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MOTORSPORT | Page 2

Al-Maghrabi triumphs in Arabian Drag Racing League



SERIE A | Page 4

Inter squeeze past Venezia to put pressure on Napoli

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AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Sabalenka, Zverev shine after rain stops play in Melbourne

Page 3

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Al Duhail go three points clear as Al Sadd stay in hunt

Al-Ameen and Almoez Ali netted a brace each as leaders Al Duhail cruise past Qatar SC



Al Sadd's Yusuf Abdurisag scores against Al Shamal at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Duhail beat Qatar SC 4-1 to regain their three-point lead at the top in the Qatar Stars League, while Al Sadd stayed in touch with their fierce rivals after Yusuf Abdurisag's strike helped them squeeze past Al Shamal 1-0.

At the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium, Homam al-Ameen (11th and 37th minutes) and Almoez Ali (90th and 90+3 minutes) each netted a brace as Al Duhail extended

their points tally to 28 points, while Qatar SC, who got their consolation goal in six minutes of added time through Yousef Mohammed Ali, remained on 10 points.

Duhail continued from where they stopped before the month-long break with their impressive attacking play. They could have grabbed the opener within the fifth minute if not for Homam's left-footed shot from 25 yards out going a bit higher than expected. The Qatari left-back, however, atoned for the earlier miss six minutes later as he took advantage of a quickly taken free-kick by Luis Alberto to put The Red Knights ahead.

Qatar SC's Ben Malango had a great opportunity to restore parity in the 24th minute after Eisa Ahmed had put him through with a cross following a set piece situation, but his header from very close range went high and wide to the right.

While Qatar SC's search for an equaliser went unyielding, Homam added his second of the night in the 37th minute, firing home a right-footed shot from the left side of the box after a well-timed overlap to locate a sublime pass from Alberto to ensure that the coach Christophe Galtier's team went into the half-time break with a comfortable lead.



Al Duhail's Almoez Ali (centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Qatar SC.

The Kings continued in their search to at least reduce the deficit in the second half and their prayers were almost answered in the 60th minute if not for Al Duhail goalkeeper Salah Zakaria's quick thinking to save a goal-bound right-footed shot from Jassim al-Jalabi from the right side of the box.

Qatar SC seemed to have put one back in the 76th minute through Ben Malango who poked home a right-footed shot from the centre of the box, but the goal was, however, cancelled, after a lengthy VAR check, due to an offside decision on the Congolese striker.

Captain Almoez made it 3-0 for Al Duhail on the stroke of regulation time from an assist by Edmilson Junior before adding another two minutes later, shooting into an empty net following a diagonal pass by Homam that beat onrushing goalkeeper

Motaseem al-Bustami.

With Al Duhail seemingly heading home with four unreplied goals in their kitty, Qatar SC finally got their consolation goal, albeit late, as Almoez hit the bull's eye in six minutes of added time to give Qatar SC some form of consolation.

Later, Al Sadd had Abdurisag to thank for after he scored in the 74th minute to beat a spirited Al Shamal at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

Al Shamal also managed to get the ball into the net off a header from Omar Mohammed in added time of the first half, but the goal was disallowed as Baghdad Bounedjah had pushed Al Sadd's Moustafa Tarek Mashal resulting in a foul.

The win saw Al Sadd stay as second in the standings with 25 points, ahead of Al Ahli on goal difference, while Al Shamal slid a rung down to sixth with 16 points.

DAKAR RALLY

Al-Attiyah stays fourth as roadbook error causes chaos

Agencies
Al Duwadimi, Saudi Arabia

Five-times Dakar winner Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah of Qatar was fourth to the finish line, and maintained fourth place in the general rankings as a roadbook note error caused many drivers at the front of the field to lose their bearings, forcing Dakar Rally organisers to erase any gains or losses for a 20km stretch during yesterday's stage seven.

As cars went off the route into the vast Saudi Arabian desert, al-Attiyah blasted blunder as a "disaster". The roadbook error came at kilometre 158 of stage 7, a 412km loop which started and finished in Al Duwadimi, and was enough to take the leaders off course. Losing precious time, they drove aimlessly in the desert until an organisation helicopter came to put the cars back on the right track.

"When you want to do the roadbook, do it well," said al-Attiyah, driving a Dacia, at the finish. "You have to check it many, many times because this was a disaster. It was a big risk."

Belgian driver Guillaume de Mevius, who was among the first to arrive at the faulty mark in his Mini, said: "We were there for 50 minutes, 50 minutes of going round in circle. We were crossing paths with everyone who was turning round, trying to get to the same place as us but which we'd already tried."

As a result, the organisers had to erase the times on a 20-kilometre section of the special although there was still confusion over the remainder of the course because of the order in which the cars had set out. The incident prompted stinging criticism



Qatari driver Nasser al-Attiyah and his French co-driver Edouard Boulanger compete during Stage 7 of the Dakar Rally, between Al Duwadimi and Al Duwadimi in Saudi. (AFP)

of the organisers.

Brazilian Lucas Moraes of Toyota emerged from the confusion as the day's stage winner, finishing 7min 41sec ahead of Swede Mattias Ekstrom with American Mitchell Guthrie at 9min 28sec, both in Fords. "Nice to win one more stage in the Dakar, these things are really hard to get," said Moraes. "I think maybe tomorrow it's going to be just like this one today and then we're going to start reaching the Empty

Quarter."

In the overall standings, South African leader Henk Lategan in a Toyota has a lead of just 21 seconds over Saudi Arabia's Yazeed al-Rajhi. Ekstrom is third at 10min 25sec. The car category also saw the withdrawal for "medical reasons" of the duo of Toby Price and Sam Sunderland of Overdrive. The double Dakar winners in the bike category had teamed up this year in the cars.

QMMF president meets Qatar team at Dakar Rally



Abdulrahman bin Abdulatif al-Mannai, President of the Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF), visited Qatar team at the Dakar Rally in Saudi Arabia. He was accompanied by QMMF board members Abdulrazzak al-Kuwari and Khalid al-Remeihi. Their visit provided a significant boost of morale and energy to Qatar team for the remaining days of the Dakar rally.

Daniel Sanders underlined his dominance on the bikes, which were not affected by the roadbook error, with his fifth stage win of this year's race. The 30-year-old Australian (KTM) finished 3min 36sec ahead of 19-year-old Spaniard Edgar Canet. "It was pretty fast, very fast," said Sanders. "Technical at the start, we had a lot of rain but it was only at the start. So it was a pretty wet line to see in front and just had us kind of correct and not following

mistakes with the navigation. The speed was good, head was good, so it was a much better day."

Sanders now leads the standings by 15min 33sec from Spaniard Tocha Schareina (Honda) who finished the day in third place, a further nine seconds behind Canet. Frenchman Adrien Van Beveren is third in the overall standings at 26min 07sec.

Today's eighth stage is a 483km special from Al Duwadimi to Riyadh.

MOTORSPORT

Al-Maghrabi sparkles at Qatar Racing Club

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Over three days of intense competition, challenges and a battle between the most powerful engines, the drag racing strip at Qatar Racing Club (QRC) hosted events that will be remembered, forming the major headlines of the opening round of the 2025 Arabian Drag Racing League (ADRL).

The ADRL is being held patronage of QRC Chairman HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani and in the presence of QRC Director Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani, who honoured the podium winners. This first round saw a record number of participants, reaching over 210 competitors. Of these, 149 competed in car categories while the rest vied for titles in the four motorcycle categories.

In the most powerful car category, the Super Street Pro, driver Jaber al-Maghrabi won the title of the opening round after his competitor and top qualifier Turki al-Dosari was unable to face him in the final due to an engine problem, settling for second place, while the third place went to Youssef al-Ali. In the Index 4.00 category, the defending champion of last season, Muslim al-Qallaf, secured



the first-round title after defeating Basel Abbas in the final, with Abbas finishing in second place. The third place on the podium went to Badr Khorsheed.

In the Super Street Outlaw category, the top qualifier, David Reese, continued his path towards the final race and managed to clinch the win over Faisal al-Shehhi, taking first place, while the latter settled for second. The third place went to competitor Jaber Salman. Additionally, in the Index 4.50 category, the 2013 NHRA Top Fuel Champion, Shawn Langdon, par-

ticipated and managed to reach the final to face Ahmed al-Juhail in a fierce competition. Langdon won the title, claiming his first victory in the championship, while al-Juhail took second place, and Ibrahim Abbas Ibrahim secured third. In the Index 4.80 category, Rashid al-Blooshi won first place, leaving second place for competitor Hussein Ashkanani while third place went to Suleiman al-Fadhil.

The categories that entered the championship for the first time this season, namely the Pro NA and 6-Cylinder Import categories,

witnessed fierce competition. The title in the first category went to competitor Mohamed al-Faraj while the title in the second category went to Youssef al-Zayani. As for the categories competing over the quarter-mile distance, they saw the widest participation in the championship. These categories included Index 9.00 and Index 8.50, and their final results showed that Ahmed Saad al-Harbi won the first category title while in the second category, the title went to Youssef al-Faraj.

Similar to the car categories,

the opening round of the Arab Drag Racing Championship saw record-breaking participation in the motorcycle categories, along with the return of the most powerful category, Pro Bike. In this category, competitor Mohamed al-Awad claimed the first spot on the podium after defeating Ahmed al-Nukhilan in the final.

The Super Street Bike category featured a final battle between Mishari al-Turki and Mishari al-Marri, with al-Marri emerging victorious to take the title of the first round. In the Street Bike category,

the first-round title went to Mustafa Mahmoudi, while the defending champion of last season, Mohamed Bourashed, settled for second place.

As for the last motorcycle category, Index 8.50, it recorded the highest number of participants in the opening round, with 38 riders competing for the title. In the end, the title went to Nasser Bourba, while Zaid al-Dosari secured second place, and Hassan Alouh claimed third.

The second round will take place from January 15-17.



CRICKET

Five seamers for New Zealand in CT squad

Spinner Mitchell Santner to lead the 15-man team

Reuters
Auckland

Seamers Ben Sears, Nathan Smith and Will O'Rourke will play their first global tournament at the Champions Trophy (CT) in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates next month after being named in the New Zealand squad yesterday.

Matt Henry will lead the New Zealand attack after the international retirements of stalwarts Trent Boult and Tim Southee with Lockie Ferguson making up a five-strong pace battery.

Sears returns from a knee injury that kept him out of action for much of last year, while O'Rourke and Smith impressed in the recent Test series against England and the short format series against Sri Lanka that followed.

Left-arm spinner Mitchell Santner will lead the 15-man squad after his appointment as his country's white-ball captain last month. Santner, Kane Williamson and Tom Blundell are the only survivors of the New Zealand squad for the last edition of the Champions Trophy in 2017.

"We're currently blessed with a lot of quality players and that certainly made for some challenging selection discussions," said coach Gary Stead. "We've gone with the squad that will offer us the best options to perform well in the expected conditions in Pakistan and the UAE."



Batsman Rachin Ravindra (front) of New Zealand at a ceremony where the squad for the 2025 Champions Trophy was announced in Auckland yesterday. (@BLACKCAPS)

The Black Caps will play warm-up matches against Pakistan, South Africa and Afghanistan in Karachi and Lahore before the tournament gets underway on Feb. 19.

New Zealand squad: Mitchell Santner (captain), Michael Bracewell, Mark Chapman, Devon Conway, Lockie Ferguson, Matt Henry, Tom Latham, Daryl Mitchell, Will O'Rourke, Glenn Phillips, Rachin Ravindra, Ben Sears, Nathan Smith, Kane Williamson, Will Young.

Najmul to lead Bangladesh in Champions Trophy
Najmul Hossain Shanto will captain Bangladesh in the Champions Trophy in Pakistan and Dubai next month, the cricket board said yesterday, with key players including Liton Das missing the cut. Former star all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan is also missing from the 15-man squad for the one-day international tournament.

The Champions Trophy takes place in Pakistan and Dubai from February 19 with Bangladesh placed in Group A alongside In-

dia, Pakistan and New Zealand. Bangladesh are ninth in the ICC ODI rankings. They play their opener against India in Dubai on February 20.

Bangladesh squad: Nazmul Hossain Shanto (capt), Soumya Sarkar, Tanzid Hasan, Towhid Hridoy, Mushfiqur Rahim, Mohammad Mahmudullah Riyad, Jaker Ali, Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Rishad Hossain, Taskin Ahmed, Mustafizur Rahman, Parvez Hossain Emon, Nasum Ahmed, Tanzim Hasan Sakib, Nahid Rana.

ANNOUNCEMENT

High-flying Afghanistan announce Champions Trophy squad

AFP
Kabul

Afghanistan announced their squad yesterday for next month's Champions Trophy, with prolific opener Ibrahim Zadran returning after an injury lay-off but spinner Mujeeb Ur Rahman missing out.

The country's performance in white-ball cricket has been strong recently - finishing sixth in the 50-over World Cup in 2023 and reaching the semi-final in last year's Twenty20 World Cup.

This will be the first time Afghanistan participate in the eight-nation Champions Trophy, staged between February 19 and March 9 in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

"Zadran, who was away from action due to an ankle injury, has returned to the squad," said a statement from the Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB).

"However, Mujeeb Ur Rahman misses out on the selection, as AM Ghazanfar, a similar mystery spin-

ner, has made the cut for the mega event."

Rahman was left out because "he has been advised by his doctor to focus on T20s for a while to ensure his full recovery", added acting ACB chief selector Ahmad Suliman Khil.

But fast-rising opener Sediquallah Atal did secure a place in the squad, the ACB said.

Afghanistan beat England and Pakistan in the ODI World Cup and Australia and New Zealand in the T20 World Cup. Their Champions Trophy campaign begins with a clash against South Africa in Karachi on February 21, before they face England and Australia in Lahore.

Afghanistan squad: Hashmatullah Shahidi (capt), Rahmat Shah (vice-capt), Rahmanullah Gurbaz (wk), Ikram Alikhil (wk), Ibrahim Zadran, Sediquallah Atal, Azmatullah Omarzai, Mohammad Nabi, Gulbadin Najib, Rashid Khan, AM Ghazanfar, Noor Ahmad, Fazal Haq Farooqi, Naveed Zadran and Farid Ahmad Malik.

GOLF

Plucky Spaun climbs into lead at Sony Open



J J Spaun acknowledges the crowd after making his putt on the 13th hole during the third round of the Sony Open at Waialae Country Club. (AFP)

Reuters
Honolulu

J J Spaun shot a 5-under-par 65 to move into the lead through three rounds of the Sony Open on Saturday at Waialae Country Club in Honolulu.

Spaun's best score of the tournament puts him at 13-under 197 going to the final round.

He'll have plenty of pursuers within range.

He's ahead of second-round co-leader Patrick Fishburn (68), Eric Cole (67) and Germany's Stephan Jaeger (62) by one stroke.

Jaeger had the best score of the day with birdies on six of the final 10 holes.

Spaun, appearing in his 219th PGA Tour event, is seeking his sec-

ond victory. The first came in the 2022 Texas Open.

Spaun was clean for most of the day, scattering five birdies over the first 14 holes before alternating bogeys and birdies on the last four.

Fishburn began the round with two birdies, but played the back nine 2 over.

Keegan Bradley (64) Englishman Harry Hall (65) and Canadian Nick Taylor (65) are among a cluster of six golfers tied for fifth at 11 under.

Denny McCarthy, who was even with Fishburn entering the round, slipped to a tie for 16th after shooting 71.

Japan's Kensei Hirata, who had a 63 for Friday's best round, is also in that group at 9 under after posting a 70 on Saturday.

There are 14 golfers within three strokes of Spaun and 27 within five strokes of the top spot.

FOCUS

India board elects Saikia unopposed to top job

AFP
Mumbai

India's powerful and hugely wealthy cricket board yesterday elected its new chief, former player and advocate Devajit Saikia, the only person nominated to the top post.

"Devajit Saikia is declared duly elected as the Secretary of BCCI", the Board of Control for Cricket in India said in a statement.

Saikia, 55, succeeds Jay Shah who left the position to become chairman of the International Cricket Council, the global governing body.

Businessman and state cricket administrator Prabtej Singh Bhatia has been appointed BCCI treasurer, the board added.



Shah's departure last month to become chairman of the ICC prompted the appointment of Saikia, who was already on the

BCCI board as interim secretary. An unknown among fans after a modest playing career, Saikia has close ties with India's ruling

Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Saikia began in administration by serving as general secretary of a cricket club in the northeastern state of Assam under the leadership of Himanta Biswa Sarma. Sarma is now Assam's chief minister for the BJP, which has governed India nationally since 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Saikia and Sarma both later served in the Assam state cricket association.

When Sarma was tapped to lead the state, he appointed Saikia his advocate general - the government's chief legal adviser.

Saikia was a wicketkeeper-batsman with modest returns in first-class cricket where he played four matches for his home state Assam, scoring just 53 runs.

TENNIS

Sabalenka, Zverev advance after rain plays spoilsport

The Australian Open kicks off with showers throughout the day forcing eight matches to be rescheduled



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka shakes hands with Sloane Stephens of the US after winning her first round match at the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. **Right:** Germany's Alexander Zverev hits a shot against France's Lucas Pouille during their singles match yesterday. (Reuters/AFP)



Reuters
Melbourne

Aryna Sabalenka opened her bid for a third straight Australian Open title with a 6-3 6-2 victory over Sloane Stephens yesterday after rain had washed away a good chunk of play on the opening day at Melbourne Park.

The top seed did not have it all her own way against the 2017 US Open champion but wrapped up the win in little more than an hour on Rod Laver Arena, one of three courts where play continued under closed roofs during the deluge.

Men's second seed Alexander Zverev, seeking a maiden Grand Slam title, made a dominant start to his bid as he closed out the evening session on the main show-

court with a 6-4 6-4 6-4 victory over 2019 semi-finalist Lucas Pouille.

Olympic champion Zheng Qinwen, who lost to Sabalenka in last year's final, reached the second round indoors, while men's sixth seed Casper Ruud and former world number four Kei Nishikori dodged the wet weather to secure five-set victories.

It was another matter on the outside courts where play ended after less than an hour in the morning and did not resume until more than six hours later in the early evening.

Eight of the 32 scheduled singles matches were scratched and organisers will be giving thanks for the cushion of the extra day which was first added to the tournament last year.

One of the benefits of winning

three Grand Slam titles is preferential scheduling and the roof of Rod Laver Arena was open again to the evening sun as Sabalenka took to court to face American Stephens.

Five breaks of serve, 20 winners and 21 unforced errors later and the Belarusian was leading the crowd in an impromptu dance, having secured a second-round clash with Spain's Jessica Bouzas Maneiro.

"It's not like I played my best match, probably, but I was glad to close it out in straight sets," the 26-year-old said. "I love playing here, it feels like home."

Zverev was equally impressive despite not hitting top gear as he began his quest to become the first German man to claim a major since Boris Becker at Melbourne Park in 1996.

Frenchman Pouille tried his best

to resist Zverev in the third set, but the world number 103 who has endured injury problems in recent years faded away.

"Lucas is somebody who when healthy isn't the ranking that he is," Zverev said.

"He's a great player, so I wish him all the best."

At the start of the day, the roofs of the showcourts were already closed before a violent thunderstorm brought the first rain and Zheng and Romanian qualifier Anca Todoni played out their baseline battle uninterrupted.

Fifth seed Zheng, who did not play a warm-up tournament, struggled against the tall Todoni in the first set, finally breaking for 4-3 only to be broken back.

The 22-year-old saved a set point before clinching the tie-breaker 7-3 and quickly raced to a

3-0 lead in the second while Todoni racked up unforced errors as she fought to stay in the contest.

"The first match is never easy and I made some stupid mistakes," Zheng said after wrapping up her 7-6(3) 6-1 win in a shade under two hours.

Earlier, Mirra Andreeva was the first player to reach the second round when the 17-year-old Russian beat Czech Marie Bouzkova 6-3 6-3 on John Cain Arena.

On Margaret Court Arena, Arthur Fils was the first man into second round when he came from a set down to beat unseeded Finn Otto Virtanen 3-6 7-6(4) 6-4 6-4.

"It's pretty nice, man. First time in my life I'm playing on a good court," the 20th seeded Frenchman said.

"To be able to play a match and to finish a match with a roof, it's

much more easy than to play, to stop with the rain."

The other two early men's matches were much longer with Norwegian Ruud advancing after a 6-3 1-6 7-5 2-6 6-1 victory over Jaume Munar and Japan's Nishikori prevailing 4-6 6-7(4) 7-5 6-2 6-3 against Brazilian qualifier Thiago Monteiro.

"He deserved to win today but somehow I fought through," said Nishikori, who was playing at Melbourne Park for the first time in four years after a horror run of injuries.

Qualifier Hady Habib gave Lebanese fans reason to cheer by becoming the first man from his nation to win a singles main draw match at a Grand Slam in the professional era with a 7-6(4) 6-4 7-6(6) win over China's Bu Yunchaokete.

SPOTLIGHT

Nishikori wins and reveals he almost quit the game

AFP
Melbourne

Japanese veteran Kei Nishikori admitted yesterday he almost quit tennis last year after lengthy battles with injury, but the dream of playing at the Australian Open kept him going.

The 35-year-old dug deep to save two match points in a five-set epic against Brazil's Thiago Monteiro on John Cain Arena and keep him alive for another day.

Nishikori, who reached a career-high four in the world and was a US Open finalist a decade ago, rallied to win 4-6, 6-7 (4/7), 7-5, 6-2, 6-3 in 4hr 6min.

"I almost gave up at match point," said Nishikori, who is on the comeback trail after spending years sidelined by major hip surgery and an ankle injury.

"He was playing very good and was on a roll. But I somehow fought through."

"It was a really tough one," he added. "I tried to stay calm even though I was almost out of the



Japan's Kei Nishikori celebrates winning his first round match against Brazil's Thiago Monteiro in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters)

tournament. I tried to fight to the end."

After his injury battles, Nishikori returned to contest his first two Grand Slams last year since the 2021 season, reaching the second round at Roland Garros before retiring with a shoulder problem.

He recovered to play at Wimbledon, losing in the first round,

but admitted it had been tough and go whether he would keep going. "Almost last year because I had my knee and shoulder two years ago, and I almost came back. I got injured again," he said when asked if he had considered quitting. "I was thinking, if I have maybe another surgery, then I think mentally I'm not able to fight any more." But he said he

still loved to compete. "I wanted to play (again) in a big stadium like today," he said.

"That was my goal a year ago when I was doing rehab. I still think that I have the chance to play with these top players."

He gave a glimpse of his progress by making his first final in six years at the Hong Kong Open this month.

Nishikori, the first Grand Slam men's singles finalist from Asia at the US Open in 2014, had played eight five-set matches at Melbourne Park before meeting Monteiro and only lost once - against Roger Federer in 2017.

He has a 29-8 record in five-set matches at tour level.

"I try to think a lot," he said in explaining his ability to pull through in tough matches.

"I think my focus level, it's always high, especially in the last set. Also, is kind of big for me to stay tough until the end."

Now coached by 2002 Australian Open champion Thomas Johansson, he will next play either American 12th seed Tommy Paul or Australia's Chris O'Connell.

HABIB MAKES HISTORY AS FIRST LEBANESE TO WIN A GRAND SLAM MATCH



Lebanon's Hady Habib eyes the ball as he hits a shot against China's Bu Yunchaokete during their singles match on day one of the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

Melbourne: Lebanon's Hady Habib made history yesterday at the Australian Open by becoming the first player from his country to win a Grand Slam match. World number 219 Habib is the only Lebanese ever, man or woman, to come through qualifying and reach the main draw at one of the four majors.

The 26-year-old continued his fairytale run with a 7-6 (7/4), 6-4, 7-6 (8/6) victory over China's Bu Yunchaokete in front of a frenzied crowd out on Court 13. He was draped in the Lebanon flag as he signed autographs after the match.

"This is probably one of the best days of my career honestly," said Habib. "It's such an incredible feeling to get this win not only for myself but for Lebanon and Lebanese tennis."

"As you guys could see there, the crowd was absolutely wild. It made it even more special to win in front of them."

Born in America to a Lebanese father, Habib lived in Lebanon for a few years from the age of six and has been representing the country since he was 15 when he first played in the Davis Cup.

He also wore the Lebanon colours proudly at last year's Paris Olympics where he lost in the first round to Carlos Alcaraz.

"There were definitely more people at the Alcaraz match," smiled Habib. "I think there were more Lebanese people today, so it felt a little more special."

"The support I've been getting these last couple days has been incredible. My phone has been absolutely blowing up."

"I actually have some family from Sydney that came out to watch. It's been a special time for me to have all the Lebanese people join in the community," he added.

"Yeah, I felt the energy out there." His reward is a second-round match against France's 14th seed Ugo Humbert.

"It's a huge win, especially what we've been going through as a country," said Habib.

"I think to bring something positive, especially we've been having a rough time with obviously the war. We had our other issues in the past. It's just nice to get this win for Lebanon and for the people."

"This is the biggest achievement I've had in my entire career."

BADMINTON

Shi Yuqi lifts Malaysia Open title after easy win

AFP
Kuala Lumpur

China's Shi Yuqi captured the Malaysia Open men's singles crown after a dominant 21-8, 21-15 victory over Denmark's Anders Antonsen in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

In doing so, the world number one extracted revenge over his world number two opponent, having lost in straight games at the 2024 edition. The 28-year-old Shi was a different proposition in this one-sided Super 1000 final, needing only 39 minutes for victory in front of a full house at the Axiata Arena. Shi

needed only 15 minutes to secure the opening game thanks to his strong start.

Shi's cross court returns proved to be his strong suit, as they left the 27-year-old Antonsen flat-footed several times.

The Dane started the second game with a neat disguised drop shot that wowed the crowd, and he continued in the same positive momentum to take an 11-9 lead at the interval.

But mistakes began to creep in, and when Antonsen conceded another point to trail 11-14, he shouted at himself.

A fortunate point from Shi saw the shuttle tumbling over the Dane's court which added to his frustration, and the Chinese ace sealed victory when Antonsen's return went wide.

Shi immediately went to celebrate his first victory of 2025 with his coaches.

"I'm definitely happy because it has been a while since a Chinese men's singles shuttler won a title in Malaysia. Last year when I played against him, he was in excellent form, so today I reflected on my past encounters with him and I made sure to prepare thoroughly," said Shi.

South Korea's An Se-young, meanwhile, defended her women's singles crown in style after the world number one thrashed China's Wang Zhiyi 21-17, 21-7. In this battle of the world's top two shuttlers, An's class showed throughout as she precisely worked her opponent into submission.

QMMF TEAM SECURES SIXTH CONSECUTIVE VICTORY IN DUBAI 24H



Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) Executive Director Amro al-Hamad (centre) poses with the victorious QMMF By HRT team drivers who won the 992 AM category at the 24 Hours Dubai 2025 at the Dubai Autodrome yesterday. With a skilled lineup of drivers - Qatar's Abdullah al-Khelaifi, Ghanem al-Ali, Ibrahim al-Abdulghani, and Germany's Julian Haneses - the QMMF team once again proved their excellence on the racetrack, extending their impressive streak to six wins. QMMF finished the highly challenging race in 24th place overall and fourth in the Porsche 992 class. While they topped the 992 AM category, France's TFT Racing claimed second place, and GP Racing, also of France, completed the podium. The team now heads to Abu Dhabi's famed Yas Marina Circuit for the next round of the 6-Hours Series, scheduled for January 18-19.



SERIE A

Inter edge Venezia to put pressure on leaders Napoli

Darmian struck in the 16th minute for the injury-hit champions

AFP
Milan

Inter Milan moved to within one point of Serie A leaders Napoli after bouncing back from a painful defeat in the Italian Super Cup final by winning 1-0 at struggling Venezia and going second in the table.

Matteo Darmian shot the injury-hit champions to victory on the Venetian Lagoon with the only goal of the game in the 16th minute, moving Inter a point above Atalanta who were held to a goalless draw at Udinese on Saturday.

Italy defender Darmian tapped home his second goal of the season on the rebound after Lautaro Martinez's shot was kept out by Venezia goalkeeper and Inter loanee Filip Stankovic. "We work on getting up the pitch and it doesn't matter who gets there. I found myself in front of goal and thankfully I managed to score and help the team win," said Darmian.

Napoli can extend their lead at the top of the division to four points with a home win over Verona, although Antonio Conte will be without Khvicha Kvaratskhelia who has asked to be sold, with an 80m (\$82m) transfer to Paris Saint-Germain reportedly in the works.

However Inter will have two games in hand, the first against Bologna on Wednesday and the other their December fixture at Fiorentina which was stopped, following Edoardo Bove's collapse on the pitch, and has yet to be rescheduled.

Inter have had problems closing out matches this season and yesterday's narrow win, their sixth on the bounce in Serie A, came after Simone Inzaghi's side threw away a two-goal lead in the Italian Super Cup final against AC Milan.

The away side dominated and should have won by more despite having Italy defender Francesco Acerbi and key midfielders Hakan Calhanoglu and Henrikh Mkhitaryan out-in-



Inter Milan's Matteo Darmian celebrates after scoring against Venezia in Venice, Italy. (Reuters)

jured, with Marcus Thuram, Benjamin Pavard and Federico Dimarco starting on the bench.

In another late game, Deniz Undav scored the only goal as Stuttgart won 1-0 at Augsburg. Undav, returning from a hamstring injury suffered in early November, collected a deft pass from his Germany teammate Angelo Stiller before calmly rounding the 'keeper and slotting home after 65 minutes.

Surprise runners-up last season ahead of Bayern, Stuttgart have struggled with Champions League commitments this campaign but now sit seventh in the Bundesliga, ahead of Borussia Dortmund.

Augsburg have now won just once in their past eight league games and sit three points clear of the relegation playoff spot.

1-0 over relegation rivals Parma, in front of new majority shareholder Dan Sucu. Morten Frendrup's wildly deflected strike in the 65th minute gave Genoa their third win since France and Arsenal icon Vieira replaced Alberto Gilardino in November.

Genoa are up to 11th on 23 points, a point behind Roma who snatched a last-gasp 2-2 draw at Bologna thanks to a controversial Artem Dovbyk penalty in the eighth minute of stoppage time. Vieira's team are also five points above the relegation zone after their first victory at the Stadio Luigi Ferraris since the final day of last season.

SPOTLIGHT

Bayindir the hero as 10-man United knock Arsenal out of FA Cup

AFP
London

Altay Bayindir was Manchester United's unlikely hero as the holders held out for over an hour a man down to knock Arsenal out of the FA Cup on penalties after a feisty 1-1 draw at the Emirates yesterday.

United's stand-in goalkeeper saved a penalty from Martin Odegaard in normal time and then denied Kai Havertz in the shootout as the wasteful Gunners had another day to forget in front of goal. Bruno Fernandes had fired the visitors into the lead early in the second half before Diogo Dalot was sent-off on the hour mark for a second bookable offence.

Gabriel Magalhaes quickly levelled for Arsenal, but they wasted a host of chances to win the tie in 90 minutes and were made to pay. United were perfect from the spot as the much-criticised Josua Zirkzee stroked home the winning penalty in front of the jubilant travelling support. "We deserved to pass through this round because we suffered all together and showed character," said United boss Ruben Amorim.

United's reward is a meeting with the club's legendary former striker and caretaker boss Ruud van Nistelrooy, who will return to Old Trafford as Leicester manager in round four.

Defeat is another hammer blow to Mikel Arteta's attempts to end a five-year trophy drought for Arsenal, who also lost the first leg of their League Cup semi-final 2-0 to Newcastle on Tuesday. "It was unbelievable," said Arteta. "Based on the performance we deserved to win the game by a mile, but the reality is that we are out and the only thing we will be judged on is that."

After four consecutive defeats in all competitions, United were much improved in a 2-2 draw away at Premier League leaders Liverpool last weekend. Amorim's gameplan was a similar one as the visitors were happy to sit back and contain Arsenal before looking to spring on the counter-attack. However, neither side posed much attacking threat in a flat first half.

And Arsenal's injury problems mounted before the break when Gabriel Jesus was carried off on a stretcher with a suspected serious knee injury.

Tottenham narrowly avoided FA Cup embarrassment against non-league Tamworth as they needed extra-time before securing a 3-0 win in the third round tie. Ange Postecoglou's side, currently 12th in the Premier League, are 96 places above Tamworth, who sit 16th in the fifth tier National League.

But the supposed gap in quality was rarely apparent as Tottenham's dismal display took them to the brink of a historic humiliation. Tamworth should have caused one of the FA Cup's greatest upsets in normal time but their missed chances proved crucial.

Nathan Tshikuna's extra-time own goal and late strikes from Dejan Kulusevski and Brennan Johnson sent Tottenham into the fourth round. Tottenham last won a major trophy in 2008, but the under-fire Postecoglou boasts he always wins silverware in his second season at a club. Having beaten Liverpool 1-0 in the League Cup semi-final first leg on Wednesday, Tottenham remain in contention for a domestic cup double.

League Two side Doncaster beat Championship strugglers Hull 5-4 on penalties after a 1-1 draw. Newcastle came from behind to beat fourth-tier Bromley 3-1, thanks to goals from Lewis Miley, Anthony Gordon from the penalty spot, and William Osula.

Ipswich, who are languishing in the Premier League relegation zone, made quick work of League One (third-tier) Bristol Rovers, with Calvin Phillips, Jack Clarke and Jack Taylor all striking in the first half. Phillips' goal was his first that was not from the penalty spot in more than three years.

Eberechi Eze scored in the fourth minute as Crystal Palace held on to beat third-tier Stockport 1-0, and Southampton, who are bottom in the Premier League, celebrated a rare win with their 3-0 victory over the Championship's Swansea City, thanks to Tyler Dibling's brace and a strike from Kamaldeen Sulemana.

Leipzig beat Bremen as new boss Klopp watches on

Leipzig: A Xavi Simons brace and a Benjamin Sesko stunner helped secure RB Leipzig a 4-2 home win over Werder Bremen in the Bundesliga, with new Red Bull football boss Jurgen Klopp in the crowd.

The former Liverpool and Borussia Dortmund coach officially started as the Global Head of Football at Red Bull, Leipzig's parent company, on January 1. Klopp was seen wrapped in a Red Bull-branded blanket in freezing conditions while celebrating Leipzig's goals, a day after watching from the stands at sister club Paris FC in the French capital.

The win took Leipzig back to fourth, level on points with third-placed Eintracht Frankfurt, but nine behind leaders Bayern Munich. Leipzig welcomed back the dynamic Simons, who had been out since late October with an ankle injury. The Dutch midfielder put the hosts in front after 24 minutes, taking advantage of a quick throw in to latch onto a Lois Openda pass and slide the ball into the bottom left corner.

Bremen's Mitchell Weiser levelled two minutes later, finishing from close range after a clever Marco Gruell backheel. Simons however had Leipzig back in front 10 minutes before the break when his long-range effort was deflected past Bremen goalkeeper Michael Zetterer. Sesko increased Leipzig's lead a minute into the second half, unleashing a dipping shot from outside the box and over Zetterer's outstretched hands to score for a fourth straight



game. Simons was replaced by Christoph Baumgartner midway through the second half and the Austrian added Leipzig's fourth in the final minute of regular time.

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RELENTLESS ATLETICO CLAIM LIGA LEAD WITH WIN OVER OSASUNA

Julian Alvarez's strike helped Atletico Madrid move top of La Liga with 1-0 win over Osasuna yesterday. Diego Simeone's side climbed one point clear of champions Real Madrid and six ahead of third-placed Barcelona at the halfway mark in the Spanish league season.

Atletico claimed a 14th consecutive victory across all competitions, a new club record, and have lost just one top-flight game all season. It was their eighth straight league win and a fifth clean sheet from those matches, with Simeone's side back to their miserly best in defence. Atletico were not at their sharpest but had more than enough to seal another victory and claim top spot. Earlier Getafe earned a 2-1 win at Las Palmas to climb three points above the relegation zone.



Manchester United's goalkeeper Altay Bayindir makes a save during the English FA Cup third round match against Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium in London. (AFP)