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# GULF TIMES SPORT

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Matsuyama breaks PGA Tour scoring record, wins The Sentry

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**MOTORSPORT**

## Bigger and better Arabian Drag Racing League from tomorrow

The number of categories has been increased to 13, with nine dedicated to car and four to motorcycle competitions

**By Sports Reporter**  
Doha

Enthusiasts of speed and excitement are in for an unmissable event as the opening round of the Arabian Drag Racing League kicks off tomorrow.

The prestigious event is held under the patronage of the Qatar Racing Club (QRC) Chairman HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani. Preparations have been ongoing over the past weeks within the club to organise the region's biggest drag racing event, known as one of the strongest championships worldwide.

This year's championship spans six rounds, held consecutively every weekend. The first events will take place on January 8-10 with the competition concluding in mid-February.

The club's management has taken steps to elevate the championship, ensuring it maintains its reputation as one of the most professional and competitive drag racing events globally.

QRC Director Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani said the club's organising committee has completed all preparations and is fully ready to deliver an exceptional event.

"We have reached the most significant event on our season calendar, which is filled with numerous championships. Annually, the club organises five major official championships, with rounds ranging from 4-6. This places us under immense challenges in terms of category diversity, intense competition and attracting the largest number of motorsport enthusiasts, reflecting the vision of the club's chairman HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani," Sheikh Jabor said in a statement yesterday.

"The Arabian Drag Racing League is among our top priorities, being the largest in participation and the most competitive.



Qatar Racing Club Director Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani.

Despite implementing several adjustments to certain categories last year, we have introduced new categories this year to attract more racers. Our current focus is to channel all efforts into ensuring the championship's success," he added.

"We have worked on technical aspects, such as preparing the club's tracks to the highest standards to ensure a safe environment for participants and spectators. Additionally, we have made all necessary arrangements, especially in the paddock area, to accommodate the large number of participants expected to come from across the Gulf and beyond. The club always prioritises welcoming Gulf, Arab, and international teams."

The QRC director added following the directives of HE Sheikh Khalid, the club strives to provide a suitable environment for the teams.

"This is a truth recognised by everyone:

the club has become, by all racers' accounts, a shining beacon in the history of motorsports on both Gulf and global levels. This season, special attention is being given to spectators by enhancing activities and events accompanying the competitions. Facilities for children and families have been introduced, significantly increasing attendance at our championships to record-breaking levels," said Sheikh Jabor, who is well-known for his deep passion for motorsports and his keen interest in the organisational and operational aspects of the sport.

### QR3.85MN PRIZE-MONEY

The number of categories in this year's edition has increased to 13, with nine dedicated to car competitions and four to motorcycle competitions.

Under the generous directives of HE Sheikh Khalid and to encourage participants in this year's edition, the organising committee has raised the prize money for the top three finishers in each category per round to exceed QR500,000, an increase of approximately QR200,000 compared to last year.

The two premier categories of this season, Index 4.00 and Super Street Pro, will receive the largest share of the prizes. The first-place winner in these categories will be awarded QR40,000, the second-place winner will receive QR20,000, and the third-place winner will take home QR10,000. In the motorcycle competitions, the Pro Bike category stands out as the strongest.

The first-place winner in each round will earn QR25,000, the second-place winner will receive half that amount, and the third-place finisher will take home QR6,250.

At the end of the six-round championship, the overall leaders in each category will be awarded commemorative championship shields along with significant cash prizes, bringing the total



prize pool to QR3.85mn. Meanwhile, QRC is also preparing to organise the 12th edition of the Qatar Custom Show 2025 from January 14-18. The exhibition is considered a youth-centred event aimed at encouraging creativity in the fields of invention and innovation in the world of cars and motorcycles.

Participants will compete by showcasing their cars and bikes according to conditions set by the organising committee

in alignment with Qatar National Vision 2030. Additionally, a motorcycle parade will be held under the slogan "We Are All Family in Qatar", inspired by a statement made by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani during the last Shura Council meeting.

The parade will take place on January 17, starting from the Old Doha Port, touring the Corniche, and heading to the ring road, eventually finishing at the club.

**FOCUS**

## Taehyun shines as WTT Star Contender kicks off in Lusail

**By Sports Reporter**  
Doha

Kim Taehyun registered a shock 3-0 (11-8, 11-7, 11-5) win over Deni Kozul in the qualifiers of the WTT Star Contender Doha, which began at the Lusail Sports Arena yesterday.

Ranked over 100 world ranking positions below his opening round opponent, World No 191 Kim showcased excellent table tennis from start to finish against the No 9 qualifying seed, claiming his first match win at WTT Star Contender level in the process.

The 16-year-old Qatari Ahmed Korani came close to pulling off an upset of his own, reversing an early deficit to take a promising 2-1 lead over Li Yan Jun. But Li Yan would go on to spoil the party, putting the frustrations of the two previous games behind him to deny Korani on home soil (11-1, 8-11, 9-11, 11-7, 11-2).

The women's singles qualifying



Kim Taehyun in action during the qualifying match of the WTT Star Contender Doha at the Lusail Sports Arena yesterday.

race also kicked into life yesterday, with Yeh Yi-Tian and Lee Daeun putting on a dazzling show under the lights. World No 329 Lee produced a magnificent display, taking her higher-ranked opponent right down to the wire. But it was Yeh who ultimately stuck the landing, swinging for the fences in games four and five to extend her stay in

Doha (11-7, 8-11, 7-11, 11-8, 11-7). Romania's Iulian Chireta defeated Italian Carlo Rossi 3-0, to qualify for the second round of the qualifiers where he will face Frenchman Roland Jules, who defeated Yemen's player Ibrahim Gibran 3-0.

South Korea's Park Jang-hyun qualified for the next round to face Portuguese Joao Monteiro, ranked



Qatar's 16-year-old Ahmed Korani went down fighting to Li Yan Jun of Chinese Taipei.

79th in the world. Monteiro beat Poland's Mateusz Zalewski 3-0. Vincent Picard, ranked 184th in the world, qualified to face the strong Portuguese Thiago Apollonia, ranked 96th in the world, after defeating Qatar's Abdulaziz al-Abdullah 3-0. The qualifying matches will continue today with about 60 matches scheduled to

determine who will advance into the main round.

The main draw will see the participation of 180 male and female players, representing more than 42 countries. Headlining a star-studded playing field is Tomokazu Harimoto, is one of the former champions in Doha.

Seven-time event champion on

the WTT Series, Hina Hayata is another player looking to rekindle old magic having prevailed in Doha three seasons back, while both surprise packages of the 2022 event Andrej Gacina and Miyuu Kihara also returning.

Offering a total prize pool of \$275,000, WTT Star Contender Doha presents players with the perfect opportunity to make serious ground in the ITTF Table Tennis world rankings, with a significant points haul up for grabs across the board.

The winner of the men's and women's singles will receive a cash prize of \$10,000 and 600 points in the international ranking, while the second-place winner will receive \$7,525 and 420. As for the doubles competitions, the champions will receive \$3,500 and 600 points, compared to \$2,500 for the runner-up and 420 points.

The tournament also represents a dress rehearsal for the World Table Tennis Championship Qatar, which will be held at the Lusail Hall in May.

SPOTLIGHT

# 3-1 series loss against Australia exposes India's dependency on pacer Bumrah

Reuters  
New Delhi

India's 3-1 defeat in Australia exposed the fragility of their top order, but equally unmissable was how much they rely on pace spearhead **Jasprit Bumrah**, who gave it all until he broke down in the series finale in Sydney.

The seam-bowling genius finished the five-Test series with 32 wickets at an average of 13.06 and was the obvious choice for the player-of-the-series award despite being on the losing side. Bumrah, laid low by a back spasm, was not available to bowl in Australia's second innings in the low-scoring thriller in Sydney where the hosts prevailed by six wickets to reclaim the Border-Gavaskar Trophy after a decade.

"It's a little disappointing in the end because I probably missed out on the spiciest wicket of the series," a dejected Bumrah said after India lost the series even though his own stature grew.

Australia run-machine Travis Head said he could not think of a better individual display than Bumrah's superlative performance in the series. Former India opener Wasim Jaffer said Bumrah alone kept

alive India's hopes of levelling the series in Sydney until his injury. "Every time Bumrah stood at the top of his mark this series Aus cricket fans held their breath and only released it after the ball was played out safely," Jaffer wrote on X.

"Have rarely seen a cricketer dominate the Aussie psyche so much..."

Australian batter Usman Khawaja applauded Jasprit Bumrah's performance in the Border Gavaskar Trophy.

"I was just getting Bumrah's. It was tough work. I have to face this guy with the new ball every single time. You never want to see anyone injured and it's a shame he was, but thank god for us," Khawaja said during an interview with ABC Sport.

"Today would've been an absolute nightmare facing him on that wicket. As soon as we didn't see him out there we thought, 'alright, we've got a chance here!'"

"He's the toughest bowler I've ever faced. And I have faced him in 2018. he got me out once, he was alright, he was good, but he has been something else this year. He has got his tail up," he added.

But there is a limit even for arguably the best all-format bowler of his generation, who was over-bowled with little support from the other end. His new-ball partner

Mohammed Siraj, who finished with 20 wickets, was inconsistent and expensive in the low-scoring series.

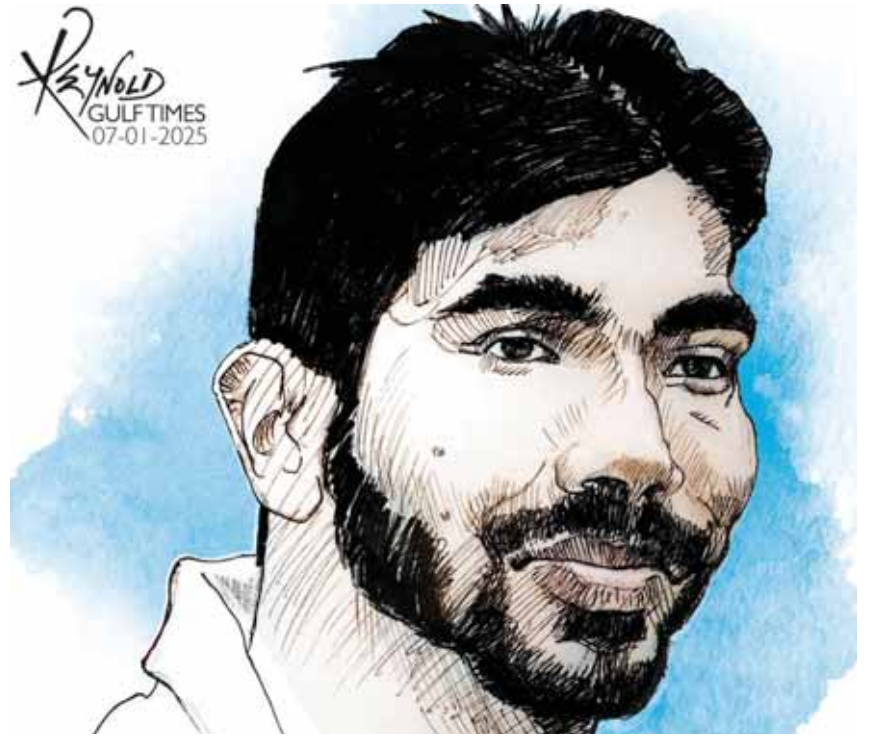
Akash Deep bowled well in Brisbane and Melbourne before a back injury cut short his tour, while Prasidh Krishna claimed six wickets in the only Test he played in Sydney. The difference between the bowling averages of Bumrah and his seam-bowling teammates stood at 21.76, suggesting Bumrah operated as India's one-man army with the ball.

He bowled 53.2 overs in Melbourne - the highest in his 45-Test career - and skipper Rohit Sharma conceded they over-bowled Bumrah. "If somebody is in such a great form, you want to try and maximise that form," Rohit said after the Melbourne Test.

"That is what we've been trying to do with Bumrah."

Apart from mentoring the young seamers in the squad, Bumrah also led India in Perth and Sydney, with Rohit skipping the first Test and being dropped from the last.

The Australia tour adds another layer of sheen to Bumrah's reputation as a premier bowler of his era, but India will return worrying about their shallow pace reserve ahead of their England tour in June-July.



MATCH REPORT

# South Africa beat listless Pakistan, sweep series 2-0

'The result is very satisfying, it was good old Test cricket'

Reuters  
Cape Town

South Africa made light work of a modest target of 58 to claim victory against Pakistan by 10 wickets at a sun-bathed Newlands yesterday, wrapping up the series 2-0 inside four days of the second and final Test.

Pakistan had held up the home side's victory charge with a second innings score of 478 having been asked to follow on, their effort led by captain Shan Masood's fine 145 on a docile wicket.

But seamer Kagiso Rabada (3-115) and spinner Keshav Maharaj (3-137) kept chipping away at the Pakistan wickets, aided by some poor shot selection.

David Bedingham was promoted to open in the South African second innings after double-centurion from their first, Ryan Rickelton, sustained a hamstring strain.

Bedingham raced to 44 from 30 balls to see his side to victory in 7.1 overs.

"The result is very satisfying, it was good old Test cricket. There was something in it for the bowlers with the new ball and then the wicket really flattened out," South Africa captain Temba Bavuma said.

"It was a good experience that will hold us in good stead as a team. Certain parts of the game we let go, but all those learnings will make us better."

South Africa have won their last seven Tests in a row, their second best run of victories behind a nine-game winning streak between 2002-2003.

It is perfect preparation for their appearance in the World Test Championship final against



South Africa's Temba Bavuma (centre) holds up the trophy after winning the Test and the series against Pakistan at Newlands Stadium in Cape Town yesterday. (AFP)

Australia at Lord's from June 11-15.

Pakistan resumed the fourth day on 213 for one, though they were effectively two down after in-form batter Saim Ayub fractured his ankle while fielding on the first day.

Despite the wicket offering little to the bowlers in terms of seam or turn, South Africa picked up two wickets in the morning session, as Khuram Shahzad was caught by Maharaj at point off seamer Marco Jansen for 18.

Rabada bowled Kamran Ghulam for 28, a delivery that nipped back off the wicket and crashed into the off-stump.

The home side took the new ball shortly after lunch and that

brought two more wickets, including the key scalp of Masood, who was trapped leg before wicket by 18-year-old fast bowler Kwena Maphaka, South Africa's youngest ever test player.

Saud Shakeel scored 23 before he was caught at second slip by Aiden Markram off Rabada.

Mohammad Rizwan (41) and Salman Agha (48) continued to show resistance but both fell to Maharaj, who also claimed the wicket of Aamer Jamal following a breezy 34.

Pakistan's total of 478 is the highest ever follow-on score by a visiting team in South Africa, a vastly improved display after they had been bowled out for 194 in their first innings.

"We didn't start off well with ball and bat, conceding too many runs (in South Africa's first innings of 615) and folded quite early in our first innings on a really nice surface," Masood said.

"The fightback after that was the thing you look for as a team and individuals really stepped up. (But) we need to learn how to win the crucial moments."

**BRIEF SCORES (Second Test, Day Four)**

**South Africa 615** (Rickelton, Bavuma 106, Verreynne 100, Abbas 3-94) **and 61 for no loss** (Bedingham 47\*) **beat Pakistan 194** (Babar 58, Rabada 3-55) and 478 (Masood 145, Babar 81, Rabada 3-115) **by ten wickets**

COMMENT

## Australia set their sights on world domination after taming India

AFP  
Sydney

Cricket's World Test Championship (WTC) final is still five months away but it is already playing on the mind of Australia skipper Pat Cummins, saying the defence of their title is "a huge goal" after conquering India.

Australia surged into a June showdown against South Africa at Lord's with a six-wicket victory in the fifth Test against India in Sydney on Sunday.

The thrilling win sealed a first series triumph against their South Asian rivals in a decade.

It also confirmed their place in a clash against South Africa that will determine the world's most consistent red-ball side over the last two years from the nine teams contesting the WTC.

"To hold the Border-Gavaskar Trophy is an amazing feeling, and the extra layer is now securing a spot again in the World Test Championship final, which was always a huge goal for us in this cycle," Cummins said.

"We're really proud to hold so we want to go back and defend it."

"I think it's a great tournament in that you've got to play well consistently and across all different conditions against different teams."

"We can't wait to get over there."

South Africa booked their spot under the WTC's average points system when they beat Pakistan in a dramatic two-wicket win at Centurion late last month.

Australia play two Tests in Sri Lanka starting later this month before a lengthy red-ball break heading into the WTC final.

Cummins appears likely to miss the Sri Lanka tour for the birth of his second child, with Steve Smith in pole position to take over as captain.

But the Australian skipper is adamant that after four years in the role, he has no plans to hand over the armband permanently anytime soon.

"First of all, I absolutely love what I do. That's the biggest driver in wanting to play Test cricket and work with this team and support staff," Cummins said.

"I absolutely love everything about it, it's that much fun. If I can keep doing it for a while, even better."

**India gazes into life without Kohli, Rohit after Australia loss**

India contemplated Test cricket without Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma yesterday after the star duo again failed to fire in the bruising series defeat to Australia.

With out-of-form skipper Rohit missing, the visitors went down by six wickets in the fifth and final Test on Sunday in Sydney to lose the series 3-1.

Fresh from a 3-0 home white-wash to New Zealand, the defeat sparked renewed debate in India about the future of the team and in particular two of its stalwarts.

The 37-year-old opening batsman Rohit, who missed the only India win of the series in the first Test because of the birth of his second child, managed 31 runs in three matches.

Kohli, 36, scored an unbeaten century in the first Test but otherwise had another underwhelming series by his sky-high standards.

Australia booked a meeting with South Africa in the World Test Championship final in June, after India lost out in the race with six Test losses in eight matches.

India's next Test assignment is their tour to England in June-July, when the visitors will play five matches and selectors will have to make a call on Kohli and Rohit.

"I think the next 8-10 days are crucial for Indian cricket to take a good, honest look at itself," former captain Sunil Gavaskar told news channel *India Today*. "Most importantly, the star culture has to end. Total commitment to Indian cricket is non-negotiable. We don't need players who are partly here and partly elsewhere. It's time to stop pampering anyone."

Kohli and Rohit have been criticised for not participating in domestic matches to improve their faltering form, a decision that irked many pundits including Gavaskar.

"The cricket board needs to stop acting like admirers and put their foot down," the batting great said.

"They must tell the players that Indian cricket comes first. It's either a full commitment to Indian cricket or other priorities."



FROM LEFT: Australia's Sam Konstas, Steve Smith, Nathan Lyon, Pat Cummins, Sean Abbott and Mitchell Starc pose with the Border-Gavaskar Trophy at the Sydney Cricket Ground on Sunday. (AFP)

FOCUS

## Rashid strikes as Afghanistan beat Zimbabwe

AFP  
Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

Star leg spinner Rashid Khan took his seventh wicket of the innings as Afghanistan speedily wrapped up a 72-run victory over Zimbabwe yesterday to win the two-Test series.

Zimbabwe were 205-8 overnight with captain Craig Ervine unbeaten on 53 and needing 73 more runs to win the Test at Queens Sports Club in Bulawayo after a drawn first Test.

But the home team failed to add a run and Afghanistan needed just 15 deliveries to seal a

first Test win since beating Zimbabwe in Abu Dhabi four years ago. Richard Ngarava was run out for three, then man of the match Khan (7-66) added to his six-wicket haul on Sunday by trapping Ervine leg before.

Khan tormented Zimbabwe throughout a match interrupted several times by rain, taking four first-innings wickets as well. The 26-year-old deflected attention from himself after receiving the player of the match award, praising second-innings centurions Rahmat Shah (139) - who was named player of the series - and debutant Ismat Alam (101) instead.

"The way they performed second time round got us back into the match," he said, re-

ferring to the 86-run deficit the tourists faced after the first innings.

**BRIEF SCORES (Second Test, Day 4)**

**Afghanistan 157** (Rashid Khan 25; S. Raza 3-30, N. Nyamhuri 3-42) **and 363 in 113.5 overs** (Rahmat Shah 139, Ismat Alam 101; B. Muzarabani 6-95, R. Ngarava 3-76) **v Zimbabwe 243** (C. Ervine 75, S. Raza 61, S. Williams 49; Rashid Khan 4-94, Yamin Ahmadzai 3-62) **and 205 in 68.3 overs** (S. Ervine 53, B. Curran 38, S. Raza 38; Rashid Khan 7-66)

**Result:** Afghanistan won by 72 runs  
**Toss:** Zimbabwe

GOLF

# In-form Matsuyama breaks PGA Tour scoring record

MATSUYAMA FINISHED AT 35-UNDER 257, THE LOWEST 72-HOLE SCORE TO PAR IN PGA HISTORY

Reuters  
Kapalua, Hawaii

Japan's Hideki Matsuyama knew he had to keep making birdies during the final round of The Sentry. He ended up making history, too.

Matsuyama couldn't be caught while shooting an 8-under-par 65 to win The Sentry, the PGA Tour's season opener, on Sunday at The Plantation Course in Kapalua, Hawaii. Matsuyama finished at 35-under 257, the lowest 72-hole score to par in PGA Tour history. It was good for a three-stroke victory over runner-up Collin Morikawa, who shot 67.

Matsuyama birdied the final hole, a par-5, to reach 35 under.

"That last putt, it felt like if I make it, then it's going to be the record," Matsuyama said. "So I'm so happy that it went in."

It marked Matsuyama's 11th career victory on the tour and follows two tournament titles last year.

Matsuyama holed out for eagle on the par-4 third hole with the ball bouncing a couple of times before landing in the cup as his lead grew to three strokes.

The margin was four shots going to the back nine even after Matsuyama's bogey on the par-4 seventh marked just his second bogey of the tournament.

Morikawa's birdie on the 15th hole closed the gap to two shots. Matsuyama responded with a birdie on the next hole.

"He just never let up," Morikawa

said. "Then you get to the third hole and the guy holes it. I just knew I had to be on top of everything, and just kind of let a few slip on that front nine."

Matsuyama, who turns 33 next month, took the lead during Friday's second round and kept up his pace of birdies. Morikawa had matched Matsuyama's scores Friday and Saturday (65 and 62), entering the final round trailing by one shot. Matsuyama has won three times in less than a 12-month period. This type of result was his goal for the beginning of 2025.

"I was able to have a great off-season and get a fresh start this week and play well this week," he said. "So it was a great way to start."

Morikawa was hoping for more out of his mostly stellar performance across four days.

"Just going through the shots I left out there," he said. "There was a good handful that I wish I could have back... I know there is a lot of positives, and it's going to take me a few hours or a day to get over it."

South Korea's Sungjae Im (65) was third at 29 under and Venezuela's Jhonattan Vegas (65) placed fourth at 25 under.

Belgium's Thomas Detry (71), Sweden's Ludvig Aberg (64) and Canada's Corey Conners (67) shared fifth place at 24 under.

Even golfers turning in impressive scores like those were merely afterthoughts to Matsuyama's excellence.

"Obviously you need to shoot a lot of low scores to keep up here," Aberg said. "It's a great place to



Hideki Matsuyama of Japan poses with the trophy after winning The Sentry 2025 at Plantation Course at Kapalua Golf Club in Kapalua, Hawaii. (AFP)

start, and looking forward to a long, good season."

Morikawa said the strong showing in the tournament could be a springboard into the season.

"I came out here trying to be ready for golf, and I'm going to try and do that for every event out

there," he said. "I don't care if it's my third, fourth week in a row, first week after whatever, that's going to be the mentality for the entire year."

Canada's Taylor Pendrith recorded the first albatross in the 27-year history of the tournament, helping him to a 67 for the second

day in a row. He ended up tied for 13th place at 22 under. His 2 on the par-5 fifth hole was the highlight, though a double-bogey on No. 17 took some shine off his round.

"Just trying to hit a hard 6-iron and land it kind of front third (of the green) and let it chase back,"

Pendrith said of the albatross. "As soon as I hit it, I knew it was going to be really good, didn't expect it to go in, didn't see it go in, but the fans that were up by the green went crazy."

All 58 golfers who finished the tournament were 3 under or better.

SPOTLIGHT

## Accidental ball switcheroo costs Davis, Zalatoris dear at The Sentry

Reuters  
Kapalua, Hawaii

A mix-up between Australian Cameron Davis and American Will Zalatoris in the final round of The Sentry on Sunday led to both golfers walking away from the tournament with significantly reduced prize cheques.

Davis and Zalatoris, partnered up for the final round, unintentionally hit each other's golf ball for their third shots on the par 5 15th hole on the Plantation Course at Kapalua, Hawaii, leading to a two-shot penalty for both.

"After realising their mistake upon reaching the green, they returned to play from the proper lo-

cation of their third shot - but now playing their fifth shot rather than their third, per the Rules of Golf," the PGA Tour said.

Zalatoris took home \$163,333 after finishing the tournament tied for 26th, while Davis was tied for 13th and pocketed \$410,000.

Had the pair not been penalised, they would have moved up to tied for 15th and fifth respectively - earning \$283,200 and \$715,625 - with Davis missing out on an eye-watering \$306,625. However, if they had not corrected the mistake, they would have been disqualified from the tournament.

Japan's Hideki Matsuyama won the tournament with an astounding 35-under par, the PGA Tour's all-time record low score in relation to par for a 72-hole event.



Will Zalatoris

## WOODS AND MCILROY'S INDOOR LEAGUE SET FOR PRIME TIME CLOSE-UP

**Florida:** The inaugural season of the tech-infused indoor team golf league founded by Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroy tees off today in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida with organisers hoping a fast-paced twist on an age-old sport attracts new fans. Combining the best of virtual and real-world golf, Woods and McIlroy will be among the 24 TGL players competing in two-hour matches during prime time on Monday and Tuesday nights for the next three months. McIlroy, one of four members of TGL's Boston Common team, does not expect the new league to take over the world of golf but rather be complementary to everything else that is going on in the sport. "I'm still a traditionalist in a lot of ways. There's no replicating championship golf. I think that's always going to be around," McIlroy said on an NBC Sports call last month to promote a five-part docuseries about Boston Common. "But there are certain things that we can do to innovate and try to maybe appeal to a different and younger demographic, especially trying to condense it into a time frame that is a little bit more digestible and putting it on at a time where we're maybe going to get a few more eyeballs as well."

TGL features six teams of four PGA Tour members competing in a fast-paced form of team golf where players will hit shots at a five-storey-high simulator screen before eventually shifting to an adjustable putting surface. Every shot on the field of play, which is about the size of an American football field, will be broadcast live, players will be mic'd up and enter the competition area to walk-up music and a shot clock will force teams to hit within 40 seconds. Woods, a 15-times major champion who has not competed in a PGA Tour event since last July's British Open and underwent back surgery in September, is expected to make his TGL debut on Jan. 14 in a format that will be much less physically taxing. TGL, founded in 2022 by Woods and McIlroy's TMRW Sports in partnership with the PGA Tour, was originally set to launch in January 2024 but was delayed after the dome of the host facility was damaged and later replaced with a steel-supported structure. TMRW Sports CEO Mike McCarley said the idea behind TGL was to incorporate elements of the traditional game of golf while also bringing the game into the future and embracing technology.

## England urged to boycott Afghanistan match by British politicians

**London:** A group of more than 160 British politicians have called on the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) to boycott next month's Champions Trophy match against Afghanistan as a stand against the Taliban regime's assault on women's rights. Female participation in sport has effectively been outlawed since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, a move that puts the Afghanistan Cricket Board in direct contravention of the International Cricket Council's rules. The England men's ODI side are due to face Afghanistan in Lahore on February 26. A wide cross-party group from the House of Commons and House of Lords, including Reform UK leader Nigel Farage and former leader of the Labour party Jeremy Corbyn, called on the ECB "to speak out against the horrific treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan under the Taliban." Afghanistan are still allowed to compete by the ICC and ECB CEO Richard Gould responded by suggesting a uniform approach from all member nations is the best way forward. "The ECB strongly condemns the treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan under the



Taliban regime," he said. "The ICC Constitution mandates that all member nations are committed to the growth and development of women's cricket. In line with this commitment, the ECB has maintained its position of not scheduling any bilateral cricket matches against Afghanistan. "While there has not been a consensus on further international action within the ICC, the ECB will continue to actively advocate for such measures. A coordinated, ICC-wide approach would be significantly more impactful than unilateral actions by individual members." Afghanistan have become a greater force in white ball cricket in recent years, rising to eighth in the ODI world rankings. They beat England at the 2023 ODI World Cup and reached the semi-finals of the T20 World Cup last year, eliminating Australia in the process.

TENNIS

## Grand Slam king Djokovic still gets the jitters at Melbourne airport after his 2022 deportation

Reuters  
Melbourne

Novak Djokovic has admitted to still getting stressed when he gets off a plane at Melbourne airport after he was deported from Australia three years ago.

The 24-times Grand Slam champion had his visa cancelled ahead of the 2022 Australian Open following days of drama over Australia's Covid entry rules and his unvaccinated status.

"I have to be quite frank," Djokovic said in an interview with Melbourne's *Herald Sun* newspaper. "The last couple of times I landed in Australia, to go through passport control and immigration - I had a bit of trauma from three years ago.

"And some traces still stay there when I'm passing passport control, just checking out if someone from immigration zone is approaching.

"The person checking my passport - are they going to take me, detain me again or let me go? I must admit I have that feeling."

The Serbian returned to Melbourne Park in 2023 when the worst of the pandemic was over and won a 10th Australian Open title.

"I don't hold any resentment, to be honest," the 37-year-old added. "I don't hold a grudge. I came right away the year after... and I won.

"My parents and whole team were there and it was actually one of the most emotional wins I've ever had considering all that I'd been through the year before."

Djokovic, who is ranked seventh in the world, will be on the hunt for a record 25th ma-



Serbian tennis player Novak Djokovic makes his way to the gate to board a flight to Belgrade at Dubai Airport, after the Australian Federal Court upheld a government decision to cancel his visa to play in the Australian Open, in Dubai, UAE, January 17, 2022. (Reuters)

for title when the 2025 Australian Open begins next Sunday.

### Injured Osaka 'very optimistic' about Australian Open

Japan's Naomi Osaka will undergo a scan on the injury that forced her to pull out of the Auckland Classic final but remains optimistic about playing at the Australian Open, the former world number one said yesterday.

Osaka, the 2019 and 2021 champion at Melbourne Park, was reduced to tears on Sunday when an abdominal injury forced her to quit

while leading Clara Tauson 6-4 in her first WTA final in almost three years.

"I'm having an MRI today to assess," the 27-year-old said in a brief statement.

"I don't feel that it's too serious and I still feel very optimistic about AO."

Osaka, who returned to the tour a year ago after a long maternity break, had shown glimpses of the form that won her four major titles on her run to the final in Auckland.

She broke back into the top 50 in the world rankings yesterday.

The Australian Open begins on Sunday.

## DAKAR RALLY

## Al-Attiyah finishes fifth, Baciуска wins 48-hour stage

AFP

Bisha, Saudi Arabia

Lithuanian driver Rokas Baciуска won the second stage of the Dakar 2025 rally yesterday, the fearsome '48-hour Chrono' while Qatar's five-time winner Nasser al-Attiyah finished fifth and is third in overall standings. "The last two days have been very difficult for us. The last 20 kilometres we had a puncture and issue with the power steering and the dust also made it more tough. But I am happy to have held on and hopefully it would be good for me tomorrow," said al-Attiyah.

Organisers had initially named Saudi driver Yazeed al-Rajhi as the stage two winner, but later announced that Baciуска, in an Overdrive, had recuperated 12 minutes that propelled him from fifth to first. The Lithuanian was timed at 10hr 54min 11sec over the 967km special, 2min 43sec ahead of Rajhi.

"It was really, really hard. I feel like this is our 10th day on the Dakar," said Rajhi on his arrival at the bivouac of the rally, which began on Friday. "The navigation was very, very difficult in some places, due to the divots and dust. You needed a rocket, not a car to pass through them. It wasn't easy."

Defending champion Carlos Sainz retired from this year's Dakar yesterday. The four-time winner rolled his Ford Raptor on the first day of the 48-hour test on Sunday. While he made it to the overnight halt and through the second half of the chrono

stage yesterday, his slim hopes of a fifth victory were extinguished when the Spaniard made it back to the bivouac. For this long stage, which started on Sunday, the competitors had to bivouac in the desert and did not benefit from the assistance of their teams at the night stop.

Nine-time world rally champion Sebastien Loeb, who is still looking for his first Dakar victory, was half an hour behind at the camp on Sunday evening, after a fan problem caused his engine to overheat. But the Frenchman had a better Monday, making up much of the deficit to finish seventh, 15min 51sec behind the leader.

South African Henk Lategan tops the overall standings, 4min 45sec ahead of Rajhi with al-Attiyah in third. Loeb is sixth, 18min 56sec off the lead. "We looked after the car for the stage because we knew it was really, really long," said Lategan. "If you don't look after the car, it won't look after you. It's actually a big surprise to be first because we haven't been really focusing on it. But I'm happy with that."

Australian Daniel Sanders continues to dominate on the bikes, his victory in their '48-hour Chrono' making it three in a row after he also won the prologue and first stage. It is the first time any rider has taken the first three stages since Spaniard Joan Barreda in 2017 between Bolivia and Argentina.

"It wasn't too bad, pretty hard in the soft dunes, it was very tough for a lot of us," said Sanders.

"When opening, you didn't know if it was going to be a soft dune or a hard dune.



Qatari driver Nasser al-Attiyah and his co-driver Edouard Boulanger repair their car after a puncture during Stage 2B of the 47th Dakar Rally in Bisha, Saudi Arabia, yesterday. (AFP)

It was pretty tough. The dust kind of ruined it a lot. Everyone was bunched up fighting in the dust for the opening bonuses. It was a bit tough on that side."

Sanders took victory on his KTM in a

time of 11hr 12min 13sec, 6min 45sec ahead of Frenchman Adrien van Beveren (Honda) with American Skyler Howes (Honda) in third. Sanders, who is aiming to become the second Australian to win the Dakar on

a bike after Toby Price, holds a 12min 36sec lead over Howes in the provisional overall standings.

Botswana's Ross Branch (Hero) lies third, 4sec behind the American.

## FOOTBALL

## Wounded Arsenal hit by Nwaneri injury blow

The 17-year-old has scored five times in 18 appearances in all competitions

AFP

London

Arsenal have suffered a fresh injury blow after rising star Ethan Nwaneri was ruled out for "a few weeks" with a muscular problem. Nwaneri suffered the injury in Arsenal's 1-1 draw against Brighton on Saturday and had to be taken off at half-time.

Gunners boss Mikel Arteta confirmed the teenage forward, who had scored his side's first half goal against Brighton, faces an extended spell on the sidelines. The 17-year-old has scored five times in 18 appearances in all competitions this term after emerging from the Arsenal youth academy.

With England forward Bukayo Saka expected to be out until at least March following surgery on a hamstring injury, Nwaneri's absence is another setback for Arteta ahead of a hectic spell of nine games in 30 days. Raheem Sterling has missed the last five matches with a knee injury, while Kai Havertz was absent from the Brighton match through illness.

Ill captain Martin Odegaard was only fit enough for a second half cameo against Brighton, while defenders Ben White and Takehiro Tomiyasu are also sidelined. "Unfortunately Ethan has picked up a muscular injury, he will be out for a few weeks," Arteta told reporters. "He has earned the right to step up and play for us. I'm gutted for him because it's going to stop that a little bit."

Arsenal are back in action today when Newcastle visit the Emirates Stadium for the League Cup semi-final first leg. Arteta hopes Germany striker Havertz can return to bolster his attacking options, while Sterling will be back "hopefully very soon". "I hope so, but I don't want to say yes because last time I said he would be fit and he wasn't fit," Arteta said of Havertz.

Asked if Arsenal would make a move in



Arsenal players train in London yesterday, ahead of their League Cup match against Newcastle.

the January transfer window to replace their walking wounded, Arteta demurred, adding: "Whatever is in the market, we're very alert, but the priority is working with the players that we have at the moment. We have to sign players to really elevate and impact the team, otherwise just bringing in bodies doesn't help us."

Arteta's only trophy as Arsenal boss was the 2020 FA Cup in his maiden season with the north London club. Trailing six points behind Premier League leaders Liverpool, who have a game in hand, Arsenal may have to focus on the cups to end Arteta's trophy drought.

Winning the League Cup would be a boost to Arsenal after they finished as runners-up to Manchester City in the Premier League

for the last two seasons. "We are in all the competitions. Obviously, in the league for a lot of circumstances, we are not where we want to be which is top, I understand that," said Arteta. "These are challenges, these are situations that we are facing, and we are trying to do the very best to overcome them and still be a really good team."

## HOWE URGES NEWCASTLE TO CARRY MOMENTUM INTO LEAGUE CUP

Newcastle United must make the most of their strong form when they take on Arsenal in the League Cup semi-finals, coach Eddie Howe said as he urged his team not to be complacent.

Newcastle have won their last six games across all competitions, including impres-

sive victories over Aston Villa, Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur.

"This is an important game for us. We need to be at our absolute best, a high-level game. There is a lot at stake for us," Howe told reporters ahead of the first leg trip to Arsenal.

"We've got to be really good off the ball and solid defensively. We've got to cause Arsenal problems the other way. I don't think we should overthink it, we just need to get that mix right. Let's try and continue the good performances we've given recently and try to win the game."

Newcastle have also received a boost in defence with Sven Botman returning to the team against Spurs after undergoing anterior cruciate ligament surgery in March.

## Indonesia sack coach Shin, citing World Cup target

Jakarta: Indonesia sacked coach Shin Tae-yong yesterday with the country's football chief saying the team needed stronger leadership as it battles for a place at the 2026 World Cup.

Tens of millions of people in the Southeast Asian nation are passionate football fans, but Indonesia's sole World Cup appearance came during Dutch rule in 1938 and the country has rarely threatened a return since independence in 1945. Erick Thohir, who heads the Indonesia Football Association (PSSI), said Shin's work with the team had "ended" and his replacement, whom he declined to name, would arrive in Indonesia on Jan 11.

"We need a leadership that implements strategies as agreed with the players, communicates better, and implements better programmes for our national team," Thohir told a press conference. Indonesia are third in their World Cup group after six of 10 matches, one point behind Australia in the battle for the second automatic spot in the finals.

If they finish third or fourth, they could still get to the finals in North America through further rounds of qualifying and an intercontinental playoff.

Thohir, who said he had interviewed three candidates to replace Shin during a recent trip to Europe, was not concerned that changing coaches in the middle of the campaign would disrupt the team.

South Korean Shin took over as coach in 2019 and Thohir said he would be compensated for the remainder of his contract, which runs to 2027. Shin benefited from a PSSI policy of enticing members of the Indonesian diaspora, mostly born in the Netherlands, to play for the national team.

Indonesia were the only Southeast Asian nation to reach the third round of qualifying and last November stunned regional powerhouse Saudi Arabia 2-0.

## PREMIER LEAGUE

## Van Dijk defends Alexander-Arnold's performance

AFP

Liverpool

Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk has defended Trent Alexander-Arnold after his poor display against Manchester United, rejecting suggestions that Real Madrid's interest has had a negative impact on his teammate. Alexander-Arnold was at fault for Lisandro Martinez's opener in Sunday's 2-2 draw against Manchester United at Anfield, falling well below his usual high standards. The right-back's sloppy performance comes during a long-running debate over his future with the Premier League leaders.

The 26-year-old's contract expires at the end of the season, meaning he can now sign a pre-contract agreement with an overseas club. Spanish giants Real have reportedly made a bid to sign him but Liverpool are believed to have rejected their approach.

After Sunday's showdown, former United captain Roy Keane took a swipe at Alexander-Arnold's error-strewn display. "There's talk



about him going to Real Madrid - the way he's defending he's going to Tranmere Rovers after this. He's got to do better," Keane said. "We talk about how brilliant Trent is going forward, but Trent's defending today. My goodness, it's like schoolboy stuff."

Fourth-tier Tranmere responded to Keane's jibe with their own light-hearted assessment of

Alexander-Arnold. The club posted a picture of their full-back Cameron Norman on X with the message: "Trent to Tranmere Roy? Nah, we're alright thanks!"

Former United right-back Gary Neville suggested speculation over Alexander-Arnold's future could have been a distraction. "The supposed bid from Real Madrid is bad timing for him," he said. "I think that will have unnerved him. Real Madrid are such a powerful club. There are three reasons for that performance - he has played like this before, he just had a bad game, or his mind was affected by all the talk. I thought his passing and forward play was the worst I've seen."

Liverpool still hope to persuade Alexander-Arnold to sign a new contract, but he is entitled to leave on a free transfer at the end of the campaign. Reds defender Van Dijk, who is also out of contract at the end of this season, is confident his teammate can cope with the potentially distracting situation as Liverpool challenge for the quadruple. Liverpool face Tottenham in London tomorrow in the first leg of their League Cup semi-final.

## FOCUS

## Real Madrid thrash Minera to enter last 16

AFP

Madrid

Real Madrid sailed through to the Copa del Rey last 16 with a comfortable 5-0 victory at fourth-tier minnows Deportivo Minera yesterday.

Federico Valverde, Eduardo Camavinga, Arda Guler struck in the first half for the dominant Spanish champions. Veteran Luka Modric netted the fourth before Guler tapped in his second to round off the rout.

Coach Carlo Ancelotti rested several key players ahead of the Spanish Super Cup starting in Saudi Arabia later this week, with Kylian Mbappe and Vinicius

Junior only appearing as second-half substitutes. Valverde volleyed home at the back post early on to help Madrid take control and Camavinga doubled the lead after 13 minutes with a header.

Endrick came close to adding a third for Los Blancos before Guler pounced with the aid of a deflection after cutting in from the right. Brahim Diaz hit the post early in the second half before 39-year-old Modric notched with a neat curling effort. Guler finished with ease at the death after Fran Garcia teed him up to cap a fine night for the Turkish playmaker.

On Saturday Barcelona and Atletico Madrid also eased into the next round, while holders Athletic Bilbao scraped through on penalties against third-tier Logrones.