was supposed to be staged in Beijing on August 8 to mark the 60th anniversary of France and China establishing diplomatic relations. However, the fixture ended up being called off by the Chinese authorities, just like it was a year earlier when the game was due to take place in Thailand.

While last season's edition ended up going ahead in Paris in January, with PSG beating Toulouse, this time Qatar has stepped into the breach. Ivory Coast was also a potential destination and there would almost certainly have been a large and passionate crowd had the game been staged in the football-mad, French-speaking country in West Africa.

But Qatar stepped in with an offer that persuaded the French league (LFP) - struggling financially after being forced to accept a much-reduced offer last year for its domestic television rights - to go to the Gulf. "Several offers were made, and the Doha solution was the best solution for the date, both for the LFP and for the two participating teams," the French league said.

And so the match - sponsored by the Qatar tourism authority - will go ahead at the Stadium 974 in Doha, one of the ven-



Paris Saint-Germain players train at the Aspire yesterday in Doha, ahead of their Trophée des Champions match against Monaco tomorrow at the Stadium 974.

ues used at the 2022 World Cup. Qatar's influence in French football dates back to the acquisition of PSG by Qatar Sports Investments in 2011.

PSG were an ailing giant at the time, but under QSI and Qatari president Nasser al-Khelaifi, they have been turned into the dominant force in the French game, their financial might crushing all rivals. The club is on course to win an 11th Ligue 1 title in the last 13 seasons, while victory tomorrow would see them claim the Champions Trophy for the 11th time in 12 years.

Al-Khelaifi is also on the board of directors of the LFP, as well as being chairman of beIN Media Group, which is one of the domestic broadcasters of Ligue 1 in France. The match usually pits the champions against the French Cup winners, but PSG won both trophies last season and so Ligue 1 runners-up Monaco were chosen as their

challengers.

PSG won 4-2 in Monaco in Ligue 1 just before the recent mid-season break and will be favourites to come out on top again, especially given the surroundings. "This is like a home game for us," admitted PSG coach Luis Enrique during a press conference held during the team's flight to Doha aboard a Qatar Airways jet.

"We're very lucky to be able to go to Doha, it's an opportunity to strengthen the group, to continue to work hard, it's something we want to put to good use for the whole squad. We're going to play this match as if it were at home, because we are at home. It's an attractive game, with a great billing and a trophy to be won. It's a highly anticipated event," the Spaniard added.

The club has even taken steps to persuade fans to make the trip to attend the

## An eagerly awaited Qatar tour, says PSG coach Enrique

**Doha:** Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique answered journalists' questions at a special press conference organised on the Qatar Airways flight to Doha on Thursday. He expressed excitement about the upcoming Visit Qatar Tour 2025, highlighting the opportunity to strengthen the team during their visit to Doha. He described the match as an attractive event with great significance and a trophy at stake. He said: "We're going to play this match as if it were at home, because we are at home."

Meanwhile, Nasser al-Khelaifi, President of Paris-Saint Germain, added: "Paris Saint-Germain is so proud to be part of an incredible world-first moment with

Qatar Airways. Holding the first-ever live press conference held at 35,000 feet using SpaceX's revolutionary Starlink technology, PSG and Qatar Airways created history together - with innovation and bold new ideas at the heart of our partnership.

"We are also proud to bring the world to Qatar this weekend with the Trophée des Champions Visit Qatar, which starts a fantastic year of global, regional and local sport for Qatar - bringing amazing spectacles to local Qatari sports fans, starting this Sunday with the best players of Paris Saint-Germain and AS Monaco at the iconic Stadium 974."



Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique oversees his team's training session at Aspire yesterday.

game, despite the six-hour flight separating Paris from Doha. A package comprising a return flight, hotel accommodation and a match ticket was offered for 100 euros (\$103) for several hundred fans. However, the club's ultras - the most fervent supporters - turned down the offer for a game in which opponents Monaco will be aiming to lift a first trophy since winning Ligue 1 in 2017.

MATCH REPORT

# Australia in charge as Boland rips through Rohit-less India

'There's still a nice covering of grass on the wicket and hopefully another good day for us tomorrow'

AFP  
Sydney

**A**relentless Scott Boland and Mitchell Starc sliced through an Indian batting line-up missing Rohit Sharma yesterday to put Australia in a commanding position after day one of the fifth and final Test.

The visitors were all out for 185 after Jasprit Bumrah - captaining the side with Rohit "rested" - sent his team in at a sold-out Sydney Cricket Ground.

Boland was the chief destroyer with 4-31 while Starc took 3-49.

In reply, Australia lost Usman Khawaja for two on the last ball before stumps with Bumrah doing the damage, leaving them at 9-1 with Sam Konstas on seven. There was drama at the end when Bumrah and the 19-year-old Konstas were involved in a spat, setting the scene for a fiery day two.

Australia will regain the Border-Gavaskar trophy for the first time since 2014-15 if they win or draw.

"It was disappointing losing a wicket on the last ball of the day but it's a pretty good position after they won the toss," said Boland, whose side leads the series 2-1.

"Hopefully the sun's out and we can bat all day (on Saturday). There's still a nice covering of grass on the wicket and hopefully another good day for us tomorrow."

None of the Indian batsmen fired, with kingpin Virat Kohli again falling cheaply while Nitish Kumar Reddy, who made a brilliant century in the previous Test



Australia's bowler Scott Boland celebrates the catch of India's Virat Kohli (left) with teammates, which was later deemed not out by the third umpire during day one of the fifth Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground yesterday. (AFP)

at Melbourne, was out for a golden duck.

Kohli had a huge let-off on his first ball and finally departed for 17, following KL Rahul (4), Yashasvi Jaiswal (10) and Shubman Gill (20).

Rishabh Pant made a battling 40 but that was as good as it got for India.

"I wouldn't say it was a bad score...it's still a very competitive score because the way the ball is moving now there's a lot of help for the bowlers," said Pant, who called Rohit's omission "emotional".

Regular captain and opener Rohit was rested, India said, after failing to get past 10 runs in any of his five innings during the series.

It was a significant move and could spell the end of the 37-year-old's 67-match Test career.

Fellow veteran Kohli, 36, has similarly been under pressure since an unbeaten 100 in the first Test at Perth, with his inability to again build a big score set to attract scrutiny. Rahul reverted to opener alongside Jaiswal, with Gill returning at three.

But the play backfired with Rahul out softly when Starc tempted him to clip a full delivery to Konstas at cover.

There were concerns ahead of the Test over star seamer Starc's fitness but he showed no discomfort and routinely troubled the batsmen.

Boland came on after an opening barrage from Pat Cummins and took the big wicket of in-form Jaiswal in his first over, collected smartly at slip by debutant Beau Webster, in the side for the axed



Australia's Mitchell Starc (right) celebrates with captain Pat Cummins after he dismissed India's K L Rahul at The SCG yesterday. (AFP)

Mitchell Marsh. The hosts were convinced Boland had Kohli out next ball.

The Indian star edged to Steve Smith at second slip, who dived low to his right and got his hand under the ball to scoop it up for Marnus Labuschagne to complete the catch.

But in a big call, third umpire Joel Wilson ruled that part of the ball feathered the ground and Kohli survived.

India seemed destined to reach lunch without further loss but Nathan Lyon drew an outside edge from Gill and Smith took the catch.

Australia tightened the screws when they returned with Kohli adding just five more before Boland struck again with a ball that nipped away, taking an edge to Webster at slip.

The ebullient Pant was criticised

for throwing his wicket away in the fourth Test in Melbourne, which Australia won, and he was far more conservative this time.

Peppered with bouncers that repeatedly hit his body, he worked hard before Boland again weaved his magic.

Pant miscued a short ball with Cummins holding the catch at mid-on, then Boland sent Reddy packing on his next delivery to send the crowd wild.

Ravindra Jadeja was dropped twice on his way to 26 before Starc trapped him lbw, with the tail briefly wagging before the end came.

**BRIEF SCORES (Fifth Test, Day 1)**  
**Australia 9 for 1** (Bumrah 1-7) trail **India 185** (Pant 40, Boland 4-31, Starc 3-49, Cummins 2-37) by **176 runs**

## Sydney axing signals end of road for India captain Rohit

**Sydney:** India's tottering Border-Gavaskar Trophy defence may soon claim a second victim with skipper **Rohit Sharma** looking at the end of his Test career after being dropped for the fifth and final Test against Australia yesterday. Unlike spinner Ravichandran Ashwin, who quit international cricket altogether after playing one of the first three Tests in Australia, Rohit is likely to stay on as India's ODI captain with a home series against England and the Champions Trophy looming.

Rohit quit T20 Internationals immediately after guiding India to their second 20-overs World Cup title last year but his Test career is likely to end not with a bang but with a whimper.

Trailing 2-1 heading into the series finale in Sydney, India took the "emotional" decision of dropping their struggling captain, who cannot find his mojo either in his usual opener's role or in the middle order. Rohit has a single fifty in his last 15 Test innings that include 10 single-digit scores and had to vacate his place so India could accommodate Shubman Gill back in the top order. With their hopes of making the World Test Championship final effectively over, India's next Test assignment will be a five-match

series England in June-July. Rohit will be 38 by then and few expect the Mumbai player to don the Test whites again. "I think it probably means that (if) India don't qualify for the WTC final, the Melbourne Test will be Rohit Sharma's last game," former India captain Sunil Gavaskar said during the lunch break on day one. "We have probably seen Rohit Sharma for the last time in Test cricket."

**TOUGH DECISION**  
Former India coach Ravi Shastri had a similar feeling.

"If there was a home season coming up he might have thought of carrying on, but I think he might just pull the plug at the end of this Test," Shastri said while commenting. "He's not getting younger... it's not that India don't have youngsters. There are very, very good play-



ers in the wings and it's time to build. Tough decisions, but there is a time for everything." Rohit is a limited-overs stalwart scoring nearly 11,000 ODI runs with a 49-plus average. He is the only batsman with three double hundreds in ODIs, including a 264 against Sri Lanka, which remains the highest individual score in this format. Rohit could not reach the same high in Test cricket though, and averages 40.57 after 67 matches with only two of his 12 hundreds coming abroad.

Jasprit Bumrah, who is leading India in Sydney, said Rohit had "opted out" of the match dismissing reports of any "selfishness" in the squad.

After yesterday's play, wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant said it was a tough decision by the team management to drop the captain.

"Definitely it was an emotional decision because he's been captain for a long time," said Pant, whose fighting 40 was the highest individual score in India's first innings 185. "We see him as a leader of the team...it was the management's call."

COMMENT

## Shastri expects Rohit to 'pull plug' on Test career

AFP  
Sydney

**F**ormer India coach Ravi Shastri said yesterday he expected skipper Rohit Sharma to "pull the plug" on his red-ball career after being left out of the fifth Test against Australia in Sydney.

The 37-year-old opener has had a poor series and the writing was on the wall when he failed to show up for India's pre-match press conference.

Coach Gautam Gambhir instead fronted the media on Thursday and declined to throw his support behind him.

Stand-in captain Jasprit Bum-

rah insisted at the coin toss yesterday that Rohit had "opted to rest" for the good of the team rather than being forced out. Shastri believes Rohit jumped rather than was pushed but suspects it is the end of his 67-Test career.

"It still is a brave call for a captain to own up and say, 'I'm prepared to take the bench in this game,'" Shastri said while commenting on Fox Sports. "If there was a home season coming up he might've thought of carrying on, but I think he might just pull the plug at the end of this Test."

"It's not that India don't have youngsters. There are very, very good players in the wings and it's time to build.

"Tough decisions, but there is

a time for everything." Rohit quit T20 international cricket last year after lifting the World Cup, but is yet to call time on his ODI career.

He missed the first Test in Perth for the birth of his second child and has not looked fully engaged since, failing to get past 10 runs in any of his five innings.

His recent form comes on the back of a similarly poor return during India's 3-0 home series loss to New Zealand during October-November.

"Our captain has shown his leadership, he's opted to rest in this game," Bumrah said at the toss.

"So that shows there's a lot of unity in our team, there's no selfishness, whatever is in the team's

best interest, we are looking to do that."

Should Rohit call it quits, it would be the second retirement of the tour with off-spinning great Ravichandran Ashwin heading home after the third Test at the Gabba. Ashwin was not selected for Brisbane, which appeared to be the final straw for the 38-year-old.

Former batsman Sanjay Manjrekar praised Rohit, saying he was "doing what is right for the team".

It was "not (an) easy decision to make at this stage of his career", veteran Indian cricket journalist Ayaz Memon wrote on social media, but said Rohit had "put team interest ahead of his own".

fellow veterans Sikandar Raza (61) and Sean Williams (49) as the home team recovered from 41-4 to build an 86-run first innings lead.

The 39-year-old skipper had partnerships of 71 for the fifth-wicket with Raza and 73 for the eighth wicket with Williams as Zimbabwe chase a first Test victory since beating Afghanistan three years ago. Ervine struck two sixes and four

fours, Raza six fours, and Williams eight fours before walking a run short of a half century despite being given not out.

**BRIEF SCORES (Second Test, Day 2)** Afghanistan 157 in 44.3 overs (Rashid 25; Nyamhuri 3-42, Raza 3-30) and 46-3 in 15 overs (Shah 18 not out; Muzarabani 2-17) v Zimbabwe 243 in 73.3 overs (Ervine 75, Raza 61; Rashid 4-94, Ahmadzai 3-62).

## Ervine stars as Zimbabwe take control against Afghanistan



**Bulawayo, Zimbabwe:** Captain **Craig Ervine** top scored with 75 as Zimbabwe made 243 in their first innings on day two of the second and final Test against Afghanistan in Bulawayo yesterday. Batting again, the tourists were 46-3 when bad light stopped play shortly before the scheduled close, leaving them 40 runs behind at Queens Sports Club in the southern city. Ervine was ably supported by

SPOTLIGHT

## Rickelton, Bavuma tons guide SA in second Test



South Africa's Ryan Rickelton watches the ball after playing a shot during the first day of the second Test against Pakistan at Newlands stadium in Cape Town yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Cape Town

**R**yan Rickelton and Temba Bavuma hit centuries and batted South Africa into a strong position on the first day of the second Test against Pakistan at Newlands yesterday.

South Africa were 316 for four at the close of play.

Rickelton (176 not out) and South African captain Bavuma (106) put on 235 for the fourth wicket after the pair came together with the total on 72 for three.

At that stage South Africa were in danger of wasting the advantage of winning the toss on a good batting pitch.

But Rickelton and Bavuma were seldom troubled as they posted a fifty partnership off 66 balls and scored consistently at better than four runs an over throughout their stand.

It was the left-handed Rickelton's second Test century in three matches, following a shaky start to his Test career in which he had failed to register a half-century in his first 12 innings. He was in commanding form, striking 21 fours and a six off 232 balls.

Bavuma recorded the fourth Test hundred of a career in which he has made 24 half-centuries. He was out 15 minutes before the close, caught behind off occasional off-spinner Salman Agha. He hit nine fours and two sixes in a 179-ball innings.

Despite taking three wickets before lunch, it was a lacklustre performance by Pakistan, who only managed to bowl 80 overs in

six-and-a-half hours and seldom looked threatening.

Pakistan opening batsman Saim Ayub suffered an ankle injury when he fell awkwardly in the outfield in the seventh over of the day. He was taken to the dressing room on a mobile stretcher and did not return to the field.

Pakistan's hopes rose when Aiden Markram was caught behind off Khurram Shahzad for 17 after he and Rickelton put on 61 for the first wicket. Wiaan Mulder (5) and Tristan Stubbs (0) followed in quick succession shortly before lunch, caught behind off Mohammad Abbas and Agha respectively. But the rest of the day belonged to South Africa.

**BRIEF SCORES (Second Test, Day 1)**  
**South Africa 316 for 4** (Rickelton 176\*, Bavuma 106) vs **Pakistan (yet to bat)**



South Africa's Temba Bavuma celebrates against Pakistan at Newlands Stadium in Cape Town yesterday. (AFP)

TENNIS

# Djokovic falls to Opelka in Brisbane quarter-finals

THE WAIT FOR THE 100TH CAREER TITLE WILL CONTINUE FOR SERBIAN GRAND SLAM KING

Reuters  
Brisbane

**N**ovak Djokovic's hunt for a landmark 100th ATP title ended with a whimper following an unexpected 7-6(6) 6-3 defeat by big-serving American Reilly Opelka in the Brisbane International quarter-finals yesterday.

Defeat was a huge blow for the Serb, who will bid to join Roger Federer (103) and Jimmy Connors (109) as players who have won at least 100 titles when he heads to the Australian Open, where he will also seek a 25th Grand Slam trophy.

Djokovic saved three break-points in stifling conditions to go 5-4 up but lost the opening set in a tough tiebreak as Opelka cranked up his serve and seized early control of his maiden tour meeting against the 37-year-old.

Opelka, who missed nearly two years due to injuries before returning to the elite circuit last year, broke for a 3-1 lead in the next as Djokovic looked rattled by the 6ft 11 in (2.11 m) American, who pulled off spectacular winners on both flanks.

The final blow came on Opelka's serve and the 27-year-old fittingly finished the match with his 16th ace against one of the game's best returners.

"He's the greatest player the sport has ever seen," said Opelka, shortly after one of his biggest wins. "It's difficult being in Novak's position. He can scout me or other opponents all day long. The reality is we have nothing to lose against him."

"You end up playing more free. You take a lot more risk because it's your only chance. If you play your



Winner Reilly Opelka of the United States (right) and Serbia's Novak Djokovic shake hands at the net after their singles quarter-final at the Brisbane International yesterday. (AFP)

normal level or even above it he's going to win every time.

"He gets guys that are good players who roll the dice. And on a day like this, when a lot of things go my way, that's how it works out."

Up next for Opelka is Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard in what promises to be an explosive battle after the Frenchman sent down 19 aces in his 7-5 7-6 (5) win over Czech Jakub Mensik to take his tournament tally to 75.

Defending champion Grigor Dimitrov went through after Jordan Thompson retired while trailing 6-4 2-1, while Jiri Lehecka made quick work of Nicolas Jarry, prevailing 6-4 6-4.

**SLOW START**

In the women's event, reigning Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka shrugged off another slow start and some shaky moments on her forehand late on to get past Marie Bouzkova 6-3 6-4 for her third straight-sets win this week.

Up next for Sabalenka is Russian 17-year-old Mirra Andreeva, who cut short Ons Jabeur's comeback from form and injury issues with a 6-4 7-6(2) win.

Anhelina Kalinina saved a matchpoint in the run of local wildcard Kimberly Birrell with a 4-6 6-1 7-5 win to book a clash with Polina Kudermetova, who

beat Ashlyn Krueger 7-6(5) 6-3. Four-times Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka made her first semi-final in nearly three years after rallying to a 6-7(2) 6-1 6-2 victory over Hailey Baptiste at the Auckland Classic.

"The key focuses I had were just to have a lot of belief and confidence in myself," said Osaka, who returned to the WTA Tour 12 months ago after a maternity break.

"I put a lot of work in throughout last year, and even though the results didn't show it, I'm just continuing to try as hard as I can and see where it gets me," Osaka added.

**Czech Republic hammer Italy, book United Cup semis with US**

Winner Tomas Machac of the Czech Republic (right) and Italy's Flavio Cobolli embrace after their singles quarter-final at the United Cup in Sydney yesterday. (AFP)



**Sydney:** The Czech Republic ended Italy's quest to claim a third straight team competition title yesterday, thumping them 2-0 to reach the semi-finals of the United Cup and book a meeting with former champions the United States.

The Italians finished a superb 2024 season by sweeping the men's Davis Cup and the women's Billie Jean King Cup titles but ran out of steam in the \$10m mixed team event ahead of this month's Australian Open.

Tomas Machac produced a dominant display for a 6-1 6-2 win over Flavio Cobolli in 54 minutes, sending the Czechs into their first semi-final in the tournament following group stage exits in their previous two attempts.

"I think this kind of tennis is the highest (level) that I can play," Machac said.

"I'm really happy I was able to play this kind of a match today, especially since it's an important

point. I was surprised that I was able to play great without any mistakes. I didn't give him any opportunity to come back. That was the key. I was trying to be as strong as possible mentally on the court and I was playing like Novak (Djokovic)."

Karolina Muchova put on another masterclass with her inventive brand of tennis in the opening match at Ken Rosewall Arena and sealed a 6-2 6-2 win over French Open and Wimbledon runner-up Jasmine Paolini.

"I really wanted to bring a point to the team, so I was trying to stay focused," United Cup debutant Muchova said after extending her record over the world number four to 5-0.

"Jasmine is an unbelievable player. It was a really tough match and I knew I had to go until the end." Kazakhstan take on Poland in the other semi-final that takes place today. The final will be held tomorrow.

**James stars in Lakers' win**



Los Angeles Lakers forward LeBron James reacts after forward Rui Hachimura was called for goaltending in the second half of their NBA game against the Portland Trail Blazers at Crypto.com Arena. Lakers won 114-106. James poured 38 points and scored eight assists to lead hosts Lakers to the win despite Anthony Davis being out with a left ankle sprain. (AFP)

MOTORSPORT

# Star Hamilton 'excited for year ahead' with Ferrari

AFP  
London

**L**ewis Hamilton said yesterday he "could not be more excited for the year ahead" as the seven-times world champion prepares for his first Formula One season with Ferrari.

Hamilton has joined the Italian giants from Mercedes, with whom he won six of his drivers' world titles. But the lure of racing for Ferrari, arguably the most celebrated team in Grand Prix history, proved too strong, with Hamilton hoping his move inspires others to seize new opportunities.

"I could not be more excited for the year ahead," Hamilton wrote on LinkedIn. "Moving to Scuderia Ferrari, there's a lot to reflect on."

The Englishman, who turns 40 on Tuesday, added: "To anyone considering their next move in 2025: embrace the change. Whether you're switching industries, learning a new skill, or even just taking on new challenges, remember that reinvention is powerful. Your next opportunity is always within reach."

"Here's to 2025 - a year of embracing new opportunities, staying hungry, and driving

forward with purpose. Let's make it one to remember. Andiamo (Let's go)."

Hamilton ended his post with the hashtag, "new job", alongside a picture of him karting in a red crash helmet as a child.

Hamilton, who made his name in Formula One with McLaren, has joined Ferrari after 12 seasons at Mercedes and his first race for his new team will be the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne on March 16.

He is due to unveil his 2025 car at Ferrari's season launch alongside team-mate Charles Leclerc on February 19 at the team's Maranello headquarters in northern Italy, with testing in Bahrain the following week.

Hamilton ended his two-and-a-half year winless streak at the British Grand Prix in July, but finished only seventh in the 2024 world championship, a mammoth 214 points behind title-winner Max Verstappen.

Hamilton joins a Ferrari side that were narrowly beaten to the constructors' title by McLaren last year.

He is bidding to win an outright record eighth world title - Hamilton shares the current record of seven with Michael Schumacher - and secure Ferrari their first championship in nearly two decades.



GOLF

# Refreshed Hoge grabs one-shot lead in Hawaii as Zalatoris gives hot chase



Tom Hoge

AFP  
Los Angeles, United States

**A**merican Tom Hoge fired a 9-under-par round of 64 to grab the first-round lead at the PGA Tour's season-opening The Sentry tournament in Kapalua, Hawaii.

Hoge led by a stroke from compatriot Will Zalatoris and Japan's Hideki Matsuyama at the first of eight 'signature events' on the tour.

Those events are designed to bring the elite of the tour together at regular points throughout the season but world number one Scottie Scheffler is missing after hurting his hand in a Christmas dinner cooking accident.

Hoge began in fine style with birdies on four of the opening five holes before he three-putted on

the par-4 sixth for a bogey. The 35-year-old, whose solitary win on the PGA Tour came at Pebble Beach in 2022, bounced back though with birdies on the seventh and ninth holes, reaching the turn in 31.

He made four birdies on the back nine, including on the par-5 18th, and was delighted with his work on the greens in particular.

"I really didn't have many expectations coming in, because there wasn't a whole lot of play or practice the last few months. But felt like I was putting really well coming into the week," he said after the first round.

Hoge was among the early players out and benefitted from relatively still conditions while those playing later in the afternoon had to contend with some gusty winds.

"We had a few holes where there wasn't a whole lot of impact from the wind.

"By the time we made the turn it came up pretty strong," he told reporters.

While there is only a short break in the PGA Tour's schedule between seasons, Hoge said he had made sure to take plenty of time off.

"I played all the way through Mexico, first week of November. Then was just at home, and we had our first child in early December, so (that) kind of forced time off."

"I feel like with the changes in the schedule, last year was a lot of golf from now until the Tour Championship, it was cramped in there pretty tight, so I felt like I was pretty burned out at that point, needed a little bit of time away," he said.

Zalatoris was bogey free in his impressive 65 as he looks to recapture the form that saw him finish runner-up in three major champi-

onships - the 2021 Masters and the PGA Championship and US Open the following year.

The 28-year-old Californian underwent back surgery in April 2023 but said he is feeling in good form.

"It's nice to be in a really good spot and really good head space. Body feels great. Put in a lot of great work over the last four months," he said.

"I don't need to be sitting on the range hitting 300 balls trying to find it, I need to go back out there and play the game."

Matsuyama threatened to grab a share of the lead after making an eagle on the par-45 15th, where he struck a 252-yard approach shot to six feet from the hole.

Americans Cameron Young and Collin Morikawa and Canadian Corey Connors were all a shot behind Zalatoris and Morikawa.

## MOTORSPORT

## Al-Attiyah takes third place in prologue as Dakar Rally kicks off

## Agencies

Bisha, Saudi Arabia

**Q**atari driver Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah came in third place at the Dakar Rally prologue in the cars category yesterday, kicking off the sixth edition in Saudi Arabia that will stretch nearly 8,000km across 12 stages. Al-Attiyah driving a Dacia Sandrider finished behind South Africa's Henk Lategan, who won the prologue. Lategan, driving a Toyota Hilux, finished a second clear of Sweden's Mattias Ekstrom over the 29km run in Bisha.

South African Lategan, who missed last year's Dakar due to a shoulder injury and last won a stage in 2022 said: "It wasn't a perfect drive, we made a few mistakes here and there, but it was a good stage. We had a good rhythm quite early on. Usually, I struggle to get going on the short stages. I need about 20km to warm up, but we knew this was quite important for the road position on the first stage, so we pushed a little bit."

The prologue times do not count towards the overall standings but those in the top 10 get to choose their starting position for the first stage today, a 499km route featuring 413km of timed sectors.

Sebastian Loeb came seventh but Carlos Sainz, who became the oldest winner of the race last year at the age of 61, was down in 25th place.

Loeb, a nine-time world rally cham-



Qatar's driver Nasser al-Attiyah and his navigator Edouard Boulanger drive during the prologue of the 47th Dakar Rally, in Bisha, Saudi.

pion, is chasing a first Dakar crown in his ninth attempt. Australian Daniel Sanders was the quickest of the motorbikes on his KTM, ahead of Botswana's Ross Branch and Spanish teenager Edgar Canet. Reigning champion Ricky Brabec of Honda came home fourth fastest.

Indian motorcycle rider Harith Noah, in

his sixth Dakar after finishing 11th overall last year and winning the Rally 2 class, withdrew after suffering a wrist fracture that required surgery. Spaniard Sandra Gomez, the only female rider in this year's edition, was 65th of 134.

A 434-strong colourful caravan made up of cars, bikes, quads and trucks set

out from Bisha for the opening prologue. Twelve stages now await the 778 competitors from 72 countries, with a January 17 finish in Shubaytah, on the border of the United Arab Emirates.

This year's route includes a second 48-hour stage in the Empty Quarter, a vast sea of sand with dunes as far as the eye can



Nasser al-Attiyah and Edouard Boulanger before the start of the Dakar Rally.

see. The 47th running of the event may be called the Dakar, but the last time the Senegalese capital actually hosted the finish was way back in 2007 - the security situation in Mauritania forced the 2008 cancellation. It moved then to South America until finding a new home in Saudi Arabia since 2020.

## FOOTBALL

## Salah targets Premier League glory in 'last year' at Liverpool

The 32-year-old Egyptian star's contract expires at the end of the season

## AFP

Liverpool

**M**ohamed Salah says he is motivated to do "something special" in what he believes will be his last year at Liverpool. The 32-year-old, whose contract expires at the end of the season, has been in scintillating form, propelling Arne Slot's team into a commanding six-point lead at the top of the Premier League.

The Egypt forward has scored 17 goals and provided 13 assists in 18 Premier League games this season ahead of the visit of struggling Manchester United tomorrow. Reports have suggested Salah is nearing an agreement with Liverpool but he said a deal was still "far away" after last weekend's 5-0 win at West Ham.

Salah was part of the side that ended Liverpool's 30-year wait to win a league title in 2020, but celebrations were muted as the players lifted the trophy at an empty Anfield during the coronavirus pandemic. "It's my last year in the club so you want to do something special for the city," Salah told Sky Sports in an interview. "We waited for that title for 30 years or so. So, to win it and it was the pandemic at that time, we didn't really have time to celebrate it in the right way. It's not a nice thing to do, so hopefully we can do it this year."

Salah is not the only high-profile Liverpool star out of contract at the end of the season. Captain Virgil van Dijk and England right-back Trent Alexander-Arnold are also now free to discuss terms with foreign clubs for next season. Together they have helped restore Liverpool to the top of English and European football.

Under previous manager Jurgen Klopp, they won a clean sweep of trophies, including the Champions League, Club World Cup, FA Cup and League Cup. But the League Cup is the only one they have won more than once and Salah believes his generation of players need a second Premier League title to cement their legacy.



Mohamed Salah has scored 17 goals and provided 13 assists in 18 Premier League games this season ahead of Liverpool's visit of struggling Manchester United tomorrow.

"My motivation this year was to win a trophy and be a big part of winning that trophy, especially the Premier League," he said. "I still believe the team needs a trophy. There is still half of the team left like me, Trent, Virgil, Alisson (Becker), Robbo (Andy Robertson). It's necessary for us to win another trophy before we all go."

Liverpool coach Arne Slot was asked whether he could categorically state that Liverpool would not let Alexander-Arnold leave in the January transfer window, with the defender heavily linked with a move to Real Madrid.

Slot said Alexander-Arnold was "fully committed" to Liverpool and would be

playing tomorrow. "Hopefully he brings the same performances as he brought in for the last half-year, because I think everybody saw how great a first half of the season he had, how much he is here, how much he wants to win here," said Slot."

## MAN UNITED 'MUCH BETTER' THAN LEAGUE TABLE SHOWS: SLOT

Meanwhile, Slot says crisis-hit Manchester United are "much, much better" than their shocking position in the Premier League suggests as he prepares his Liverpool team for a clash against their fierce rivals. Liverpool are six points clear at the top of the Premier League table - and are hot favourites to land a 20th English top-flight crown, which would pull them level with record-holders United.

United, by contrast, are 14th in the table after five defeats in their past six league games under new manager Ruben Amorim. But Slot, also in his first campaign in England, is adamant he will not take his opponents lightly at Anfield, when asked if he might rest players at pre-match press conference.

"No, of course I'm not going to plan to rest any player because it's a big game and I think it's for me I said it before the first fixture (a 3-0 win at Old Trafford) and I can say it one more time, that they have much better players in my opinion than maybe the league table shows at the moment. I think it's going to take a while maybe for Ruben Amorim to bring this out of the players... but they will definitely go up and they are much, much, much better than the league table shows at the moment."

The Dutchman said he had sympathy with his rival in the Old Trafford hot seat, who joined United from Portuguese champions Sporting Lisbon in November. "I think every manager sympathises with every other manager, because we all know how much pressure this job brings," said Slot. "That's not different for him than for me, or for any other manager that works in the Premier League, or somewhere else around the world."

## Qatar U-20 preliminary squad for AFC U-20 Asian Cup announced

**Doha:** Spanish coach Felix Angel of the Qatar U-20 national football team announced the list of players preparing for the AFC U-20 Asian Cup, which will be held in China. Qatar are in Group A alongside hosts China, Australia and Kyrgyzstan. The 42nd edition of the tournament will be held from February 12 to March 1, with the host nation, China, automatically qualifying, along with 15 other teams who secured their spots through the qualifiers held last October.

Coach Angel called up a squad of 30 players, including three goalkeepers: Abubakar Mohamed, Jalal Amir (Kahlora, Spain), and Mohamed Fawzi (AI Ahli). The squad also includes Ibrahim Hassan, Awab Fadil, Jassim al-Hamad, Ziad Fadi, Moath Ibrahim, Abdullah Mujeeb, Mohamed Khaled, Nawaf al-Yeheri, Youssef Mohamed, Younis Mohamed (Kahlora, Spain), Ayoub al-Aloui (AI Gharafah), Bassam Adel, Tahseen Mohamed, Saleem Reda (Alcorcon, Spain), Jamil Freikh, Shamin Abdullah, Moatamin Mohamed (Cultural, Spain), Joao Pedro (AI Arabi), Abdulaziz Abbas, Ghanem al-Bukhit (AI Duhaile), Abdulaziz al-Bakri (Umm Salal), Abdullah Salman, Mohamed Hani (AI Sadd), Ali Mohamed, Nasser Adel, Nour Ed-dine Tamer (AI Ahli), and Fayeze Marwan (AI Wakra).

Qatar qualified for the finals by earning a perfect nine points in the qualifiers in Group 10, held in Doha last September. They won all three of their matches: 3-0 against Singapore, 2-0 against Hong Kong, and 3-2 against Jordan, while Jordan finished second with 6 points.

Throughout its history in the AFC U-20 Championship, Qatar U-20 team, which will make its 16th continental appearance, won the title for the first time in 2014 when Myanmar hosted the tournament, defeating North Korea 1-0 in the final. Qatar also reached the semifinals in the 2018 edition in Indonesia. Additionally, Qatar finished as runners-up in the 1980 edition, third in 1988, and fourth in both 1986 and 1990.

Qatar's U-20 team has participated in 15 previous editions of the AFC U-20 Championship.

## LA LIGA

## Barca coach Flick optimistic but 'not happy' over Olmo situation

## AFP

Barcelona

**B**arcelona coach Hansi Flick said yesterday he was unhappy about potentially losing key midfielder Dani Olmo because of the club's dire financial state, but optimistic the situation would be resolved successfully.

The Catalan giants said Tuesday they had asked the Spanish football federation to grant Spanish international Olmo a new licence to play, after his initial registration expired on December 31, 2024 and Barcelona exhausted legal avenues to extend it. Barcelona signed Olmo for around 60mn in the summer and according to Spanish

media his contract includes a clause which would allow him to be released if he is not registered.

The Spanish top flight's strict financial rules limit indebted Barcelona's spending and they were initially only able to register Olmo after defender Andreas Christensen was injured in August. Along with Olmo, striker Pau Victor is in a similar position.

"If I am honest, I was not happy about the situation, and the players are not happy about the situation," Flick told a news conference. "But it is like it is and we have to accept it, we are professional, we have to play football. I have to coach and the club has to do their job. The confidence (in the club) is there, I am always positive about things, but we have to wait for the decision."

Barcelona visit Barbastro in the Copa del Rey

round of 32 today with Olmo and Victor currently unavailable. "My job is to prepare the team for the cup," continued Flick. "I was in contact before Christmas with the president and I spoke today with the president. I have the confidence with the club that they do their job and I do my job."

An important figure in Spain's Euro 2024 victory, Olmo, 26, has impressed since his move from Leipzig, scoring five league goals. La Liga said on Tuesday

"Barcelona has presented no alternative" complying with the league's spending rules that would allow them to register players. Losing Olmo would be a blow to the third-place Blaugrana's bid for silverware this year and another embarrassing mistake after years of financial mismanagement.

