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GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

Bumrah absent but Pant shines for India as wickets tumble in Sydney

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TROPHEE DES CHAMPIONS

PSG's Donnarumma fit to face Monaco after bad face injury

Victory today at Stadium 974 would see PSG claim the trophy for the 11th time in 12 years

Agencies
Doha

Paris St Germain goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma could return to action when the French champions play AS Monaco in the Trophée des Champions (French Super Cup) at the Stadium 974 in Doha today, coach Luis Enrique said, after the Italian keeper was sidelined while recovering from a face injury. PSG came back from 2-1 down to win 4-2 at Monaco in Ligue 1 on Dec 18 but they had to replace Donnarumma midway through the first half after a dangerous challenge by Monaco defender Wilfried Singo left the keeper with a gashed face.

The 25-year-old Italian needed to be urgently stitched up by the club doctor on the pitch to stop the bleeding, and has not played since. "All three goalkeepers are fit to play and available for tomorrow," Luis Enrique told a press conference in Doha yesterday. "There is no problem concerning any of them, any of the three could play. I will decide tomorrow who will. Everyone is in good shape, and we have one more training session."

The Spanish coach has brought his entire team to Doha, including some of the players who had been rumoured to leave Paris during the January transfer window. "It seemed interesting to me to leave together to start the year and the second part of the season together," Luis Enrique said.

"It's a final, which is always a special game with a title at stake, so that means the more united we are, the better. The (league) game against Monaco was an excellent match for the supporters," Luis Enrique added.

"We had control from the beginning. Despite that, Monaco made a good start to the second half. It's normal that there are certain phases against such a team. The result reflected the fact that we were better but it's true that the game was open. I expect a good match tomorrow."

The 54-year-old said that, with today's game being a final, emotions were guaranteed to run high. "It's a final between the two best teams in the championship, so of course it will be difficult," Enrique said. "We will need to be at a high level to beat Monaco. (But) we are motivated, prepared, and looking forward to the game tomorrow."

Trophée des Champions game is the traditional curtain-raiser to the French campaign. PSG is on course to win an 11th Ligue 1 title in the last 13 seasons, while victory today would see them claim the French Super Cup for the 11th time in 12 years.



PSG coach Luis Enrique.



Paris Saint-Germain players take part in a training session at the Stadium 974 in Doha yesterday, on the eve of their Trophée des Champions final against AS Monaco. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil



Monaco, who trail the leaders PSG by 10 points in Ligue 1, will have a tough task ahead at the Stadium 974.

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 surround-

ings. With their comeback victory at Monaco, PSG extended their unbeaten run in the league this season to 16 games. Alongside Serie A side Juventus, the French

champions are the only unbeaten team remaining in Europe's top five leagues in this campaign. Third-placed Monaco trail the Ligue 1 leaders by 10 points.

Meanwhile, Monaco coach Adi Huetter, who has signed a two-year contract extension that will keep him in the principality until June 2027, was hopeful of beating PSG today. "Three weeks ago, we faced them, and it was tough, but we were close. We lacked a bit of luck. It's a new match, and while PSG have their strengths, we have ours," Huetter said.

The 54-year-old Austrian arrived at Monaco in summer 2023 and guided the club to a second-place finish and Champions League football during his first term in charge. His contract was set to expire at the end of the 2024/25 season.

"I am very happy and proud to be a part of this project," Huetter said of extending his contract at the Stade Louis II. Huetter's time in charge of the principality side has been marked by an attacking brand of football, as well as the promotion of young players from Monaco's academy into the first team. His win-rate over the course of the 60 matches he has overseen in all competitions stands at almost 60 percent.

MOTORSPORT

Al-Attiyah 20th as Quintero wins Dakar Rally first stage



Dacia Sandriders' driver Nasser al-Attiyah and co-driver Edouard Boulanger in action during first stage of the Dakar Rally in Bisha, Saudi Arabia, yesterday. (Reuters)

Agencies
Bisha, Saudi Arabia

American Seth Quintero won the first stage of the Dakar Rally yesterday, while Qatar's five-time winner Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah was in 20th position.

Organisers had initially named French Mini driver Guerlain Chicherit as the stage winner. But that was overturned and Quintero credited with victory after recuperating 95 seconds after stopping for an accident. The American timed 4hr 35min 08sec on the 413km special around Bisha in Saudi Arabia, finishing 45sec ahead of Chicherit, organisers said.

Defending champion Carlos Sainz (Ford) came in seventh, while nine-time world rally champion Sebastien Loeb was 22nd, 11min 31sec off the lead pace.

Dacia driver al-Attiyah said tactics had played a big part in the day's classification and said he had taken the stage easy, stopping for 15 minutes after a puncture to secure a more favourable position today. "Maybe we lose a

lot of time... but it's very important for tomorrow. If I start 50th, that would be nice," said the Qatari. "Last year, we took a risk but we learned. We don't need to learn this year, we need to be smart, and I'm really quite happy to manage today without any problems. The stage wasn't easy, but we took it steady and avoided mistakes."

Competitors will today tackle a 48-hour stage in the Empty Quarter, a vast sea of sand with dunes as far as the eye can see. Introduced last year, the stage features a special of 1,000km while drivers and riders have to bivouac on the sand and are not allowed outside help.

Setting off first through the sea of dunes and over rough and rocky desert tracks is a disadvantage for a driver compared to those who follow. "The goal was not to do the best time, so we decided to stop for a few minutes at the end to lose a bit of time and not to be first on the road tomorrow," said Frenchman Loeb. "Everyone played the same game."

Chicherit also stopped when a small fire broke out around the exhaust but he decided to adopt a different strat-

egy to rivals. "I predicted that all the top guns would follow the same strategy, so I asked myself, 'Should I stay with the herd in a low-risk, low-reward approach, or should I do the exact opposite?'" he explained. "Winning tomorrow is virtually impossible. I need to limit the damage to 15 minutes or less. If I can pull it off, I'll still be within five minutes of the rest."

Setting off first, or opening the road, is often seen as a disadvantage. It has been made even tougher this year by the fact that car and motorbike categories will drive differing routes, meaning drivers will be unable to follow the trails set by the faster bikes.

Australia's Daniel Sanders (KTM) took the honours in the motorbike category. The 30-year-old took the lead at the 151km mark and kept his cool through to the finish, timing 4:41:27 over the special. Defending champion Ricky Brabec of the US and Botswana's Ross Branch were 2min off Sanders.

Hero rider Sebastian Buehler's rally ended after the German crashed and injured his shoulder.

BORDER-GAVASKAR TROPHY FIFTH TEST

Bumrah absent for India as wickets tumble in Sydney

PANT PRODUCED SOME EXTRAORDINARY SHOTS IN A STUNNING 28-BALL HALF CENTURY

Reuters
Sydney

India brushed off the absence yesterday of captain Jasprit Bumrah to dismiss Australia for 181 and reach 141 for six for an overall lead of 145 on an extraordinary second day of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy's finely-balanced fifth Test.

On a day of high drama at a sun-bathed Sydney Cricket Ground, Bumrah took the first wicket to set India on their way but departed with the team doctor soon after lunch for medical scans of his back after suffering spasms.

Prasidh Krishna (3-42), Mohammed Siraj (3-51) and Nitish Kumar Reddy stepped into the considerable bowling void left by their captain to rout Australia and fire India to a slender first-innings lead of four runs at tea.

There was still plenty of spice in the wicket, however, and paceman Scott Boland took 4-42 in the final session to add to his four-wicket haul on Friday, as Australia lopped the top off the Indian batting and dug deep into the middle order.

Rishabh Pant threw off the shackles and produced some extraordinary shots in a stunning 28-ball half century to stop the rot but he too departed for 61 in the final hour, Australia skipper Pat Cummins claiming the 14th wicket of the day.

There was still time for Boland to claim his fourth victim in the shape of Nitish Kumar Reddy, leaving Ravindra Jadeja, who was eight not out, and Washington Sundar, unbeaten on six, at the crease at the close of play.

"As many runs as possible would be great for us," Krishna said, when asked how big a lead the Indian bowlers would be comfortable defending, potentially without Bumrah.

"We don't really know how the wicket is behaving. It's going up, it's going down. If you can be aggressive, there is risk involved, but you get a reward of runs."

Australia coach Andrew McDonald thought "generational" bowling talent on both teams was



India's Rishabh Pant plays a shot on day two of the fifth Test against Australia at the Sydney Cricket Ground in Sydney yesterday. (AFP)

the reason for the number of falling wickets and said his plans for day three were straightforward. "First and foremost, we've got four wickets to get, to try to keep that total as low as possible," he told reporters. "There's a long way still to go...so we'll see what happens."

The crowd of 47,257 enjoying the Sydney sunshine certainly got their money's worth as the momentum shifted back and forth, as it has over the series, which Australia lead 2-1.

Debutant all-rounder Beau Webster, whose 57 was Australia's highest score, was cheered to the rafters for his half century and again when he removed Shubman Gill for 13

later in the day to claim his maiden Test wicket.

Virat Kohli, standing in as India captain after Bumrah's departure, was booed to the crease for what is likely to be his final innings in Australia, and cheered back to the boundary rope after Boland had him caught in the slips for a timid six. Boland is fast becoming a cult hero in Australia and possibly the loudest roar came when he bowled a peach of a delivery to take out opener Yashasvi Jaiswal's off stump and end a promising innings on 22.

The Indian supporters had plenty to cheer too, starting with Bumrah's dismissal of Marnus Labuschagne in the morning session

to take his series tally to 32 wickets at an average of 13.06.

Krishna also had the Indian flags waving when he had Steve Smith caught in the slips for 33 to break up a fifth-wicket partnership of 57 with Webster and leave the former Australia captain five short of 10,000 Test runs. India, who dropped captain Rohit Sharma for the match, need to win in Sydney to square up the series and retain the Border-Gavaskar Trophy.

BRIEF SCORES: India 141 for 6 (Pant 61, Boland 4-42) **and 185 lead Australia 181** (Webster 57, Smith 33, Prasidh 3-42, Siraj 3-51) **by 145 runs.**

I'm not retiring, says India's Rohit after losing Test spot

Indian Test skipper **Rohit Sharma** said sitting out the final match of the series against Australia due to poor form does not mean he will retire, adding that critics will not decide when he should walk away from the sport.

Rohit was dropped after scoring only 31 runs in five innings as India look to draw the final test and retain the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, with pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah replacing him as captain in Sydney.

Rohit has only one fifty in his last 15 test innings, which include 10 single-digit scores, but the 37-year-old said he had confidence in himself to turn things around.

"This decision is not a retirement decision nor am I going to take myself out of the game," Rohit told Star Sports broadcaster on day two of the Sydney Test.

"I sat out of this match because I'm not scoring runs. There is no guarantee that runs will not come two or five months down the line. I have seen a lot in cricket. Every minute, every second, every day life changes.

"I have belief that things will change, but at the same time I have to be realistic as well. So life won't change by what someone or says. I've played the game for years.

"They can't decide when we should retire, when we should sit out, when we should captain. I am a sensible man, a mature man, a father of two kids. So I think I know what I need in life."

'I AM NOT IN FORM'

With India trailing 2-1 ahead of the fifth and final test, Rohit said he "stood down" after a discussion with the selectors and head coach Gautam Gambhir, who had declined to confirm on the eve of the game if the batter would play. The match is finely poised with India at 141-6 in the second innings, leading Australia by 145 runs.

"The chat that I had with the coach and the selector was very simple - my bat is not scoring runs, I am not in form, this is an important match and we need players who are in form," Rohit added.

"The boys are not in great form. So I had this simple thought in my mind - we can't carry out-of-form players.

"That's why I thought I should inform the coach and the selector about what's on my mind. They backed my decision. They said, 'You've been playing for many years, you're the best judge of what you are doing.'"

India's next test series is against England in June when Rohit will be 38.



FOCUS

Pakistan in trouble after Rickelton leads SA run feast

AFP
Cape Town

Pakistan were reeling in response to a relentless South African batting performance on the second day of the second Test against Pakistan at Newlands yesterday.

Pakistan were 64-3 at the close after double centurion Ryan Rickelton led South Africa to a first-innings total of 615.

Kagiso Rabada struck twice and Marco Jansen once when Pakistan started their innings. The tourists were effectively four down because opening batsman Saim Ayub was ruled out of the match with a broken right ankle.

Babar Azam, forced to open the batting in Ayub's absence, was 31 not out at the close with his side still 551 runs behind.

Left-handed opening batsman Rickelton made a chanceless 259, South Africa's joint seventh highest Test score, before he was seventh man out with the total on 557.

South African captain Temba Bavuma opted to keep Pakistan in the field until the last man, 18-year-old debutant Kwenza Maphaka, was out 40 minutes after tea. By then, South Africa had added 299 runs to their overnight 316-4, scoring at almost five runs an over. Resuming on 176, Rickelton was content to play the anchor role while Kyle Verreynne hit 100 off 147 balls in a sixth-wicket partnership of 148 off 222 deliveries.

Verreynne holed out to deep midwicket after an innings which included five sixes as well as nine fours, but Rickelton continued to bat flawlessly while Jansen thrashed a 42-ball half-century.

A rapid seventh-wicket stand of 86 was ended when Rickelton was caught at mid-on going for a big hit after batting for 607 minutes. He faced 343 balls and hit 29 fours and three sixes.

Jansen was out for 62 off 54 balls, but Keshav Maharaj hit 40 off 35 deliveries as the bowlers continued to take a pounding.

South Africa's innings ended when Maphaka was bowled second ball for nought to become the 100th Test wicket for Mohammad Abbas.

At 18 years 270 days, Maphaka became South Africa's youngest Test player when the match started on Friday.

Abbas took three for 94, while wicketkeeper Mohammad Rizwan held six catches in the South African innings.

Pakistan captain Shan Masood was caught at first slip off Rabada for two in the first over of his team's reply. Kamran Ghulam was bowled by Jansen for 12 and Saud Shakeel was out for nought, providing a second catch for David Bedingham at first slip off Rabada.

Pakistan were floundering at 20-3, before Babar and Rizwan put on an unbeaten 44 for the fourth wicket as the day's play ended.

BRIEF SCORES

South Africa 615 in 141.3 overs (R. Rickelton 259, T. Bavuma 106, K. Verreynne 100, M. Jansen 62, K. Maharaj 40; Mohammad Abbas 3-94, Mir Hamza 2-127, Khurram Shahzad 2-123, Salman Agha 3-148) **vs Pakistan 64-3 in 21 overs** (Babar Azam 31 not out; K. Rabada 2-9).

Match situation: Pakistan trail by 551 runs with seven wickets remaining in the first innings.



South Africa's Ryan Rickelton celebrates after scoring 250 runs during the second day of the second Test against Pakistan at Newlands stadium in Cape Town yesterday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Shah Test century tips tide in favour of Afghanistan

AFP
Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

Rahmat Shah struck 139 in Bulawayo yesterday to revive Afghanistan hopes of winning a series-deciding second Test against Zimbabwe before rain stopped play late on day three.

The experienced 31-year-old put on 132 for the seventh wicket with debutant Ismat Alam (64 not out) to turn a worrying overnight situation into a potential path to victory.

Afghanistan were 46-3 after day two at Queens Sports Club, 40 runs behind having lost star batter and captain Hashmatullah Shahidi (13).

Much hinged on Shah, a double centurion in the drawn first Test, and he proved equal to the task as Afghanistan reached 291-7 by the close of play for a 205-run lead.

Shah faced 275 balls over two days, having come in at No. 3 with the tourists reeling at 18-2 in the southern city.

He performed patiently throughout, offering few chances to an increasingly frustrated Zimbabwe attack, and struck 14 fours in a 401-minute stand.

His innings ended shortly before the rain. A pacy, good length ball from the most successful Zimbabwe bowler, quick Blessing Muzarabani, beat Shah and he was trapped leg before.

Unbeaten Alam followed the cautious approach of Shah, hitting four fours off 122 balls as he atoned for a first-innings duck.

Zia-ur-Rehman (6), Afsar Zazai (5) and Shahidullah Kamal



(22) were the other Afghan batters to fall on day three, as both teams seek a first Test win since beating each other in 2021.

Brian Bennett caught Rehman at short fine leg, a brilliant catch by Dion Myers at backward point dismissed Zazai and a Shahidullah prod was snapped up by Takudzwanashe Kaitano at silly point.

Muzarabani (4-71) and fellow quick Richard Ngarava (2-47) fared best for Zimbabwe on a surface that has become batter friendly after initially favouring the bowlers.

BRIEF SCORES

Afghanistan 157 in 44.3 overs (Rashid Khan 25; Sikandar Raza 3-30, Newman Nyamhuri 3-42) **and 291-7 in 91 overs** (Rahmat Shah 139, Ismat Alam 64 not out; Blessing Muzarabani 4-71, Richard Ngarava 2-47) **v Zimbabwe 243 in 73.3 overs** (Craig Ervine 75, Sikandar Raza 61, Sean Williams 49; Rashid Khan 4-94, Yamin Ahmadzai 3-62). **Rain stopped play** **Match situation:** Afghanistan lead by 205 runs.

HORSE RACING

Wafei dazzles on Qatar debut, claims Al Rakayat Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Wafei yesterday dazzled on Qatar debut, claiming the Al Rakayat Cup with an emphatic three-length victory in the 2200m Thoroughbred Handicap feature at Al Uqda Racecourse.

The triumph for the four-year-old gelding capped off a brilliant treble on the day for Wathman Racing and the trainer-jockey duo of Alban de Mieulle and Soufiane Saadi. Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Racing Manager Abdullah Rashid al-Kubaisi presented trophies to the winners.

Earlier, Kafalat won the first title (Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate) for the trio with Skipper securing their second win (Thoroughbred Novice Plate).

Trainer Hamad al-Jehani and jockey Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi also celebrated two victories with Charlie Bu Thaila winning the Local Thoroughbred Handicap 0-50, while Al Hemroor prevailed



Team Wafei celebrates after the gelding won the Al Rakayat Cup at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

in Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate.

In other races, Lukas Delozier guided Mohammed Ghazali-trained Pure Motion to win in the Thoroughbred Handicap 45-65 (Class 6), while Jassim Ghazali-trained Townsend Manor reigned supreme in the Thoroughbred Handicap 70-90 with Fayos Mar-

tin Borja in the saddle.

RESULTS

5th Al Uqda Race Meeting - Al Rakayat Cup

WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

1 - Al Rakayat Cup - Thoroughbred Handicap 70-90

(Class 3)

Wafei, Alban Elie De Mieulle, Soufiane Saadi

2 - Thoroughbred Handicap 70-90 (Class 3)

Townsend Manor, Jassim Ghazali, Fayos Martin Borja

3 - Thoroughbred Novice Plate (Class 5)



Jockey Soufiane Saadi guided Wafei to victory. PICTURES: Juhaim

Skipper, Alban Elie De Mieulle, Soufiane Saadi

4 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap 0-50 (Class 5)

Charlie Bu Thaila, Hamad al-Jehani, Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi

5 - Thoroughbred Handicap 45-65 (Class 6)

Pure Motion, Mohammed Ghazali,

Lukas Delozier

6 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate

Al Hemroor, Hamad al-Jehani, Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi

7 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate (4yr Only) (Class 6)

Kafalat, Alban Elie De Mieulle, Soufiane Saadi

TENNIS

Sabalenka sweeps into final, Dimitrov retires hurt

'I think every year I'm getting a little bit better'

AFP
Brisbane

World number one Aryna Sabalenka brushed aside Russian teenage sensation Mirra Andrejeva to storm into the final of the Brisbane International yesterday, as men's defending champion Grigor Dimitrov retired with soreness.

Sabalenka broke Andrejeva once in the first set and twice in the second to win 6-3, 6-2 in an ominous display just over a week before she launches her Australian Open defence.

Sabalenka, runner-up in Brisbane in 2024, has won the last two Australian Opens and the way she absorbed the pressure from Andrejeva in the first set, then turned the screws in the second, showed why she is considered a strong chance to make it three in a row this year.

"I definitely think that I have improved a lot mentally, physically and skills as well," the Belarusian said.

"I think every year I'm getting a little bit better."

Sabalenka now plays Russian qualifier Polina Kudermetova, who continued her fairytale week when she beat Ukraine's Anhelina Kalinina 6-4, 6-3.

In the men's draw, Dimitrov retired from his semi-final with a painful hip. Unseeded Czech player Jiri Lehecka was leading 6-4, 4-4 when the Bulgarian left the court with the physiotherapist



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka celebrates winning her semi-final against Russia's Mirra Andrejeva at the Brisbane International tournament in Brisbane yesterday. (AFP)

for a medical timeout. Dimitrov, ranked 10 in the world, returned but played one point before retiring.

Lehecka will play giant American Reilly Opelka, who has one of the biggest serves in the game.

It will be the 23-year-old Lehecka's fourth final on the ATP Tour and he will be aiming to add

the Brisbane title to his Adelaide win last January. "I will need to be focused 100 percent all the time," Lehecka said about facing Opelka's huge serve in the final. "I will need to focus on every point, every chance, because the chance can be gone in a very small moment."

Opelka, who was ranked 17 in the world before being forced out

of the game for almost two years with wrist and hip injuries, managed to outserve rising French star Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard.

He broke the Frenchman in the first set then was able to take the tiebreak to win 6-3, 7-6 (7/4).

"It's great to be in another final - I didn't think I'd be playing in one at all," Opelka said.

"But once I was out of pain I had confidence that I could make it back."

Osaka into first final since 2022 ahead of Australian Open

Former world number one Naomi Osaka reached her first final since 2022 yesterday as she swept aside unseeded American Alycia Parks at the Auckland Classic.

The four-time Grand Slam champion from Japan won 6-4, 6-2 in another confidence boost ahead of the Australian Open starting on January 12 in Melbourne.

Osaka was contesting her first semi-final since 2022, having taken a break from tennis and becoming a mother in 2023. She returned to the sport a year ago.

The 27-year-old showed no sign of the nerves that had marked her first three wins in Auckland, producing a clinical performance to set up a final on Sunday against Clara Tauson of Denmark.

"Of course I'm really happy to get to the final here, I've actually never got to a final a week before Melbourne so this is like a career first for me," said Osaka, a two-time Australian Open champion now ranked 57th.

FOCUS

Gauff, Swiatek to clash for United Cup as Machac makes abrupt exit

AFP
Sydney

Coco Gauff and Iga Swiatek will battle for United Cup glory after the USA and Poland won their respective semi-finals yesterday in Sydney amid bizarre circumstances.

Swiatek beat Elena Rybakina to help last year's runners-up Poland see off Kazakhstan and they were joined in today's final of the mixed-teams tournament by the Gauff-led United States.

The Americans defeated the Czech Republic, with Gauff beating Karolina Muchova and then an increasingly irate Tomas Machac retiring from his match against Taylor Fritz in an abrupt and bewildering ending.

"I woke up so late today," said Gauff, 20, after she dismissed Muchova 6-1, 6-4 to underline what a threat she will be at the Australian Open starting next week.

Gauff, the world number three, added: "The whole match I was intense and focused, that made the difference today."

Big-serving Fritz, ranked fourth in the world, lost the first set on a tie break but fought back in the second and looked poised to level up their men's singles match when a hot and bothered Machac shook hands, sending the Americans through.

"Not the way I want to win in the end, but I think we're all happy to be through to the final," said Fritz.

He said that his opponent, who had ranted at the Czech bench and squandered chances to seal the match, told him afterwards he had cramp.

"I didn't expect it to end so abruptly. I did not notice at the time that he was cramping," said Fritz.

Five-time Grand Slam champion Swiatek played a starring

role for Poland in their semi-final against Kazakhstan as she beat Rybakina 7-6 (7/5), 6-4.

"This win makes me really proud," Swiatek said after giving Poland an unassailable 2-0 lead in the tie.

"It is perfect preparation for the Australian Open," said the world number two.

Swiatek again played with strapping on her right thigh, having been troubled in her tough three-set win over Britain's Katie Boulter in the quarter-finals.

Swiatek beat Elena Rybakina to help last year's runners-up Poland see off Kazakhstan and they were joined in final of the mixed-teams tournament by the Gauff-led USA

That clash lasted nearly three hours and Swiatek was slow out of the blocks against Rybakina, who is ranked sixth in the world.

They went to a first-set tie break after Rybakina saved two set points, before the 23-year-old Pole pulled away to take her country into the final.

"I for sure did not start well and had the handbrake on a bit. I knew I had to do something and change the momentum," said Swiatek, who made light of any injury concerns.

She is relishing the prospect of a meeting with Gauff.

"I think at this stage she's developing every month and it's going to be also a nice challenge," she said.

Hubert Hurkacz put Poland on the way when he beat Alexander Shevchenko 6-3, 6-2 in the men's singles.

The 16th-ranked Hurkacz lost both his singles matches in group play but defeated Britain's Billy Harris in the quarter-finals and took that momentum into the meeting with Shevchenko.

PSG for Communities launches 'One Team - Onze de Légende' programme in Doha

Doha: The Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) endowment fund is proud to announce the first international launch of its flagship program "One Team - Onze de Légende" in Doha in partnership with Qatar Foundation through its Ability Friendly Program and Generation Amazing Foundation.

This initiative, supported by PSG for Communities via the Paris Saint-Germain endowment fund, brings autistic and neurotypical children together on the pitch, promoting inclusion through football. Yesterday, the Paris Saint-Germain family gathered at Qatar Foundation's Education City in Doha to celebrate the first overseas launch of the "One Team - Onze de Légende" programme.

Around twenty children selected by the PSG Academy and Qatar Foundation had the opportunity to take part in their first training session, led by coaches and educators trained in the unique method developed by PSG for Communities. Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique and his staff, together with PSG Legend Claude Makélélé, also took part in the session, help-

ing to provide an unforgettable moment of sharing and joy for the young participants, all united by their shared passion for football. Each child received a Paris Saint-Germain jersey and various gifts in the Club's colours.

"Here in Doha, we take another significant step in our commitment to fostering inclusion across borders with our program One Team - Onze de Légende. With the support of Generation Amazing Foundation and Qatar Foundation, we aim to train as many coaches as possible in our methodology and enrich our pedagogy by sharing our respective expertise. One Team - Onze de Légende is destined to expand and be rolled out worldwide. We want the know-how developed by PSG for Communities to benefit as many people as possible."

Fabien Allègre, Vice-President of the Paris Saint-Germain endowment fund said: "This programme, a collaboration between Qatar Foundation, PSG for Communities, Paris Saint-Germain Academy Qatar and Generation Amazing Foundation marks a significant



milestone in our ongoing partnership, which aims to promote inclusion through sports. The Ability Friendly Program, part of Qatar Foundation's Pre-University Education, plays a pivotal role in supporting PSG for Communities and Paris Saint-Germain Academy. The academy's efforts align perfectly with our mission to promote inclusion and expand opportunities for people with disabilities. This

partnership reflects our unwavering commitment to empowering them and ensuring their active engagement in sports."

Abdullah al-Kaabi, Head of Sports Affairs at Qatar Foundation's Pre-University Education, said: "We are proud to collaborate with PSG for Communities and Qatar Foundation to bring the One Team - Onze de Légende programme to Qatar and communities worldwide.

Through this partnership, and in alignment with Generation Amazing Foundation's vision, we aim to empower individuals of all abilities, leveraging the universal language of sport to inspire inclusion, resilience, and opportunity." Nasser al-Khori, Executive Director of Generation Amazing Foundation, said: "I'm delighted to have been able to take part in this important day, marked by the

launch of the One Team - Onze de Légende program in Doha. Seeing so many neurotypical and neurotypical children together, and being able to share the values of soccer with them, makes me very happy, and gives a whole new dimension to the actions carried out by PSG for Communities."

Luis Enrique, coach of Paris Saint-Germain, said: "This first training session marked the middle of the three days dedicated to the launch of "One Team - Onze de Légende" in Doha, during which numerous theoretical and practical exchanges were held on the program, the role of the facilitators, the challenges of autism, and behaviour management. Since its creation, "One Team - Onze de Légende" has allowed dozens of children to thrive through the values of sport, such as mutual support, team spirit, and solidarity.

Every week, training sessions are organized in Clamart and Poissy, led by specialized educators from PSG for Communities. In 2025, the program will also be rolled out in other regions of France and internationally.

SPOTLIGHT

Bahrain fight back to stun Oman, win Arabian Gulf Cup

Two goals in two minutes late in the game gave Bahrain a second triumph in the regional competition

By Sports Reporter
Kuwait City

Two dramatic minutes were enough to turn Arabian Gulf Cup final in Bahrain's favour as they came back from a goal down to beat Oman 2-1 and lift their second regional title in Kuwait yesterday.

Oman had taken a first half lead, and looked to be heading towards their third title, but Bahrain fought back in sensational style. The atmosphere inside the Jaber Al Ahmad International Stadium was electric as 57,674 fans anticipated a festival of football provided by the tournament's two most impressive sides who topped their respective groups.

Following an early spell of Oman pressure, it was Bahrain who missed a golden opportunity to take the lead on 12 minutes when Mohamed Marhoon blazed over with the goal at his mercy from inside the six-yard box. But Oman went ahead four minutes later when Ali al-Busaidi's outswinging corner was headed home superbly by winger Abdul Rahman al-Mushaifri.

Bahrain came close to levelling at the end of an open first half but Ali Madan's shot flashed across the Omani goal to send the teams into the interval with just the one goal between them.

Bahrain pushed hard for an equaliser in the second half and got their reward in the 78th minute when a rash challenge on Marhoon saw the referee point to the spot. The winger dusted himself down to slot home in style and atone for his earlier miss.

Just two minutes later and the Bahrain end erupted once again when Marhoon



Bahrain players and support staff celebrate with the trophy after winning the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup at Jaber Al Ahmad Stadium in Kuwait City yesterday. (AFP)

burst clear down the left wing and his cross was deflected into his own net by unfortunate Oman centre-back, Mohammed al-Masalami.

The double blow stunned Oman, who

were the losing finalists in Iraq last time out, and they struggled to find a way back into the match, leaving Bahrain as worthy winners of what has been a hugely entertaining two weeks of football.

The 26th Arabian Gulf Cup has been an undoubted success. More than 450,000 fans packed into the two stadiums to watch 15 matches. All eyes will now move to September 2026 when Saudi Arabia will host

the 27th edition.

There was some consolation for the hosts Kuwait with striker Mohammad Dahan being named the player of the tournament, and picking up a cheque for \$10,000.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arsenal stumble in title race as Man City stroll



Arsenal and Brighton players vie for the ball during the Premier League match in Brighton yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
London

Arsenal blew a chance to make up significant ground on Premier League leaders Liverpool yesterday with a disappointing draw at Brighton as Manchester City pummeled West Ham 4-1. In-form Newcastle inflicted another painful defeat on Ange Postecoglou's struggling Tottenham and Chelsea's recent woes continued with a 1-1 draw at Crystal Palace.

Mikel Arteta's Arsenal, Premier League runners-up over the past two seasons, travelled to the south coast hunting a fourth straight league win. Seventeen-year-old Ethan Nwaneri, in for the injured Bukayo Saka, put them on course for all three points in the first half. But Joao Pedro levelled from the penalty spot following a clash of heads between the Brazilian and William Saliba just after the hour mark, prompting a furious reaction from Arteta.

The 1-1 draw means the second-placed Gunners are five points behind Liverpool, having played two games more, with Arne Slot's in-form leaders hosting crisis-hit Manchester United today.

Manchester City beat Leicester last week for just their second win in 14 games but they have now won successive matches for the first time since October and Pep Guardiola will hope they have

turned the corner.

The defending champions took an early lead against West Ham through a Vladimir Coufal own goal and Erling Haaland headed in Savinho's deep cross shortly before the break. The Norwegian claimed his second 10 minutes after the interval, dinking the ball over Alphonse Areola after a fine pass from Savinho, to take his league haul to 16 goals, one behind Liverpool's Mohamed Salah.

Phil Foden made it 4-0 before Niclas Fullkrug grabbed a consolation for Julen Lopetegui's men, who suffered a 5-0 mauling by Premier League leaders Liverpool last week.

Despite their shocking run of results, sixth-placed City are just two points behind fourth-placed Chelsea but Guardiola said his team were still not back in the groove. "I'm very pleased for the result but you cannot ask me if the old City is back," he said. "If you saw the game, we are not. You saw many times during the years what we have done with the opponents."

In the early kick-off, Newcastle came from behind to clinch a fifth straight Premier League win and heap more misery on injury-hit Spurs. The home side went ahead in the fourth minute through Dominic Solanke. Newcastle levelled two minutes later when Anthony Gordon arrowed an effort into the bottom corner, but Postecoglou stood in disbelief on the touchline looking at referee Andrew Madley after Joelinton intercepted Lucas

Bergvall's pass with his hand in the build-up.

VAR deemed Joelinton's arm to be in a natural position and the contact to be accidental. In-form Alexander Isak scored what turned out to be the winner towards the end of the first period.

The 2-1 victory, watched by new England manager Thomas Tuchel, leaves Newcastle in fifth spot, which may yet prove enough to secure a place in the Champions League next season.

But Spurs have slumped to 12th in the table after five defeats in seven matches. Postecoglou said he was proud of his players but was the "angriest I think I have ever been in my career".

"I think it's clear," said the Australian. "Now whether people agree with me or not whether it wasn't handball or it was accidental, I'm just not interested in any of that discussion."

Enzo Maresca's Chelsea were breathing down Liverpool's necks just two weeks ago but have taken just two points from four games over the festive period. Cole Palmer gave the visitors a first-half lead, but they could not capitalise on their possession and Jean-Philippe Mateta levelled in the 82nd minute.

Aston Villa beat relegation-threatened Leicester 2-1 at home, with goals from Ross Barkley and Leon Bailey. Brentford recorded their first league win on the road this season, smashing hapless Southampton 5-0, and Bournemouth beat Everton 1-0.

SERIE A

Napoli move top with clinical win at Fiorentina

Reuters
Florence, Italy

Napoli went top of the Serie A standings thanks to a comfortable 3-0 win at Fiorentina yesterday, the visitors facing few problems as they registered a fourth successive league victory. With Napoli's main Scudetto rivals not in league action this weekend - Atalanta and Inter Milan are both in Saudi Arabia for the Italian Super Cup - Antonio Conte's side took full advantage.

Napoli are on 44 points, three ahead of Atalanta who have a game in hand, and Inter are a further point back, but with two fewer matches played. Fiorentina dropped to sixth on 32 points. Mathias Olivera had the ball in the net for Napoli early on but the goal was ruled out for offside, while Leonardo Spinazzola drew a save from Fiorentina keeper David de Gea.

The visitors took the lead in the 29th minute when David Neres went on a mazy dribbling run into the area, going past three players before blasting a powerful shot into the roof of the net. Fiorentina striker Moise Kean finally got his chance to shine, and found the net, but his goal was chalked off for a handball while controlling the ball and Napoli took their lead into the break.



Fiorentina's Moise Kean (left) and Napoli's Frank Anguissa vie for the ball during the Serie A match in Florence, Italy. (Reuters)

Fiorentina manager Raffaele Palladino had given defender Matias Moreno his Serie A debut and the Argentine showed his inexperience when hauling down Andre Anguissa in the area. Romelu Lukaku, who had a penalty saved in Napoli's last game, sent De Gea the wrong way with his low strike straight down the middle to give the visitors a two-goal cushion nine minutes after the interval.

Fiorentina had two chances in quick succession to pull back a goal, with Napoli keeper Alex Meret denying Rolando Mandrag-

ora and Amir Rrahmani blocking Lucas Beltran's goalbound shot from the rebound. Another defensive error allowed Napoli in for a third goal, with Pietro Comuzzo's poor clearance of a cross from Anguissa falling to Scott McTominay who calmly stroked home his fourth league goal of the season in the 68th minute.

Fiorentina could find no way past a Napoli side with the best defensive record in Serie A and, after a run of eight successive league wins, Palladino's side have now gone four games without a win.

Lewandowski double helps Barcelona to beat Barbastro 4-0 in Copa del Rey

Barcelona: Barcelona beat fourth-tier Barbastro 4-0 in the Copa del Rey round of 32 yesterday, with striker Robert Lewandowski scoring either side of the break for the visitors. Defender Eric Garcia put Barca in front with a bullet header in the 21st minute before Lewandowski nodded home from close range to double the advantage 10 minutes later.

The Poland striker added a third goal two minutes into the second half with a simple low finish from near the penalty spot and Pablo Torre made it 4-0, having capitalised on an error by Barbastro goalkeeper Arnau Fabrega. Aragonian club Barbastro sit 16th in Group Two of the Segunda Federacion, three points into the relegation zone.

BARCA LOSE REQUEST TO KEEP PLAYING OLMO AND VICTOR

Barcelona's Dani Olmo and Pau Victor will be unable to play for the La Liga side in the second half of the season, Spanish football authorities said yesterday, rejecting the club's latest attempt to extend their registration. Midfielder Olmo, 26, who helped Spain to European Championship glory last year, has been

an integral part of Barcelona's team this season, while forward Victor, 23, has been largely restricted to substitute appearances. Barca are third in La Liga, five points behind leaders Real Madrid.

They had signed Olmo in August for around 55m euros and Victor in July, but only registered them for the first half of the season due to La Liga wage cap considerations. The Spanish football federation (RFEF) and La Liga said in a joint statement they had rejected a request to register them both for the second half, saying a cancelled licence could not be revived for a player by the same club in the same season.

"The Monitoring Committee agrees not to grant the prior approval or the definitive licence requested by FC Barcelona for the players Daniel Olmo Carvajal and Pau Victor Delgado," the RFEF said.

Two courts had previously rejected the club's requests. La Liga had previously welcomed the legal rulings, saying additional spending is allowed so long-term injuries do not weaken a team but the rule should not be exploited to allow the registration of players whose salaries exceed the limit.