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TENNIS

No. 1 Sabalenka eyes hat-trick at Australian Open but Swiatek, Gauff lurk

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DAKAR RALLY

Al-Attiyah jumps to second, teen Variawa wins third stage

'I will try to do my best to win this race. Edouard did a good job with the navigation today'

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's five-time champion Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah moved up to second place in the overall standings at the Dakar Rally while 19-year-old South African Saood Variawa secured the victory in stage 3 yesterday.

Dacia Sandriders driver al-Attiyah and his French navigator Edouard Boulanger finished the gruelling 793km stage in three hours 20 minutes and 26 secs. He was three minutes and 34 seconds behind the day's winner in fifth place. Al-Attiyah avoided any mistakes on the day and said 'everything is fine and I'm happy'

The Qatar ace said: "I will try to do my best to win this race. I have a good feeling and Edouard did a good job with the navigation. Everything is going well as we need it to and we're trying to do our best. For the moment, everything is fine and I'm happy. It's not easy, but it's not about to open up. When we caught all the Toyotas, nobody wanted to open for us. We received a lot of sentinel system warnings, it was a real shame. I'm going to check if there's a problem. Now I will try to do my best and finish every day, but we are in a good way."

Rally legend Sebastien Loeb struggled to complete the stage after rolling his car near the start, a setback that is likely to cost him his dream of a first title in the event.

The nine-time World Rally Champion went off the road 12 kilometres into the 327-stage between Bisha and Al Henakiyah. After a nasty bounce his Dacia performed several impressive rolls, which seriously damaged the vehicle.

The 50-year-old Frenchman and his Belgian co-driver Fabian Lurquin set off



Qatari driver Nasser al-Attiyah and his navigator France's Edouard Boulanger in action on their Dacia Sandriker during stage 3 of the 47th Dakar Rally between Bisha and Al Henakiyah in Saudi Arabia yesterday. (AFP)

again after a five-minute stop for repairs, but struggled throughout the rest of the stage.

Loeb, who has finished second three times in the Dakar Rally, ended the stage in 4 hours 20 minutes 12 seconds, more than an hour behind the day's winner, Variawa.

"We were able to continue but suddenly the steering rod broke, I think because of the rollover," said Loeb at the finish.

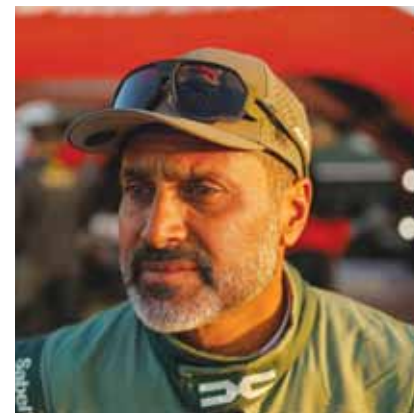
"Then we had a problem with the engine

overheating. We tried to finish the stage. We managed to do so, but we lost an hour.

"It wasn't the kind of day we prefer. We lost an hour and we got the feeling that we were in 'it' up to our necks. But it is what it is, we just have to continue. We'll keep on racing and we'll see, even if winning the rally is starting to look complicated." Variawa, in a Toyota, finished 33 seconds ahead of Frenchman Guerlain Chicherit in a Mini.

Another South African Toyota driver, Henk Lategan retained the overall lead after finishing 12th on the day, 7mins 31sec behind Variawa.

Variawa is 41st, 7 hours 47 minutes 11 seconds behind after losing eight hours the day before following a head-on collision with team-mate and compatriot Giniel de Villiers. "Towards the end, in the last five kilometres, we hit a big rock and got a puncture, but nonetheless it was a really



Nasser al-Attiyah finished the gruelling 793km stage three in three hours 20 minutes and 26 seconds.

good drive on our side," said Variawa.

Loeb sits 16th, almost an hour and a quarter off first. He also lost 30 minutes on Sunday when a fan problem caused his engine to overheat. Reigning champion Carlos Sainz had retired on Monday after his Ford Raptor flipped, damaging its roll bar. Saudi Arabia's Yazeed al-Rajhi dropped from second to fourth overall. Double motorcycle champions Toby Price of Australia and Sam Sunderland of Britain slid from fourth to sixth in their first Dakar on four wheels. With rain forecast, the stage was shortened from the original 496 km.

In the motorbike competition, Spaniard Lorenzo Santolino, riding a Sherco and making his seventh appearance in the Dakar Rally, won a stage for the first time. Australian Daniel Sanders still leads the overall standings, a minute and 57 seconds clear of American Skyler Howes.

The Rally through Saudi Arabia ends on January 17 in the Empty Quarter desert.

FOOTBALL

Second edition of Qatar-UAE Super Cup matches to be held from January 16-19

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Organising Committee of the second edition of the Qatar-UAE Super Cup said yesterday preparations are in place to host matches in Doha. Eight teams - 4 each from Qatar and the UAE - will play four matches between January 16-19 in Doha, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Ali al-Salat, Head of the Media Department at the Qatar Football Association, announced that the tickets for the tournament will be available starting today at prices of QR30 and QR50 for the first and second categories through the official website of the Qatar Stars League (qsl.qa).

The first match, which bears the name "Challenge Shield", will be held between Al Rayyan, runner-up of the Qatar Stars League, and Shabab Al Ahli, runner-up of the Adnoc Professional League, on January 16 in Doha at 6pm at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium.

The "Super Cup" tournament will see Al Nasr, runner-up of the President's Cup, meet Qatar SC, runner-up of the Amir Cup, on January 17 in Dubai at Al Maktoum Stadium at 7pm.

The third tournament is called the "Super Shield" and will bring together Al Sadd, the Qatar Stars League title holder, and Al Wasl, the Adnoc Professional League champion, on January 18 in Doha at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium at 7pm. Al Wahda, the Abu Dhabi Islamic Bank Cup champion, will meet Al Wakrah, the Qatar Cup champion, for the "Challenge Cup" championship on January 19 in Abu Dhabi at Al Nahyan Stadium at 7pm.

Al-Salat explained that preparations are ongoing by the organising committee in coordination with the UAE Football Association regarding the matches between Al Rayyan and Shabab Al Ahli Dubai, and Al Sadd and Al Wasl, and that coordination is underway with the Emirati side regarding the attendance of fans at the matches, in addition to opening the registration for issuing media permits, stressing that the participation of 8 teams in the new version after the participation of 4 teams



Head of the Media Department at the Qatar Football Association Ali al-Salat and Executive Director of Al Sadd Club Turki al-Ali address a press conference yesterday.

in the inaugural version will achieve great gains on the technical and competitive levels.

Faisal al-Otaibi, Director of Marketing and Public Relations at Al Rayyan Club, confirmed that the first team's preparations are going well following the new technical management after Portuguese Arto Jorge took over the responsibility, succeeding national coach Younis Ali.

Al-Otaibi pointed out that the team gained the return of some players after an absence due to injury, and the match against Umm Salal next Friday in the opening of the second half of the Ooredoo Stars League will be the first for the new technical staff, and there are aspirations to reconcile the fans in the coming period and achieve good results.

Al-Otaibi stressed his cooperation with the organizing committee regarding the arrangements for the match that will be held at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium on January 16, as well as the public attendance and accompanying events that precede the confrontation.

For his part, Turki al-Ali, Executive Director of

Al Sadd Club, confirmed that the team's preparations are going well by playing some friendly matches during the past period.

Al-Ali added: "We have previously faced the Emirati team Al Wasl in the current edition of the AFC Champions League for Elite, and facing the same opponent in the Super Cup again is a positive thing for us, and we have great confidence in the technical staff and all the players."

The first edition of the Qatari-UAE Super Cup was limited to only two matches, as Al Arabi, the Emir Cup champion (2022-2023), hosted Sharjah, the UAE President's Cup champion, for the Super Cup (2022-2023) at Al Thumama Stadium, and succeeded in defeating them with a goal without a response scored by its Tunisian player Youssef Msakni, while Al Duhail, the Qatar Stars League champion (2022-2023), lost to Shabab Al Ahli Dubai, the Adnoc Professional League champion (2022-2023), with a goal to two goals in the match that brought them together at Rashid Stadium in Dubai.

Taste of 2024 World Cup as Asian Cup 2027 Saudi stadiums named

Kuala Lumpur: Fans and players will get a taste of what the 2024 World Cup in Saudi Arabia will be like when the kingdom hosts the Asian Cup, with officials announcing yesterday dates and stadiums for the regional showpiece.

Saudi Arabia was in December controversially awarded the World Cup but first it hosts the Asian Cup in 2027. The tournament will be from January 7-February 5 that year and be held in the capital Riyadh, plus Jeddah and Al Khobar, the Asian Football Confederation said, launching a two-year countdown.

Among the venues announced yesterday for the 24-team regional competition were the 70,000-capacity King Fahd Sports City Stadium and King Saud University Stadium, both in Riyadh, which have also been earmarked to hold World Cup games. Likewise the 60,000 King Abdullah Sports City Stadium in Jeddah. The Asian Cup will be spread across eight stadiums. "Confirming the dates and selecting the stadiums for the AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 is a strategic milestone in our journey to host the tournament," said Yasser al-Misheal, president of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation.

Qatar, the 2022 World Cup host, staged and won the Asian Cup a year ago. The tournament was supposed to take place in China in 2023 but was moved out of the country because of the country's Covid policies at the time. Chairperson of the Organising Committee for AFC Asian Cup (OCAC) Mariano V Araneta Jr, who received an overview of the upcoming plans during the 3rd OCAC meeting in Riyadh, before the decisions were ratified by the AFC Executive Committee, said: "The record-setting AFC Asian Cup in Qatar exceeded all our expectations. In every way, Qatar 2023 has set the benchmark of excellence for all future editions of Asia's flagship tournament. "We are resolute in our commitment to improve Asia's crown jewel with each passing edition and the foundations are now in place for Saudi Arabia to host a truly exceptional tournament in 2027.

"We are confident that they will bring to bear their top-class hosting capabilities and warm hospitality for the benefit of everyone across the Continent and beyond, and we wish them the very best of success."

Eighteen teams have already sealed their places at the Asian Cup 2027. The remaining berths will be decided via the Qualifiers Final Round, which is scheduled to commence from March 2025 and features six groups of four teams - confirmed at last month's draw - with the winners of each group to make up the final cast.

CRICKET

West Indies great Lloyd plays 2-tier Test structure

'I think it will be terrible for all those countries who worked so hard to get the Test status'

Reuters
London

West Indies great Clive Lloyd is "disturbed" by the idea of a two-tier structure for Test cricket and believes efforts should instead be focused on ensuring struggling teams play more often against the top sides.

According to a report in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, India, Australia and England are in talks to divide Test cricket into two divisions to allow cricket's "Big Three" to play each other more often.

The International Cricket Council (ICC)'s Indian chairman Jay Shah will meet representatives of the Australian and English boards this month, the report said.

Lloyd was fiercely critical of the idea, which he believed could be catastrophic for the likes of the West Indies, which ruled the game in the 1970s and 1980s when he was captain.

"I think it will be terrible for all those countries who worked so hard to get the Test status," the 80-year-old told an online media interaction. "Now they'll be playing among themselves in the lower section. How are they going to make it to the top? When you play against better teams?"

The ICC did not offer any immediate comment on whether the proposal was under consideration.

T20 ONSLAUGHT

Test cricket is reeling under the popularity of T20 leagues across the world, but the format produces intense drama at the top level.

India just played a blockbuster series in front of huge crowds in Australia, and their next test assignment is another five-match series in England in June-July.



Pakistan's Mohammad Abbas (right) fields off his own bowling after a shot played by South Africa's David Bedingham during the fourth day of the second Test at Newlands Stadium in Cape Town on Monday. (AFP)



Clive Lloyd...former World Cup winning captain of West Indies.

Former India coach Ravi Shastri is a vocal supporter of the two-tier concept, which he believes can help test cricket survive against T20.

"The top teams play against each other more often, so there is a contest. You want contests," Shastri told SEN radio during India's fifth Test against Australia.

Lloyd warned that being banished to the lower tier with a corresponding drop in funding could lead to the disintegration of the West Indies team, which is made up of players from 15 island nations.

"Our islands have got to play together. We've been doing that for years," he added.

While a cricket-mad India has emerged as the game's financial engine, Lloyd recalled how the West Indies contributed to the game's development, including by lending their players to county cricket in England in the 1970s.

"We were the cash cows for a lot of countries over the years ... people must recognise that," he said. "But we are at that situation now where we need the help, and we can't get it."

Ex-England skipper Vaughan backs Test shake-up

Sydney: Former England captain Michael Vaughan threw his support yesterday behind a two-tier structure "to save" Test cricket with the ICC reportedly meeting this month to discuss the issue. Vaughan joined former India coach Ravi Shastri in urging a shake-up which would include relegation and promotion to help ensure the survival of the red-ball game.

Both men were on commentary duties during the thrilling five-Test series between Australia and India which the hosts won 3-1 in front of huge crowds. "It has been a series that has only served to strengthen my views on where the game is headed and what administrators should be looking at," Vaughan said in a column for *The Telegraph* in London and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. "I believe it is a four-day product with a set number of overs each day enforced, three matches minimum per series and two divisions of six, including promotion and relegation."

Shastri said the Australia-India series proved Test cricket continued to hold its own in the face of ever-increasing T20 franchise cricket. But, like Vaughan, it only reinforced his view that to survive, the biggest teams needed to be playing each other more often. The *Herald* reported Tuesday that Australia, England, India and the International Cricket Council's new chairman Jay Shah would meet this month to discuss a two-tier structure.

Any move to two divisions would kick in after the end of the current Future Tours Programme in 2027, it added, citing sources with



knowledge of the talks. "I was delighted to read in this masthead the ICC are considering a two-tier structure from 2027 which could see the Ashes staged twice every three years," said Vaughan. "I have been saying for a long time this is the way to keep Test cricket relevant by ensuring the best play the best as often as possible, and we get fewer mismatches."

"There is much to iron out before any major changes are made for 2027, but there is time." The ICC has been contemplating a two-tier system for years but the plans have never got off the ground.

A proposal for a de facto premier league featuring the top seven sides was on the agenda of the world governing body in 2016. It was scrapped after the powerful Indian board led a backlash. While India stand to gain from playing more matches against teams such as England and Australia, the BCCI said at the time the cost to smaller cricketing nations was too great.

FOCUS

Aspire Academy student-athletes back for fresh semester of ambition



Aspire Academy's student-athletes are back to school for the second semester of the 2024-25 academic year.

The next few months promise to be a busy period for them with international and local training camps as well as tournaments. Aspire Academy is committed to ensuring all of its student-athletes excel both academically and athletically and employs advanced educational strategies and customised academic plans in order to achieve this.

Jassem al-Jaber, Aspire Academy's School Principal, commented: "At Aspire Academy, we face unique challenges due to the dual nature of our students' commitments as both scholars and athletes. Ensuring their academic progress remains unaffected during training camps and competitions is a priority, and it requires innovative strategies and dedicated support. This year, for example, several of our student-athletes are part of Qatar's national under-17 squad, which is preparing for the FIFA U-17 World Cup, which Qatar is hosting, so we've started early to ensure they are ready to perform at their best. To achieve this, we've implemented tailored academic plans that balance their sporting schedules with their educational needs, allowing them to thrive in both areas."

One of the major highlights of the second semester is a training camp for the majority of Aspire Academy's footballers, which also involves special planning from the school as al-Jaber explained: "Approximately 120 students will participate in an intensive training camp in Turkey, requiring meticulous academic arrangements to maintain their studies. At Aspire, we make use of innovative solutions, including digital learning platforms, where lessons and materials are readily



accessible. This ensures students can continue their education remotely while receiving the support they need to stay on track."

He further explained: "In addition to online learning tools, we provide opportunities for makeup classes and remedial sessions upon their return. This ensures our students are fully prepared for examinations and remain supported academically. Aspire Academy is committed to fostering a flexible and inclusive environment that enables our student-athletes to excel both in the classroom and on the field."

Aspire Academy continues to set the standard for educational and athletic excellence, equipping students with the tools to achieve their full potential and shaping the next generation of champions.

SPOTLIGHT

LIV Golf features 6 US stops over 14 tournaments announced for 2025

Reuters
New York

The 2025 LIV Golf schedule, announced yesterday, will take the circuit to nine countries and six new venues, including a first-time location for the season-ending team championship.

The final four events of the 14-tournament schedule were revealed yesterday and will be played at Club de Golf Chapultepec in Mexico City on April 25-27, Robert Trent Jones Golf Club in Gainesville, Virginia, on June 6-8, and The Cardinal at Saint John's Resort in Plymouth, Michigan, for the team championship on Aug 22-24.

LIV Golf also will return to the Blue Monster at Trump National Doral in Miami from April 4-6.

"Our global calendar continues to expand with a focus on playing the very best golf courses and delivering a unique and memorable experience for fans," said Ross Hallett, LIV Golf's executive vice president and head of events.

"The 2025 slate features courses that have hosted multiple Presidents Cups, the Ryder Cup, and the Solheim Cup, where team golf has shined."

"We have a strong blend of historic venues rich with tradition, and contemporary clubs establishing new traditions of their own, and this season will be another incredible showcase for the



LIV Golf League, our teams, and our players," Hallett added.

The LIV Golf schedule tees off at Riyadh Golf Club in Saudi Arabia on Feb 6-8.

The tour will then play tournaments at The Grange Golf Club in Adelaide, Australia, on Feb. 14-16; Hong Kong Golf Club in Fanling, Hong Kong, on March 7-9; and Sentosa Golf Club in Singapore on March 14-16.

LIV Golf will also have international tournaments at the

Jack Nicklaus Golf Club Korea in Incheon, South Korea, on May 2-4; Real Club Valderrama in Sotogrande, Spain, on July 11-13; and JCB Golf and Country Club in Utttoxeter, England, on July 25-27. Other stops in the United States include a return to Mari-doe Golf Club in Carrollton, Texas, on June 27-29; Bolingbrook Golf Club in Illinois on Aug 8-10 and The Club at Chatham Hills in Westfield, Indiana, on Aug 15-17.

SCHEFFLER TO SKIP LA QUINTA AS HAND HEALS

Los Angeles, United States: World number one Scottie Scheffler has withdrawn from the US PGA Tour tournament at La Quinta, California, as he continues to recover from a hand injury suffered in a Christmas cooking accident. "After consulting with my medical team, I have made the decision to withdraw from next week's American Express tournament to give my injury more time to heal," Scheffler said in an Instagram post yesterday. "I am still hopeful to begin my 2025 season at the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro Am."

Scheffler had already withdrawn from The Sentry,

which was won on Sunday by Japan's Hideki Matsuyama. He had planned to play in La Quinta in the tournament starting on January 16. Scheffler's manager had said in a statement this month that the US golf star sustained a puncture wound to the palm of his right hand from a broken glass on Christmas Day. Scheffler needed surgery to remove glass fragments from the wound. Scheffler has just enjoyed one of the most successful seasons in PGA Tour history winning seven tournaments on the tour - the first player to reach that tally since Tiger Woods in 2007.

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Sabalenka eyes hat-trick but Swiatek, Gauff lurk

'HONESTLY, BEFORE EVERY GRAND SLAM I HAVE THE BELIEF THAT I CAN WIN'

AFP
Melbourne

World number one Aryna Sabalenka is gunning for a third consecutive Australian Open crown but will face a stiff challenge from Iga Swiatek, Coco Gauff and last year's runner-up Zheng Qinwen.

Sabalenka won the Brisbane International on Sunday but the headline was in Sydney where a red-hot Gauff beat Swiatek in the United Cup final in a statement victory.

The 20-year-old American Gauff bounced back impressively from parting with coach Brad Gilbert to win the WTA 1000 in Beijing and the WTA Tour Finals to end 2024. The world number three again looked in prime form as she inspired the US to victory over Poland in the mixed-teams event and confidence is high heading into Melbourne.

"Honestly, before every Grand Slam I have the belief that I can win," said Gauff, who triumphed at the 2023 US Open for her only major title so far. And especially after the US Open, I proved that I could do it. I definitely have belief that I can win."

The United Cup was Swiatek's first event since it was revealed she had served a one-month doping suspension.

The world number two began her 2025 campaign with four straight singles wins until coming up against Gauff, where she went down 6-4, 6-4 a week before the start of the Australian Open.

Swiatek is a five-time major champion but she has never shone at Melbourne Park, only progressing beyond the fourth round in 2022, when she was upset by Danielle Collins in the semi-finals.

The Pole also appears to be carrying a nagging left thigh injury that needed strapping during the week, but she brushed off any fears after the United Cup final.

"I was just tired," the 23-year-



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka serves against Russia's Polina Kudermetova during their final at the Brisbane International in Brisbane. (AFP)

old said. "You know, the volume at the beginning of the tournament especially has been pretty big. But honestly, it's all good."

Sabalenka is the woman to beat in Australia after the best season of her career in 2024, capped by being named WTA Player of the Year last month.

The Belarusian will be the first woman to win the Australian Open three years in a row since Martina Hingis in 1999 should she go all the way. The 26-year-old showed she was in the mood with a romp to the trophy at the season-opening Brisbane International, dropping only one set.

"Mentally, physically, I'll be ready to go at the Australian Open," she said. "I definitely feel confident in my game."

The victory continued her superb form from 2024 where she reached seven finals and won four tournaments.

She began 2024 by successfully defending the Australian Open and booked it by lifting her first US Open, as well as winning

WTA 1000 events in Cincinnati and Wuhan.

Sabalenka recaptured the number one ranking from Swiatek, who had mysteriously pulled out of the WTA's Asian swing citing "personal matters".

Only later was it revealed Swiatek had been absent because of a one-month ban for testing positive for a banned heart medication. She denies knowingly doping.

China's Zheng had a stellar 2024 including winning Olympic gold but she goes into the first Grand Slam of the year without playing a warm-up event. Other fancied players, Jasmine Paolini, Mirra Andreeva and two-time Melbourne champion Naomi Osaka have all shown glimpses of their best form to begin the season.

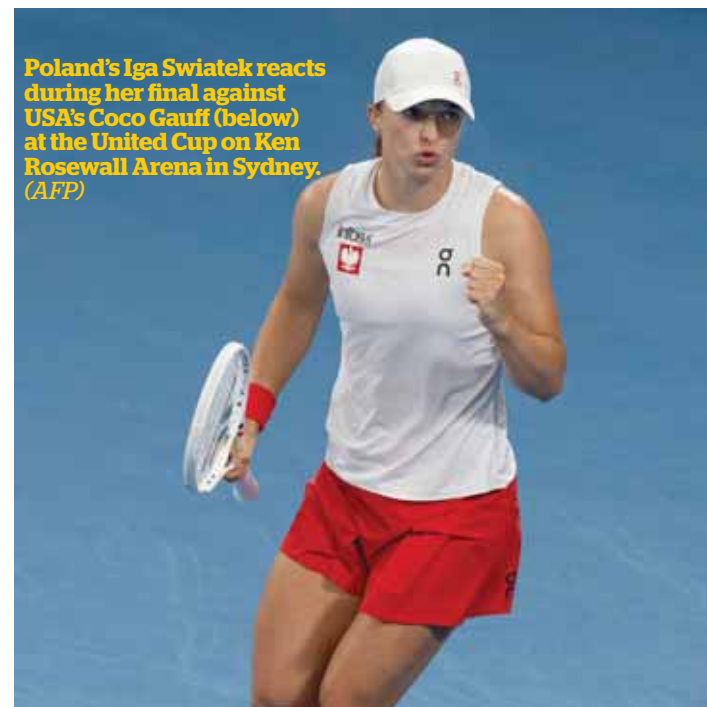
Late bloomer Paolini, 29, won two of her three singles at the United Cup to follow a 2024 where she reached the finals at Roland Garros and Wimbledon and rose to world number four.

Former number one Osaka re-

turned to the circuit last year after the birth of her daughter but failed to recapture the form that took her to four Slam crowns. Now under the wing of Patrick Mouratoglou, who formerly coached Serena Williams, she reached her first final since 2022 at Auckland before pulling out on Sunday with an abdominal problem.

Osaka, who is not thought to be badly injured, is ranked 50 and so will be unseeded and a dangerous potential early opponent for anyone. Teenage sensation Andreeva, a semi-finalist at Roland Garros in 2024, is expected to figure at the sharp end of Grand Slams this season.

The 17-year-old Russian already has one WTA title to her name and although she lost in the semi-finals at Brisbane to Sabalenka, the match was a lot closer than the 6-3, 6-2 scoreline suggested. One current Grand Slam champion will be absent, however, as Wimbledon winner Barbora Krejckova of the Czech Republic has pulled out with a back injury.



Poland's Iga Swiatek reacts during her final against USA's Coco Gauff (below) at the United Cup on Ken Rosewall Arena in Sydney. (AFP)



SPOTLIGHT

Sinner turns focus to Australian Open defence after 'amazing' year

AFP
Melbourne

World number one Jannik Sinner said yesterday his "amazing" 2024 was history as he warmed up for the defence of his Australian Open title with a tough exhibition match victory on Melbourne's centre court.

The Italian is coming off a breakthrough year in which he backed up his maiden Grand Slam title at Melbourne Park by winning the US Open and ATP Finals.

He then starred for Italy as they claimed a second consecutive Davis Cup triumph, ending as the world's undisputed top player.

The 23-year-old skipped any lead-up events to the opening major of the year and instead flew straight to Melbourne for his first match of 2025.

He faced a testing battle on a hot afternoon against Australian world number 25 Alexei Popyrin, eventually prevailing 6-4, 7-6 (7/2), rallying from 5-2 down in the second set on Rod Laver Arena.

"2024 was an amazing season for me, but it has already gone now," said Sinner, who spent Christmas at home in the snow and arrived in Melbourne to a 40 degree Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) day.

"So many things have happened



Jannik Sinner of Italy hits a return during a practice match against Australia's Alexei Popyrin yesterday, ahead of the Australian Open in Melbourne. (AFP)

for me on this court and off the court," he added.

"I'm very happy to be back, even if it is a kind of exhibition. For us it's always very important trying to feel the court, the pace."

"In my mind, I know how much work we have put in, which hopefully will give me confidence and we will see how it goes," he added.

The Australian Open starts on Sunday.

Sinner is kicking off his cam-

paign with a doping cloud hanging over him after twice testing positive for traces of the steroid clostebol in March. He was exonerated by the International Tennis Integrity Agency, which accepted his explanation that the drug entered his system when his physiotherapist treated a cut.

But the World Anti-Doping Agency appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport and the Italian is still awaiting the verdict.

Grand Slam champion wrote on Instagram late Monday. "No bad blood at all, he's a great person and an awesome dad. "Honestly really glad our paths crossed because my daughter is my biggest blessing and I was able to grow a lot from our experiences together." She ended the post with a red

heart emoji, without saying when they parted ways. Osaka reached her first WTA final since 2022 at the Auckland Classic over the weekend. But she pulled out with an abdominal injury after taking the opening set 6-4. The 27-year-old was not thought to be badly hurt, with the Australian Open starting on Sunday.

Norrie apologises after accidentally hitting fan with racket

Britain's Cameron Norrie apologised after a racket he tossed flew into the stands and hit a spectator during his 6-2 6-3 loss to Argentine Facundo Diaz Acosta in Auckland yesterday. World number 48 Norrie netted a shot while trailing 6-2 5-3 to Diaz Acosta and threw his racket in frustration, before going over to the fan sitting in the front row, who appeared unhurt. The 29-year-old was issued a warning by the chair umpire for

unsportsmanlike conduct. "I wasn't meaning to do that but it's still not ideal to be doing that and I've never done something like that," said Norrie, who represented New Zealand as a junior and previously lived in Auckland. "(The spectator) was laughing and I just said 'so sorry, I didn't mean to do that.' And she said 'yeah, I'm completely OK.' That was not a big deal. But as we saw with some other players, you can easily be defaulted if

it catches them in the wrong spot or they're not looking or something. "I was not meaning to do that and it is completely not me to do something like that. I apologised very quickly and I want to apologise in general. I'm not happy with how I behaved." At the 2020 US Open, 24-times Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic was defaulted in the fourth round after accidentally hitting a line judge in the throat with a ball.

FOCUS

Jabeur beats Collins to step up comeback ahead of Melbourne

AFP
Adelaide

Three-time Grand Slam finalist **Ons Jabeur** stepped up her comeback ahead of the Australian Open by beating fourth seed Danielle Collins 7-6 (8/6), 6-2 yesterday at the Adelaide International.

The 40th-ranked Tunisian wildcard, who last week reached the Brisbane quarter-finals, had a shoulder injury last year that kept her off court after August.

Collins, the 2022 Australian Open runner-up who cancelled a retirement scheduled for the end of 2024, was playing her first WTA match since September.

Jabeur faces Kazakhstan's Yulia Putintseva in the last 16 and said she relied on her forehand to earn victory. "It saved me a lot, this was a really good match for me," she said.

"After being injured I was not expecting to win many matches, but time off helped me physically and mentally. I was a bit tired from years of tennis."

Defending champion Jelena Ostapenko needed a set to get going but kicked up the inten-



sity in a 4-6, 6-1, 6-1 defeat of Magdalena Frech.

The 17th-ranked Latvian, who won Roland Garros in 2017, will meet Madison Keys in the last 16 at the warm-up tournament leading into the first major of the year.

American Keys crushed Brazil's Beatriz Haddad Maia, ranked four places above her at 16 in the world, 6-2, 6-1.

Ostapenko struggled in a scratchy opening set marred by more than 20 unforced errors against Poland's Frech.

"After the first set I just fought for every point," the 27-year-old said. "I found my game and got

better and better."

Keys, who married her coach Bjorn Fratangelo in November, broke four times in her rout of Haddad Maia.

"I didn't do much wrong - and that doesn't happen very often," she said.

Greek lucky loser Maria Sakkarri, who missed the latter part of 2024 with a shoulder injury, will next line up against top seed Jessica Pegula after defeating Czech Linda Noskova 6-3, 6-3.

"I'm coming back and have not had a lot of matches," the former number three said. "Every match I play I feel better and my game is improving day by day."

Osaka splits with rapper Cordae ahead of Australian Open

Japanese tennis star Naomi Osaka says she and her American rapper boyfriend Cordae have split up just days ahead of the Australian Open. The couple have been together since 2019 and share a young daughter, Shai. "Hi everyone, I just wanted to say that Cordae and I are no longer in a relationship," the four-time

SPANISH SUPER CUP

Barcelona and Flick play waiting game for Olmo

'It's not so easy for us not to have two very important players'



Barcelona's Jules Kounde (centre) trains with teammates in Jeddah yesterday, ahead of the Spanish Super Cup semi-final against Athletic Bilbao.

Reuters
Jeddah

Barcelona do not expect to have Dani Olmo or Pau Victor available for the Spanish Super Cup semi-final, but manager Hansi Flick said yesterday that the difficult situation surrounding the pair's registration can galvanise his team.

Barcelona signed Olmo from RB Leipzig in August for around 55mn euros (\$57.01mn) and Victor in July, but could only register them for the first half of the season because of La Liga wage cap rules.

On Saturday, Barcelona lost their latest appeal to register both players for the rest of the campaign, and their last hope now rests with the Spanish government through the Administrative Sports Court (CSD).

"I don't think it's going to happen tomorrow, but we're going to wait. The only thing we can do right now is wait," Flick told reporters ahead of today's semi-final against Athletic Bilbao in Saudi Arabia. "It's not so easy for us not to have two very important players. They have improved a lot. Dani Olmo is an excellent

player, of course we miss him. But we have to continue. Of course it will have an effect, but this will give us the opportunity to be closer as a team. We have to show that we are a team."

Flick is not too concerned that the legal difficulties the club have faced with the two players will have a negative effect when they look to sign others in the future. "We know what the situation is and how immense this club is. When you know that, you sign no matter what," Flick said. "It's great to be able to work with people like that."

Barcelona beat Athletic 2-1 when the sides met in the league back in August, but their opponents are on an excellent run of form, unbeaten in their last 15 matches in all competitions. Flick's side, meanwhile, have registered just one win in the last seven league games, losing top spot, and are now third in La Liga standings, with Athletic only two points behind.

The manager expects a tough game, but does have winger Lamine Yamal available, after the 17-year-old missed their most recent two games with an ankle injury. "I think he's trained three or four times. He's ready, he can play tomorrow," Flick said. "Playing against

Athletic is always difficult. They are a very good team, they have very good players and a very good philosophy."

The winners will face either Real Madrid or Mallorca, who meet in tomorrow's semi-final, in the final on Sunday.

Meanwhile, Athletic Bilbao coach Ernesto Valverde said Olmo being unavailable to play in Spanish Super Cup semi-final was a boost for his team. "Olmo is an extraordinary player and if he can't play tomorrow, for us, well what can I say?" former Barca coach Valverde told reporters. "I'm sorry for the situation he's in, because he's a player who if he can play, would bring prestige to the competition, but if he doesn't play against us, so much the better."

Despite winning two La Liga titles Valverde was sacked by Barcelona in January 2020 after a semi-final defeat in the Spanish Super Cup by Atletico Madrid at the King Abdullah Sports City in Jeddah, where today's match also takes place.

"I know I played my last Barca match as coach here, in the same stadium," added Valverde. "It happened, I am in another place now, very happy and tomorrow is a different game."

SPOTLIGHT

FBWC Qatar 2027 LOC signs agreement with Education Above All Foundation

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Local Organising Committee (LOC) of the FIBA Basketball World Cup - Qatar 2027 (FBWC Qatar 2027) has signed a co-operation agreement with the Education Above All (EAA) Foundation, aiming to advance the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) while showcasing Qatar's leadership in leveraging sports to support education and social development.

The signing ceremony was attended by Sara Khalid al-Mesnad, Executive Director of Communications & Guest Relations at the Local Organising Committee - FIBA Basketball World Cup - Qatar 2027, and Ali Turki al-Sobai - Executive Director of Human Resources of the Education Above All Foundation.

As part of the agreement, the Qatar Basketball Federation (QBF) and the Local Organising Committee for the FIBA Basketball World Cup - Qatar 2027 will develop a co-ordinated events calendar, ensuring the integration of Education Above All into their upcoming initiatives and activities. This collaboration will include initiatives such as hosting joint events to engage with prominent visitors to Qatar, organising field visits and creative gatherings to promote the tournament, and supporting the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in areas like education, youth empowerment, and employment.

Additionally, the partnership

will see the activation of QBF's social responsibility efforts to support EAA's educational initiatives, the development of a basketball scholarship program to nurture young talent.

Commenting on the partnership, Sara Khalid al-Mesnad stated: "This partnership underscores Qatar's commitment to using sports as a powerful platform for positive change, promoting universal values, and driving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. It lays the foundation for delivering a truly exceptional edition of the FIBA Basketball World Cup in 2027 which will support the right to educate children through the beautiful game of Basketball."

"Through this partnership with the FIBA Basketball World Cup - Qatar 2027 Local Organising Committee, Education Above All Foundation reaffirms its commitment to leveraging the transformative power of education and sports to drive sustainable development. This collaboration reflects our shared vision to make education accessible to every child, regardless of their circumstances. Together, we aim to inspire hope, foster opportunities, and empower youth to achieve their full potential," said Ali Turki al-Sobai, Executive Director of Human Resources at the Education Above All Foundation.

Al-Mesnad extended her appreciation to the Education Above All Foundation for their dedicated efforts in advancing global education. She expressed her optimism that the partnership would fulfil its mission to create a brighter future for upcoming generations.



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LEAGUE CUP

Spurs have 10 players out for semis against Liverpool, says Postecoglou

Reuters
London

Tottenham Hotspur will be without 10 first-team players ahead of their League Cup semi-final leg at home against Liverpool, manager Ange Postecoglou said, with the North London side aiming to end a 16-year trophy drought.

Spurs' injury issues continue to mount with key players out while James Maddison and Pape Matar Sarr are suspended after the duo picked up two yellow cards each in previous rounds. Spurs signed goalkeeper Antonin Kinsky from Slavia Prague over the weekend to strengthen the squad but Postecoglou will have limited options to field against Liverpool in today's first leg at home.

"We're trying to help the squad and players. We're down significant numbers, we'll have roughly 10 first-team players missing against Liverpool," Postecoglou told reporters. "That isn't easy, we get one back and then lose a couple. We still need to see if we can help the playing group and the club's working hard on that in a number of areas."

Spurs are without Cristian Romero, Micky van de Ven, Wilson Odobert, Richarlison, Ben Davies and Guglielmo Vicario due to long-term injuries and they are unlikely to be fit before today's clash. Postecoglou said Rodrigo Bentancur, who missed Spurs' 2-1 loss to Newcastle United due to suspension, will be back while others are being assessed.



On a positive note, Spurs activated a one-year extension to captain Son Heung-min's contract and Postecoglou said he wants the South Korean forward to end his career at the club with a trophy. Spurs have not won any silverware since they beat Chelsea in the League Cup final in 2008. "The main ambition is to make sure he finishes his career here with some silverware," he added.

SLOT SAYS CONTRACT ISSUES NOT AFFECTING ALEXANDER-ARNOLD'S FORM
Arne Slot stressed that contract issues for some of Liverpool's top stars are not a distraction following stinging criticism of Trent Alexander-Arnold for his perform-

ance against Manchester United. The England defender, linked with a move to Real Madrid, was at fault for Lisandro Martinez's opener in Sunday's 2-2 draw at Anfield during a sub-par display.

The right-back's sloppy performance came 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 the former Liverpool trainee but the Anfield club are believed to have rejected their approach. Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk and top-scorer Mohamed Salah are also out of contract at the end of the season. Liverpool manager Slot, speaking before the first leg of his side's League Cup semi-final against Tottenham, admitted Alexander-Arnold had performed below his usual standards against United.

"He's played so, so, so many games well for this club," he said. "Now it wasn't his best, like for some others, it wasn't the best game. "And we just pick it up, start training today again, because these players know if you play 50, 60 games in the season that once in a while you don't have your best performance."

The Dutchman said he was frustrated at the way the performances of his players were assessed. Slot also said he avoids the noise around the club after Salah's cryptic social media post on Monday featuring a picture of all three players who are nearing the end of their contracts.

FOCUS

Conceicao's start at AC Milan ends in Super Cup success

Reuters
Riyadh

Sergio Conceicao capped an incredible first week at AC Milan by lifting the Italian Super Cup on Monday, wrapping up a period which included two comeback wins, fighting a fever, picking up an injury and smoking a cigar in the dressing room.

Conceicao replaced the sacked Paulo Fonseca as manager last Monday and, despite suffering with illness and a high temperature, he took his place on the bench to lead Milan to a 2-1 semi-final win over Juventus on Friday. Milan came from a goal down to beat Juventus but things looked decidedly worse in Monday's final when they found themselves two goals down to their local rivals Inter Milan after conceding a



goal either side of halftime.

"The team has character, it managed to win games against two great teams in the end," Conceicao said. "At halftime the coach has to change certain things, that's why they pay me."

Conceicao's side again showed their fighting spirit, pulling back to 2-2 and, with the game in added time and heading for penalties, Tammy Abraham netted a dramatic winner. The Milan players and staff celebrated with a visibly emotional Conceicao at

the final whistle but the manager picked up an injury and needed treatment on the bench before rejoining his team.

"Emerson Royal made a red card tackle on me," Conceicao said with a laugh. "I'm very happy for the players because it wasn't easy, we had little time to work on the details that were important to me. The credit is all theirs because they absorbed my indications. There is still a lot of work but with humility we can do well in the Champions League and in the league."

BAN FOR WOLVES STRIKER CUNHA CUT AFTER OFFER TO BUY NEW GLASSES FOR SECURITY GUARD

London: An offer from Wolves forward Matheus Cunha to buy new glasses for a security guard following a post-match melee helped convince an independent disciplinary panel to cut his ban from three matches to two.

The Brazilian was suspended for two games after clashing with members of Ipswich's security team following his team's 2-1 loss against their relegation rivals at Molineux on December 14. Cunha

elbowed a man and "knocked his glasses from his face, causing them to break", according to the panel's report, published on the Football Association's website.

It said the "starting point" should be a three-match ban, to reflect the seriousness of the offence. But it added: "The commission agreed that (Cunha's) acceptance of the charge, his prompt personal apology... the offer to pay for new glasses and his

clean disciplinary record, were mitigating factors."

Those factors also helped to secure a reduction in the fine, from £120,000 (\$150,000) to £80,000. Cunha has been a standout player for Wolves this season, scoring 10 goals in 19 league games. Defeat by Ipswich marked the end of the road for Wolves manager Gary O'Neil, who was dismissed and replaced by Vitor Pereira.