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PREVIEW

Asian giants Qatar ready for 'tough' World Handball opener

Qatar are in Group C along with six-time champs France, former silver medallists Austria and Kuwait



In the run up to the global showpiece, Qatar went through intensive training in Slovenia where they played two friendly matches against hosts and Algeria, which they both lost.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Asian giants Qatar are expecting a feisty contest today against world champions France when they open their campaign at the 29th World Handball Championship. Qatar, the 2015 World Championship runners-up, take on Austria on Jan 16 followed by their final preliminary round match against Kuwait on Jan 18. It was against France that Qatar lost 25-22 in Doha in 2015 to settle for silver.

The tournament, which will conclude on February 2, will be jointly hosted by Croatia, Denmark and Norway. Ahmed al-Shaabi, President of the Qatar Handball Federation (QHF), yesterday watched the players undergo strenuous training under new coach Veselin Vujovic.

Khalifa al-Jassim, Director of the Qatar National Teams, yesterday said Qatar - who are short on experience - seem "well prepared" but won't be taking any of their opponents lightly.

"The Qatari team's matches will not be

easy in this edition of the World Championship, but at the same time I will say that we have great confidence in our players who can do good," al-Jassim said. "The draw placed us in Group Three along France who are the world champions, Austrian, who are one of the stronger European teams, and Kuwaiti, which has returned strongly to the scene recently," he added.

Al-Jassim said: "Our team played five friendly matches as part of its preparations for the World Championships. Qatar played against Slovenia and Algeria during their training session held in the Slovenia camp."

"We know the difficulty of our game against France but we are confident we will do well," the QHF official said. "We will focus on one match at a time. We prepared the players reasonably well and we know they are confident," he said.

When asked about the formation of the side for today's opening clash against France, al-Jassim said: "The final playing combination will be directly picked by Veselin Vujovic, our coach, as he is responsible for these choices."

The Qatari official said influential play-

ers Zarko Markovic and Frankis Carol are fit and available for selection.

Last August, experienced Montenegrin coach Vujovic was announced as the man to lead the Qatar through the global event, taking over from Goran Djokic, who sealed qualification for 2025 after guiding the side to continental glory in Bahrain last January. Vujovic is no stranger to world championship metal, taking bronze while in charge of Slovenia at the 2017 IHF Men's World Championship - completing the full set of competition medals if you consider his gold (1986) and silver (1982) won as a player with the former Yugoslavia.

That Asian championship was Qatar's last major, competitive event after they failed in their Paris 2024 Olympic Games qualification quest on home soil a few months earlier, with the departing Spanish coach Valero Rivera, who had been in the position for a decade and who had led the Asian nation to silver at the 2015 IHF Men's World Championship held in Qatar.

And while it is unlikely that Vujovic will be able to repeat a podium place that Rivera gained in his very first global event with the Asian side - silver in 2015 - the new

incumbent will surely be able to achieve better than the 22nd spot Qatar ended with at the last world championship in 2023 - their second worst-ever ranking in nine appearances and worst in the new format of 32 teams.

"The circumstances are different and Qatar are not at the same level as before, but as a coach I know very well the difficulty of the task at this stage," Vujovic had said in August after being announced as Qatar's coach. "But I accepted it, and therefore I will live up to the expectations of the officials in the Qatari Handball Association who gave me this opportunity in order to win the challenge and bring Qatari handball to the best position in Asia and the world."

Qatar are participating in the World Cup for the 10th time after Portugal 2003, Tunisia 2005, Germany 2007, Spain 2013, Qatar 2015, France 2017, Germany and Denmark 2019, Egypt 2021, Poland and Sweden 2023.

Qatar qualified for the World Cup after topping Group 1 in the main round of the 21st Asian Men's Championship held in Bahrain last January, and the Qatari team

won the title for the sixth time in a row after defeating Japan in the final (30-24).

At the World Championship two years ago, Qatar finished 22nd spot. At Poland/Sweden 2023 Qatar won just once, against Algeria (29:24) in the preliminary group stage, losing their two other first stage games against Germany (27:31) and Serbia (24:34) before going on to lose all three main round games, against Netherlands (30:32), Norway (17:30) and Argentina (22:26).

Just 10 players from the 2023 World Championship disappointment made it through to the continental final squad last year. It won't be wrong to say that Qatar are starting a new era under coach Vujovic.

FACTBOX

Key players: Frankis Marzo (left back), Youssef Ben Ali (line player)
Qualification for Croatia/Denmark/Norway 2025: 2024 Asian Men's Championship - 1st place
History in tournament: 2003: 16th, 2005: 21st, 2007: 23rd, 2013: 20th, 2015: 2nd, 2017: 8th, 2019: 13th, 2021: 8th, 2023: 22nd
Group C: Austria, France, Kuwait, Qatar

DAKAR RALLY

Lategan wins stage 8 to consolidate lead; al-attiyah stays fourth

AFP
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

South African Henk Lategan (Toyota) consolidated his lead atop the driver standings of the Dakar Rally by winning the eighth stage yesterday. The 30-year-old, in his fourth Dakar outing, covered the 487km special between Al Duwadimi and Riyadh in 4hr 51min 54sec.

Qatar's five-time champion Nasser al-Attiyah completed the stage in 11th, 12min 17sec off Lategan's pace and now sits fourth in the overall standings, at 34min 14sec. Lategan, who also won the January 3 prologue, extended his lead over home hope Yazeed al-Rajhi to 5min 41sec in the general classification after the previous day's chaotic race had virtually wiped out his advantage. Dakar Rally organisers were forced to erase any gains or losses for a 20km stretch during Sunday's stage over a road book note error, and Lategan's lead had been cut to 21 seconds.

Despite a two-minute penalty for speeding on the stage, Lategan finished the day's driving 1min 47sec ahead of compatriot Guy Botterill, also in a Toyota. Lategan and co-driver Brett Cummings, who also won the prologue, have led the race since stage



Qatari driver Nasser al-Attiyah and French co-driver Edouard Boulanger compete during stage 8 of the Dakar Rally, between Al Duwadimi and Riyadh in Saudi. (AFP)

two, and the pair have four stages left, with today drivers taking route from Riyadh to Haradh.

"There was one canyon where everybody was getting lost," said Lategan. "And we were a little bit nervous going into there because you see cars coming from

the front and cars coming from all angles out the mountains. At the end, we went all the way out the canyon and then finally found our way. So we hopped from, let's say, seventh or so on the road all the way to first. And then we were opening for quite a while. And then we made one or two small



Chilean rider Jose Ignacio Cornejo Florimo in action yesterday. (AFP)

navigation errors. We had a puncture earlier on. So, not a bad day. We're happy to have found that one waypoint, but not the perfect day."

France's Mathieu Serradori (Century) prevented an all-South African podium by finishing third, five seconds ahead of Brian Baragwanath.

Qatar's al-Attiyah, who has seen fancied rivals Carlos Sainz and Sebastien Loeb withdraw from the gruelling race, said: "It was a very tough day. Sometimes when we were opening it was very difficult. Yazeed had a good line and when he passed we just followed him, until the dunes when we

won the title for the sixth time in a row after defeating Japan in the final (30-24).

Argentinian Luciano Benavides (KTM) won the bike category's stage, 2min 08sec ahead of French rider Adrien Van Beveren. Spain's Tosha Schareina was third, while Australian Daniel Sanders retained the overall lead by just over 11 minutes.

Schareina had initially been named provisional stage winner, but Benavides and Van Beveren were re-credited with the time spent assisting Chilean Pablo Quintanilla, who fell after 133km and was forced to withdraw due to a shoulder injury. This dropped Tosha Schareina down to third on the stage, but the Spaniard did gain some time on the overall leader Sanders who finished seventh.

"It was very, very trick at the beginning and I lost a lot of time early on," Sanders said. "After that, I got into a really good rhythm and the navigation was easier but you had to be really switched on because we lost so much time at the beginning. I think tomorrow's going to be the last difficult navigation day before we head down to the Empty Quarter."

Today's stage nine features a 357km special from Riyadh to Haradh.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Former world heavyweight champion Fury retires again just weeks after loss

AFP
London

Former world heavyweight champion **Tyson Fury** said yesterday he had retired from boxing just weeks after suffering a second straight defeat at the hands of Oleksandr Usyk.

"I'm going to make this short and sweet," the British fighter said in a social media post. "I'd like to announce my retirement from boxing."

"It's been a blast, I've loved every single minute of it," added Fury, who has, however, previously quit only to return to the ring.

The "Gypsy King", 36, last fought on December 21 when he lost his rematch against WBA, WBC and WBO champion Usyk in Riyadh.

Asked after the fight whether the public would see him fight again, Fury said: "You might do, you might not do. Who knows?" Fury enjoyed two stints as heavyweight champion and retires with a record of 34

wins, two defeats and one draw. He announced he was quitting after beating Dillian Whyte in April 2022 but returned to action later that year.

Frank Warren, who promotes Fury, told the BBC he had not spoken to the boxer prior to his retirement announcement.

"I've said all along that there is no way I will be trying in any way to influence him," Warren said.

"If that what he wants to do, that's great. He's done everything he can do. Probably been the best British heavyweight of his generation by far.

"Two-time world champion, two closely fought fights against Usyk. He's got plenty of money, got his wits about him, got a lovely family. God bless him, enjoy."

All three judges scored last month's fight in Saudi Arabia 116-112 in Usyk's favour.

The Ukrainian won their first fight in May 2024 by split decision.

Fury's retirement appears to mean he will not take on another former world champion, Anthony Joshua, in a long-anticipated all-British showdown. Joshua said Saturday that a fight with



Fury "has to happen this year" And Joshua's promoter, Matchroom's Eddie Hearn, said he doubted it was the end of the road for Fury. "If you haven't got a heart for it

anymore, and you don't want to compete anymore, I think retirement is the best option," Hearn said.

"Disappointing obviously for British fight fans because we've got the chance to make the biggest fight in boxing but if that is the last we see of him, he's had a great career.

"I doubt it (is the last time we will see him box)."

Fury became world champion for the first time when he shocked Ukraine's Wladimir Klitschko in November 2015, becoming WBA, IBF and WBO champion in spectacular fashion.

He was then out of the ring for more than two-and-a-half years, during which he tackled mental health issues.

Fury returned to action in 2018 and became a two-time champion by beating Deontay Wilder to claim the WBC belt in 2020 in the second of a trilogy of fights against the American.

He overcame a big scare against converted MMA fighter Francis Ngannou in 2023, before losing twice to Usyk last year alone.

CRICKET

Cummins to lead Australia's big guns at 2025 CT

2023 World Cup winners name a strong squad for Feb-Mar event

Reuters
Melbourne

Pat Cummins will captain Australia at the Champions Trophy (CT) after being named in a preliminary 15-man squad also featuring fellow quick Josh Hazlewood yesterday.

Cummins will skip the Test series in Sri Lanka in January and early February for personal reasons but will return to Australia's colours for the one-day international tournament being played in Pakistan and United Arab Emirates from Feb 19.

Hazlewood missed the last two Tests in the recent series triumph over India because of calf and side injuries but will reunite with Cummins and Mitchell Starc in the pace attack that has helped Australia to multiple successes over the last decade.

There was no place in the squad for opener Jake Fraser-McGurk, who has been short of runs, but otherwise the squad had a familiar feel with all but three of the team that won the 50-overs World Cup in 2023 included.

All-rounders Matt Short and Aaron Hardie as well as quick bowler Nathan Ellis are the least experienced international players in the squad with less than a dozen ODIs each.

"This is a balanced and experienced squad," head selector George Bailey said in a news release.

"It offers a variety of options for touring management depending on opposition and the conditions that may present in Pakistan."

The Champions Trophy, which Australia won in 2006 and 2009, was last played in 2017.

The ninth edition of the tournament will run from Feb 19-March 9 mostly in Pakistan with only the matches involving India taking place in the UAE for



Australia's charismatic captain Pat Cummins.

political reasons. Australia have been drawn with Afghanistan, England and South Africa for the opening group stage.

Australia squad: Pat Cummins (captain), Alex Carey, Nathan Ellis, Aaron Hardie, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Marnus Labuschagne, Mitch Marsh, Glenn Maxwell, Matt Short, Steve Smith, Mitchell Starc, Marcus Stoinis, Adam Zampa.

Nortje back in South Africa squad for Champions Trophy
Fast bowler Anrich Nortje was

yesterday named in South Africa's 15-man squad for the Champions Trophy one-day international tournament in Pakistan next month. Nortje, 31, has not played in a 50-over match since September 2023 when he suffered a stress fracture.

He came back to be South Africa's most successful bowler in the T20 World Cup last June but has not played an international match since the final against India in Barbados.

He turned down a Cricket South Africa contract in order to play T20 franchise cricket.

Nortje had been due to play in white-ball matches against Pakistan last month but suffered a broken right toe while batting in the nets. Coach Rob Walter said he was confident Nortje would be in peak physical condition for the Champions Trophy.

"He was at our camp in Pretoria bowling really quickly," said Walter. "He was super-fit and super-energised to be playing for South Africa again and it was just one of those unfortunate circumstances. Anrich is the ultimate professional, he looks after himself and takes care of his conditioning. I've got no doubt he'll be good to go."

Fellow fast bowler Lungi Ngidi will also return after recovering from the groin injury which kept him out of South Africa's home international season.

Ten of the squad played in the Cricket World Cup in India in 2023, where Walter said the team had "played exceptional cricket" to reach the semi-finals.

While South Africa's quest for a major trophy continues, Walter said a core group of players would benefit from reaching the semi-finals and final of their last two International Cricket Council events.

"They know what it feels like to be in the cauldron," he said.

South Africa will play in a triangular tournament in Pakistan against the hosts and New Zealand ahead of the Champions Trophy but are likely to have to select some different players because of a clash with the closing stages of the SA20 franchise tournament.

South Africa squad: Temba Bavuma (captain), Tony de Zorzi, Marco Jansen, Heinrich Klaasen (wkt), Keshav Maharaj, Aiden Markram, David Miller, Wiaan Mulder, Lungi Ngidi, Anrich Nortje, Kagiso Rabada, Ryan Rickelton (wkt), Tabraiz Shamsi, Tristan Stubbs, Rassie van der Dussen.

FOCUS

IOC long-shot Watanabe hopes 'crazy' Olympic idea sparks debate

AFP
Tokyo

Japan's **Morinari Watanabe** is a rank outsider to become International Olympic Committee (IOC) president but he hopes his "crazy idea" to host the Games in five cities at once can spark debate.

The 65-year-old International Gymnastics Federation chief is one of seven candidates vying to succeed Thomas Bach as head of the IOC, with members set to decide in March.

The son of a Hiroshima atomic bomb survivor, Watanabe would be the first Asian in the high-profile post.

Watanabe is proposing to host the Games simultaneously in five cities across five continents in a bid to reduce costs and let the whole world share Olympic fever.

He told AFP in an interview that he wants to bring "reform" to the IOC and embrace the possibility of "something new".

"Whether it happens or doesn't happen is not so important - we must open discussions and make new ideas," said Watanabe.

"I give the first time some crazy idea, but I think young people have more ideas. My job is to open the door."

Watanabe is seen as a long shot to succeed Bach in a field that also includes British Olympic legend Sebastian Coe, France's David Lappartient and Zimbabwe's Kirsty Coventry.

Spain's Juan Antonio Samaranch Junior, Jordan's Prince Faisal al-Hussein and Sweden-born Johan Eliasch are also in the running.

Watanabe, who has led the world gymnastics body since 2017, is one of four international sport federation leaders on the ballot, along with athletics' Coe, cycling's Lappartient and skiing's Eliasch.

Watanabe says the Olympic format of having one host city, which has been in place since the modern Games began in Athens in 1896, has become "stifling".

He proposes instead to have five cities sharing events, beamed around the world in a rolling 24-hour broadcast.

His idea involves an enlarged programme of 10 sports for each city, with events being hosted in the time zone and climate that suits them best.

He says his plan would allow Games organisers to "create the best conditions for the athletes".

"It would be done across differ-



ent time zones so they wouldn't need to compete early in the morning or late at night," he said.

"When it's summer in the Northern Hemisphere it's winter in the Southern Hemisphere, so you could have the marathon and the athletics events there."

Hands-on approach

Watanabe believes IOC sponsors could also benefit from having a global network of host cities and says fans would feel more connected if the action was happening locally.

"Most people enjoyed the Paris Olympics, but looking at it from Asia it felt like something far away," he said.

"I don't think there was the sense of unity that there should have been. If you host it across five continents, more people would be involved."

If he pulls off a shock and wins the top job, Watanabe says his priority as IOC chief would be to create a more "open" governing body.

Unlike Bach or Coe, for example, Watanabe was never an Olympian.

He studied physical education in Tokyo and Bulgaria before becoming director of a large Japanese company's sport business division.

He became managing director of the Japan Gymnastics Association before going on to be elected president of the sport's world governing body, the first Asian to hold the role.

Watanabe says he has travelled to more than 160 countries as part of his job and describes his approach to leadership as "hands on".

"I like to meet people and understand each other and talk," he said.

Bach's successor will be chosen at an IOC session in Athens from March 18-21.

ENGLAND BOWLING GREAT ANDERSON, 42, TO PLAY ON FOR LANCASHIRE

London: England's record Test wicket-taker **James Anderson** has agreed a new one-year contract with Lancashire that takes him past his 43rd birthday, the county side announced yesterday.

The veteran paceman has not played since an emotional farewell to Test cricket against the West Indies at Lord's in July 2024 but repeatedly said he still had something to offer as a player.

Anderson bowled out of Test duty with 704 wickets - the most taken

by a seamer in the history of the format and the highest number by an England bowler of any type. He has since had several spells acting as a mentor to England's quacks, but the urge to play remains strong even though he went unsold at the recent Indian Premier League action.

"I am incredibly excited to sign this contract with Lancashire and resume playing professional cricket again next season," said Anderson, who turns 43 in July.

"This club has played a huge part in my life since I was a teenager, so to have the opportunity to wear the Red Rose again and help the side in both red and white ball cricket is one that I am really looking forward to." Lancashire's first County Championship match in the 2025 season is against Middlesex at Lord's, starting on April 4.

IPL'S PUNJAB NAMES SHREYAS IYER AS CAPTAIN
Indian batsman Shreyas Iyer has

been named captain of Indian Premier League team Punjab Kings for the upcoming edition of the lucrative T20 tournament. Iyer, a title-winning captain with Kolkata Knight Riders last season, was picked by Punjab for \$3.17m as the second-most expensive buy in the IPL auction in December. The 30-year-old Iyer said he was excited to re-unite with Australian great and new Punjab coach Ricky Ponting, after the two previously worked together with Delhi Capi-

tals. Iyer said he was "honoured" to be named as skipper. "I am looking forward to working again with coach Ponting," Iyer said in a statement. "The team looks strong, with a great mix of potential and proven performers", he added.

"I hope to repay the faith shown by the management to deliver our maiden title." Ponting said Shreyas had "a great mind for the game", adding that his "proven capabilities as captain will enable the team to deliver".



TENNIS

Rattled Djokovic survives as younger rivals advance

CONTRASTING WINS FOR CARLOS ALCARAZ, JANNIK SINNER ON DAY TWO OF AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Reuters
Melbourne

Novak Djokovic overcame an early jolt to remain in the hunt for a record 25th Grand Slam title while his two young rivals Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz moved into the Australian Open second round with more emphatic victories yesterday.

An ailing Nick Kyrgios was unable to avoid falling through the trapdoor on his return to his home major, although the maverick Australian went down fighting like 2023 runner-up Stefanos Tsitsipas on a blockbuster second day at the year's opening major.

Naomi Osaka prevented a repeat of her 2024 first-round loss to Frenchwoman Caroline Garcia as the twice Melbourne Park champion prevailed 6-3 3-6 6-3 to close out the action on the main show-courts.

The evening session began with a scare for Djokovic before the Serb beat American teenager Nishesh Basavareddy 4-6 6-3 6-4 6-2 to keep his quest for an 11th Australian Open title alive.

"I was impressed by him," Djokovic said. "The whole stadium was. That's why he got a great round of applause and appreciation from the crowd. They saw what he did on court, the quality of tennis, the fighting spirit."

"I ended the match in good fashion. I think it's important. It counts mentally for me, for the rest of the tournament."



Serbia's Novak Djokovic greets Nishesh Basavareddy of the United States after winning his first round match at the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters)

While Djokovic went to war at Rod Laver Arena, Alcaraz was cruising to a 6-1 7-5 6-1 victory over unseeded Kazakh Alexander Shevchenko on Margaret Court Arena, but the decision to schedule three marquee matches at the same time raised eyebrows.

Adding to the overlap of big-ticket matches was Kyrgios, whose first appearance in Melbourne Park in three years due to injury ended in a 7-6(3) 6-3 7-6(2) defeat by Jacob Fearnley.

DOPING IN FOCUS

Sinner, who has come under attack over the last few months from the outspoken Kyrgios over his two

positive drug tests in March, began his title defence in bright sunshine with a win over Nicolas Jarry.

While the balmy weather was welcome after persistent rain chopped six hours of play out of the outer court schedule on day one but the dark cloud of doping refused to budge.

Jarry served an 11-month ban in 2020 after testing positive for ligandrol and stanozolol. The International Tennis Federation accepted his explanation that two banned substances were in his urine sample via vitamins made in Brazil and ruled that Jarry "bore no significant fault or negligence for his violation".

The big-serving Chilean contrasted his treatment with Sinner's avoidance of a suspension for failing his tests last year, after losing 7-6(2) 7-6(5) 6-1 to the Italian.

"It's tough for me to play him... it's a difficult and delicate topic. What I can say is that I'd have liked the same treatment as the things that I went through," Jarry said.

"I don't think it was the same, so that's all."

Sinner, who could yet face a ban after an April hearing at the Court of Arbitration for Sport, said he was unfamiliar with the details of Jarry's case.

"We got treated in the same way," he added. "There's the pro-



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz hits a return against Kazakhstan's Alexander Shevchenko during their singles match yesterday. (AFP)

ocol. If the protocol has some issues or problem, it's not my fault, you know?"

Women's number two Iga Swiatek was also at the centre of allegations that tennis doping authorities were running a two-tier system favouring the top players after she served a one-month doping ban last year.

The 23-year-old five-times Grand Slam champion refused to let the controversy distract her as she defeated Czech Katerina Siniakova 6-3 6-4.

Third seed Coco Gauff, who like Swiatek can move to the top of the rankings if results go her way in Melbourne, closed out a routine 6-3 6-3 win over 2020 champion Sofia Kenin.

Tsitsipas fell at his first hur-

dle as American young gun Alex Michelsen earned a 7-5 6-3 2-6 6-4 victory, much to the disappointment of the local Greek community who arrived in numbers to support him.

The 11th seed could only blame himself for his jaded performance at the Grand Slam where he once beat both Rafa Nadal and Roger Federer in the same year.

"I had a fresher mind back then," the 26-year-old said.

Local fans had plenty to cheer with James Duckworth, Jordan Thompson, James McCabe, Aleksandar Vukic, Tristan Schoolkate and Thanasi Kokkinakis progressing on the men's side along with Ajla Tomljanovic, Destanee Aiava and Talia Gibson in the women's draw.

AILING KYRGIOS MAKES GLOOMY EXIT FROM AUSTRALIAN OPEN



Melbourne: Nick Kyrgios's long-awaited return to the Grand Slam stage was cut short yesterday as Briton Jacob Fearnley sent the ailing home hero out of the Australian Open in the first round. A capacity crowd packed out Kyrgios's favourite John Cain Arena for his first match at Melbourne Park in three years, hoping the tennis showman could shrug off an abdominal strain to battle through. Most left deflated as Kyrgios went down swinging in a 7-6(3) 6-3 7-6(2) defeat, with the injury hampering his serve and movement. With most of his last two seasons wiped out due to knee problems and wrist surgery, a gloomy Kyrgios said he might have played his last singles match at Melbourne Park given his injury fatigue.

"I went out there, I would say 65% of my capacity," he told reporters yesterday. "For (the fans) to really see me fighting and still giving me that energy, it meant a lot, because I feel like I've given my life to tennis and I've tried to give them a show every time I go out there. "Realistically, I can't see myself playing a singles match here again." Though lamenting his fitness, Kyrgios was full of praise for Fearnley who was impressive on debut at the year's first Grand Slam as he set up a second round match with Frenchman Arthur Cazaux. "Obviously extremely nervous before the match, I didn't get much sleep," Fearnley said on court. "Sorry for Nick, I could tell he

was dealing with some stuff. But I thought it was a great match and I really enjoyed playing with you guys. "All things considered, it's probably the best match (I've played)." Having previously won only two tour-level matches and with the crowd heavily stacked against him, the world number 92 barely put a foot wrong at the so-called "People's Court". Fearnley was rock-solid on serve and kept the crowd at bay until midway through the third set when he let a 3-1 lead slip. Kyrgios broke Fearnley to put the game back on serve at 3-3 as the Briton tensed up and failed to convert a slew of break points. The Kyrgios party tricks came out - the hopping, backhand winners

and behind-the-back shots reigniting the crowd. The 29-year-old scrapped his way to the tiebreak then promptly crumbled, giving up five match points in a flash. He saved one but bowed out with a backhand into the net and exited the arena quickly with a single kiss blown at the crowd. "No regrets," said Kyrgios, who plans to return for the doubles with compatriot Thanasi Kokkinakis. "My journey is not over, but I've had an amazing journey. My career's been amazing. "I continue to try and have fun, just be real, and enjoy the ride. "But I think it would be selfish for me to say that I want more. I've had a lot of success. More than most athletes would have."

ANNOUNCEMENT

'Defective' Paris medals to be replaced, says IOC

AFP
Paris

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) said yesterday that the "defective medals" from the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris will be replaced with identical models.

"The Paris 2024 Olympic Games Organising Committee is working closely with the Monnaie de Paris (the French state mint), the institution responsible for the manufacture and quality control of the medals, to assess any complaints about the medals and to understand the circumstances and cause of any damage," the IOC said.

"Defective medals will be systematically replaced by the Monnaie de Paris and engraved identically. The replacement process should begin in the coming weeks." When contacted by AFP, a spokesperson for the Monnaie de Paris refuted the term "defective" and said that the medals signalled by athletes as being "damaged" since the month of August have already been replaced.

"We have replaced all the damaged medals since August and we will continue to do so in the same professional manner as before," said the spokesperson, adding that replacements were "underway" and were being made "as requests come in".

According to French online media outlet *La Lettre*, "more than



100 defective medals have been returned by disgruntled athletes, who have seen their awards deteriorate. Some Olympians from the Paris Games took to social media to share photos of their medals.

One such athlete was American skateboarder Nyjah Huston, who won bronze in the street skateboarding competition on July 29.

Ten days later he posted a picture of his medal, where he complained about its quality.

"These Olympic medals look great when they're brand new, but after letting it sit on my skin with some sweat for a little bit and then letting my friends wear it over the weekend, they're apparently not as high quality as you would think," he said. "It's looking rough. Even the front. It's starting to chip off a little."

According to *La Lettre*, the medals "had to bear the brunt of the new products used", as new regulations banned a component of the varnish previously employed and "had to be replaced at short notice".

GOLF

Taylor wins the Sony Open

Reuters
Hawaii

Winning the Sony Open almost became an afterthought for Canada's Nick Taylor during Sunday's final round.

But get this guy into a playoff, and he knows what to do.

Taylor knocked in a birdie putt from less than 3 feet away on the second playoff hole to win the tournament in Hawaii at Waialae Country Club in Honolulu.

"I'm a bit stunned this worked out this way," Taylor said.

It's his fifth PGA Tour victory. The last three have come in playoffs.

"I feel like I can rise to the occasion," Taylor said. "It's pretty fun."

Taylor, who had a dramatic eagle to conclude the final round, matched Colombia's Nico Echavarria with 16-under-par 264s. They both turned in 5-under 65s in the final round.

Taylor and Echavarria were forced to repeat the par-5 No. 18 after they both birdied it on the first extra hole.

Taylor made a 10-foot putt and Echavarria followed by draining a 5 1/2-footer. On the second playthrough, Echavarria missed an 8 1/2-footer for birdie to set up Taylor for the win.

Echavarria, 30, was trying to post a PGA Tour victory for the third consecutive year. In regulation, he birdied No. 18 after blasting from a bunker.

But on the second playoff hole, he used three putts to reach the hole.

"One bad putt can't define a great week," Echavarria said, bemoaning the first attempt after reaching the green.

Taylor's chip-in from the fringe for an eagle



Nick Taylor celebrates with the trophy during the final round of the Sony Open at Waialae Country Club.

3 on No 18 catapulted him into contention before waiting for others to finish to see if it held up.

That put him 6 under for the final 11 holes of regulation. It also was redemption after he missed back-to-back birdie putts from less than 5 feet away on the back side.

So, there were several less-than-encouraging moments for Taylor along the way.

"It's a tough day. I was 1 over through seven," Taylor said. "Not really thinking about winning necessarily. Got on a birdie streak there. Then I missed two short putts on 15 and 16. I was a little down after those two missed putts."

Echavarria recovered after bogeys on his first two holes. He had birdies on Nos 16 and 18.

"I am showing myself that I am ready to fight for the tournaments," Echavarria said. "I am fighting for the tournaments. I fought hard today, and I am playing very well, and I must continue like this."

Third-round leader J J Spaun (68) and Germany's Stephan Jaeger (67) shared third place at 15 under. They were in the final grouping and had chances to join the leaders, but both finished with pars. Spaun, seeking his second victory on the PGA Tour, went to the par-3 17th hole with the lead, but he bogeyed there.

SPOTLIGHT

Barcelona smash Real 5-2 to clinch Super Cup

MBAPPE PUT MADRID AHEAD BUT A DOMINANT BARCELONA HIT BACK

AFP
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Barcelona hammered rivals Real Madrid 5-2 in a wild Spanish Super Cup Clasico final in Saudi Arabia on Sunday night to win the first trophy of the Hansi Flick era. Kylian Mbappe put Madrid ahead but a dominant Barcelona hit five in response before their goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny was sent off in the second half.

Madrid were hoping to avenge their 4-0 home defeat by Barcelona in October's La Liga Clasico but instead were left battered and bruised by their arch-rivals in Jeddah. After Mbappe's opener, Lamine Yamal levelled and Robert Lewandowski sent Barcelona ahead from the penalty spot, with Raphinha bagging a brace and Alejandro Balde also on target.

Rodrygo Goes pulled one back for Madrid with a free-kick but they could not capitalise further on their numerical advantage in a humiliating defeat for the European champions. "I think today is a good day because we beat one of the best teams in the world, for the second time this season, Real Madrid, and this is unbelievable," Flick told reporters. "We won a title here and we are really happy... today is a day to look positively at this team."

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said his team's poor defending was the main reason for the heavy defeat. "We defended badly and that cost us the game - they found their goals quite easily," Ancelotti said. "We're sad, like all our fans, it's disappointing and we don't have to hide that... we have to look forwards, there's nothing else we can do."

Despite a strong Barcelona opening salvo it was Real Madrid who took the lead in the fifth minute with Mbappe's brilliant goal on the counter-attack. The French forward, frustrated numerous times by the offside flag in the league defeat by the Catalans, broke loose on the halfway line after Vinicius won the ball back and, after bursting into the area, clipped past Szczesny.



Barcelona's players celebrate with the trophy after winning the Spanish Super Cup in Jeddah on Sunday night. (Reuters)

It took a stunning individual goal from 17-year-old Yamal to level the scoreline, with the Spanish winger cutting in from the right before stroking home a low finish inside the near post in a similar style to former Barca great Lionel Messi, to whom he is often compared.

Barcelona kept pushing and moved ahead through Lewandowski's penalty after Eduardo Camavinga arrived late and carelessly clattered Gavi. Raphinha soon added Barcelona's third with a header from Koude's cross from deep and they grabbed their fourth before half-time on the break.

Yamal and Raphinha combined and the latter slipped in Balde, who slotted past Courtois. Barcelona continued in the same vein after the break and Raphinha netted

the fifth with a neat dribble and finish after Marc Casado played him in.

The Catalans were reduced to 10 men when Mbappe sped in at the other end, rounding goalkeeper Szczesny, who brought him down outside the area and after a VAR review was dismissed. Rodrygo, who earlier hit the post, rifled home the free-kick past Szczesny's replacement Inaki Pena.

Mbappe brilliantly teed up Jude Bellingham but the England international was denied by a superb Jules Koude challenge in stoppage time.

The French forward also came close to scoring again himself on a fine individual display but Pena tipped away his effort.

"He was the best (Madrid player)," said Ancelotti, noting an improvement after

Mbappe's hit-and-miss start to life at the club following his switch from Paris Saint-Germain.

"We can't always win, if we have to lose a cup, it's better that it's this one," said veteran Madrid midfielder Luka Modric.

Barcelona brought on playmaker Dani Olmo for his first appearance since he was registered to play for the club on a temporary basis, a controversial issue which overshadowed the semi-finals earlier in the week. However their five-star display offered a host of other talking points as Barca won a record-extending 15th Spanish Super Cup. "It's really nice, it had been a season since we won a trophy, it's always special and on top of that in a Clasico against Real Madrid," Barcelona defender Koude said.

Conte hails McTominay and Lukaku as Napoli extend Serie A lead

Milan: Napoli manager Antonio Conte praised the impact of Scott McTominay and Romelu Lukaku, both in their first season at the club, after their 2-0 Serie A win over Hellas Verona on Sunday. An early own goal from Verona goalkeeper Lorenzo Montipò and Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa's second-half rocket ensured that Napoli took advantage of Atalanta being held to a goalless draw at Udinese on Saturday and strengthened their bid for a second league title in three seasons.

Conte said he is still trying to find the right tactics to suit his squad, even as they secured a fifth successive league win, but that the new signings were integral in helping Napoli lead the standings by four points ahead of Inter Milan.

"There have certainly been changes since the beginning of the summer, especially as I am still trying to find the right tactics for this team," Conte said. "The arrival of Scott McTominay and Romelu Lukaku, in particular, made a big difference to the switch to 4-3-3. We tried a couple of different formations before we settled on this one."

The coach added that he was pleased with the team's development, as "there is more confidence, and the whole squad is involved".

After revealing that forward Khvicha Kvaratskhelia wanted to leave the Serie A club, Conte said he bore no ill will toward the Georgian and that he was more disappointed with himself.

"It's a disappointment for me, not for the player or the club," Conte said. "In six months I failed to change the situation. I believe a coach should help a club to make decisions and advise on what players to sign. When I realise that I was unable to make a difference here, that is my disappointment. I take nothing from Khvicha, he's a good lad, but everyone has to decide their own destiny, just as the club has to make its decisions."

PREMIER LEAGUE

Forest are title contenders: Liverpool's Slot

AFP
London

Arne Slot says high-flying Nottingham Forest "deserve" to be treated as Premier League title contenders as he prepares Liverpool for a tricky trip to the City Ground today.

Third-placed Forest, responsible for Liverpool's only league defeat of the season, can move just three points behind the title favourites if they win a seventh straight league game in midweek. Forest finished just outside the relegation places last season and their surge towards the top of the table is a big surprise.

But Slot said Nuno Espirito Santo's team must be considered as serious rivals. "I've always said that you can judge the table best halfway through the season, and that moment is there now, so if Forest is up there with us, with Arsenal, Chelsea, (Manchester) City and all the others, then they definitely are a team that's in competition with us and with the other teams," said the Dutchman. "And they deserve to be treated like this if you look at the way they play, if you look at their results. So it's going to be a very difficult challenge tomorrow to get a result."

Forest, who have not conceded a goal in the Premier League since mid-December, beat Liverpool 1-0 at Anfield in September, although Slot said given their subsequent form, the result was not the shock it seemed at the time. The rise of Nuno's team has given the English top flight a retro look.

Forest, under then manager Brian Clough, challenged Liverpool's dominance in the late 1970s, winning the league title in 1978 and then succeeding them as European champions. "That's been quite a long time ago and now they're all back at it," said Slot. "They are doing really, really good and Nuno is doing an incredible job. But if you look at the amount of money they've spent, it's not a complete surprise that they do well this season."

Forest spent heavily on players after returning to the English top flight in 2022 following a



Liverpool players train yesterday, on the eve of their match against Nottingham Forest.

23-year absence, bringing in a huge number of new faces. In March last year they were docked four points for breaching Premier League rules on spending but managed to avoid relegation.

Slot himself has had a stellar first season at Anfield so far, winning 24 of 30 matches in all competitions, but he played down the start he has enjoyed since succeeding Jurgen Klopp. "I've said many times if you go into a job you don't think about where we will be halfway through a season when it comes to the position in the league table," he said.

"What you do try to focus on a lot is 'Can we make the players really fit, can we make them work really hard and can we implement the playing style in the best possible way from the start?'. You never know what the other teams are going to do."

Meanwhile, Forest boss Nuno warned that too much praise is not good for his players as he is wary of believing the hype surrounding

his team. "Nothing changes in our approach," the Portuguese coach said. "When we do things good we should be pleased, but too much compliments can distract us, so we don't want to pay too much attention. It was the beginning of the season (the victory at Anfield), maybe it was a surprise, but it was a long time ago, many things have changed. No one in this room could ever predict what is happening. It is the ambition and desire to do things well and the hard work of the players and commitment."

Even if an audacious title challenge proves beyond Forest, they are well on course to return to the top level of European football for the first time since 1980. A top-four finish would guarantee Champions League football next season, with fifth place also likely to be enough due to a strong start from English clubs in European competition this term. And Nuno believes his squad can get even better in the final 18 league games of the campaign.

LIGUE 1

Dembele hits brace as PSG edge out Saint-Etienne 2-1

AFP
Paris

Ousmane Dembele scored twice in the first half as Paris Saint-Germain beat Saint-Etienne 2-1 on Sunday to sit seven points clear at the top of the Ligue 1 table halfway through the season. Dembele opened the scoring with an individual effort on 13 minutes and then netted a penalty midway through the first half as PSG threatened to run riot against struggling opponents.

However a Saint-Etienne side sitting in the relegation play-off place stemmed the tide and managed to pull a goal back through a Zuriko Davitashvili free-kick on 64 minutes. PSG, who won the French Champions Trophy last weekend against Monaco in Doha, nevertheless held on and have won 13 and lost none of their 17 domestic league outings this season.

"I would like to congratulate Saint-Etienne because I loved the way they played, with no fear, attacking and pressing high. They were very daring and brave," said PSG coach Luis Enrique, whose team maintained their habit of being wasteful in front of goal. "Since the start of the season we have created lots of chances but struggled to score goals, but I think tonight we played pretty well in general," said the Spaniard.

His side are on course to claim an 11th title in 13 years, with this victory at the Parc des Princes coming in response to nearest challengers Marseille's 2-1 win away at Rennes on Saturday. Roberto De Zerbi's Marseille side look like the only potential rivals for Paris in the second half of the season, with third-placed Monaco now 12 points adrift of the leaders after a 2-2 draw at Nantes on Friday.

PSG are building towards a crunch Champions League clash at home to Manchester City on January 22, and Luis Enrique rested numerous key players



here. Captain Marquinhos was not involved at all, while Wilfried Zaha, Warren Zaire-Emery, Joao Neves, Vitinha and Desire Doue all began on the bench. Instead there was a first start this season in defence for Lucas Hernandez, who has recovered from a knee injury, and 18-year-old prospect Senny Mayulu came into the midfield.

Saint-Etienne were looking to build on a victory at home to Reims last weekend in their first outing under new Norwegian coach Eirik Horneland. They looked lively in the opening minutes, with Georgian winger Davitashvili forcing an early save from Gianluigi Donnarumma, but PSG soon seized control.

Dembele opened the scoring before the quarter-hour mark, the France winger cutting in from the right flank and firing low into the near corner on his left foot from just inside the box. The hosts then won a penalty when an Achraf Hakimi cross struck the arm of Leo Petrot inside the box, with the referee pointing to the spot after being called across to the VAR screen.

Dembele sent the goalkeeper the wrong way from the spot for his second goal of the night, and his 10th of the campaign in Ligue 1. Bradley Barcola then thought he had made it three before half-time only for his strike to be disallowed following another VAR review for a foul on Benjamin Bouchouari.

Man City mood lifted by three wins, says Guardiola

London: Pep Guardiola said yesterday the mood at Manchester City has been lifted by three straight wins but was cagey regarding potential recruits to strengthen his injury-hit squad in January. Premier League champions City had won just one of 13 matches in all competitions before their 2-0 victory at Leicester on December 29. They then overwhelmed West Ham 4-1 in Julien Lopetegui's final game in charge of the London club before smashing fourth-tier Salford 8-0 in the FA Cup third round last weekend.

"Before, it was impossible to win one, so

now we've won three and that helps us,"

Guardiola said on the eve of today's league match at Brentford. "But the reality is we've won against a team in the last game for the difference of the Premier League and League Two and the badges for both teams and for many reasons we should win. We did it quite well, but still we have to wait to see who we are. You know who we are, but of course the mood is better."

He added: "We have an enormously difficult game (against Brentford). Thomas (Frank) and his team always create a lot of problems. They

are a fantastic, fantastic team."

Brentford went out of the FA Cup on Saturday after a 1-0 home loss to second-tier Plymouth but their home record in the Premier League is second only to that of leaders Liverpool. City are sixth in the league table, just two points behind fourth-placed Chelsea in the hunt for Champions League football next season. Guardiola said there was no update on the situation regarding captain Kyle Walker, who has expressed a desire to play abroad. The England right-back, 34, has not started a game for City since the loss to Manchester United.