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# GULF TIMES SPORT



**TENNIS**

Medvedev advances after meltdown, Fonseca dazzles on debut at Australian Open

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**HANDBALL**

## Qatar go down to dominant France in Worlds opener

By Sports Reporter  
Porec, Croatia

Qatar were soundly beaten by six-time champions France 37:19 in their opening match of the IHF World Handball Championship in Porec, Croatia, yesterday.

France proved their favourites' status in Group C as they imposed their rhythm and did not allow Qatar to score easily.

France came out strong in the match, with Remi Desbonnet making two quick saves that kept Qatar goalless for the first four minutes.

The Asian champions showed a brief spark of hope, fuelled by good defensive action, but it did not last long. They managed to stay level for just four minutes before France powered ahead with a 5-0 goal run, pulling ahead 7:2 after 12 minutes.

Qatar's head coach, Veselin Vujovic, who took over the team in August 2024, expected a tough match against France and saw it as a chance to prepare his players for the upcoming important clashes against Australia and Kuwait.

Left back Frankis Marzo struggled to

find his rhythm, scoring only once from seven attempts in the first 20 minutes. Despite their struggles, left wing Ahad Madadi celebrated his 300th international goal when scoring for 11:6.

French lead extended to eight goals by halftime, 18:10, as Desbonnet continued where he left off at the start, closing the first half with 40 per cent save efficiency. The real problem for Qatar were their backcourt shots, as their backcourt players were at only 14 per cent efficiency.

The second half brought more of the same, as France maintained their dominance.

They forced Qatar to keep trying to score from the outside, where they remained on the low percentage and continued to put pressure on them. Just five minutes into the second half, France hit a double-digit lead when Thibaud Briet netted his fourth goal of the game, cementing their control of the match.

The bright side of the Qatar team was their goalkeeper, Anadin Suljakovic, who was giving his best against the current European champions with 11 saves.

Qatar next face Austria tomorrow, while France will take on inexperienced Kuwait.



France players prevent a Qatar player from scoring during the IHF World Handball Championship in Porec, Croatia, yesterday.

**MOTORSPORT**

## Al-Attiyah wins stage 9 as al-Rajhi takes Dakar lead

Al-Attiyah is fourth in overall standings over 25 minutes behind al-Rajhi

AFP  
Haradh, Saudi Arabia

Qatari Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah hit the gas yesterday to win stage 9 of the Dakar Rally as Saudi Yazeed al-Rajhi took the lead in the drivers' standings. South African Henk Lategan was dethroned having dominated the standings since stage 2 and is now 7min 09sec behind the Saudi driver with three days to go. "It was a messy, messy, messy day for us but it's not the end of the world, we're still in it," said Lategan.

Five-time champion al-Attiyah covered the 357km special between Riyadh and Haradh in 2hr 52min 59sec, to keep in touch with a sixth Dakar title. "It was a good stage. I can be happy with the result. There are three days left, we really have to focus, everything is open," said Dacia driver al-Attiyah, who is fourth over 25 minutes behind al-Rajhi.

The Qatari finished 2min 47sec ahead of Belgian Guillaume de Mevius' Mini and 3min 12sec ahead of al-Rajhi's Overdrive. Al-Rajhi finished almost 13 minutes ahead of Lategan and with three stages left, his overall advantage is seven minutes and nine seconds, after Lategan's difficult day. "We did a great job like we planned to," said al-Rajhi. "It won't be easy, but we will fight to the end. Everything is going well for us."

Having had to open the road following his victory in stage 8, Lategan crossed in his Toyota 11th on the day, 16min 2sec off the pace. "It's a bit of disaster to be honest," said Lategan.

"It was really a mess, about 13km in and we got lost. We thought we missed the way point but we actually had it. It wasn't great and when we got lost we got one puncture and then towards the end we got another one and the wheel is actually flat."

Swede Mattias Ekstrom (Ford) is third overall at 24min 50sec, less than a minute ahead of al-Attiyah. Guy Botterill, who had pushed hard for a stage win on Monday before finishing second behind fellow South African Lategan, is out of the race after an accident 272km into yesterday's stage.

On the bikes, Argentine Luciano Benavides (KTM) claimed his second straight stage win as Australian Daniel Sanders finished third to hold the overall category lead. KTM's Benavides finished 1min 54sec ahead of French driver Adrien Van Beveren (Honda) after the 357m special.

Sanders crossed in third 3min 4sec off the pace to extend his lead on second-placed



Qatar's Nasser al-Attiyah and French co-driver Edouard Boulanger celebrate with their medals after winning the stage 9 of the Dakar Rally in Haradh, Saudi Arabia.



Nasser al-Attiyah in action in the stage 9 of the Dakar Rally, between Riyadh and Haradh in Saudi.

Spaniard Toshia Schareina (Honda) to 14min 45sec. Benavides started first after winning the eighth stage and opened the road, also benefiting from a bonus of 4min 51sec for a time of

3hr 15min 38sec. The 29-year-old Argentine achieved the fifth Dakar stage win of his career and is now fourth overall, 27min 44sec behind his teammate Sanders.

**SPOTLIGHT**

## Rossi set to feature in 2025 WEC season opener at Lusail

Motorsport legend Valentino Rossi will return to Lusail International Circuit (LIC) for the 2025 FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) season opener, as Team WRT confirms his participation in the Qatar 1812 KM race scheduled for February 26-28.

Famously nicknamed 'The Doctor' for his cool and clinical approach to racing, Rossi enters the new season following an impressive rookie WEC campaign that saw him finish 6th in the championship standings, including a remarkable 4th place finish at Lusail International Circuit and a podium finish at the 6 Hours of Imola where he claimed 2nd place.

The nine-time MotoGP champion, who first raced at the Lusail International Circuit on two wheels during the inaugural Qatar GP in 2004 aboard his Yamaha YZR-M1, and continued to race at LIC and in MotoGP till 2021.

He made a dramatic return to the venue - this time on four wheels - with his WEC debut in 2024. Rossi will once again pilot the BMW M4 GT3 in what could potentially be his final WEC season.

The Italian icon recently revealed he's contemplating scaling back his racing commitments for 2025, making his return to LIC even more significant for motorsport fans.

Rossi's legendary status in motorsport is undisputed. He holds the record for the highest number of points in MotoGP history with 6,357, along with an unprecedented 235 podium finishes - 76 more than his closest rival, Giacomo Agostini.

His 89 premier class victories and participation in over 400 Grand Prix races further cement his status as the legend, leading to his well-deserved induction into the MotoGP Hall of Fame in 2021.

"I realised that 16 races is too many and I am in the same situation as in MotoGP," Rossi admitted in a recent interview. "For 2025 my goal is to run a more focused schedule of 10-11 races in the endurance racing."

This measured approach reflects the evolution of Rossi's racing career. Since retiring from his illustrious 25-year motorcycle racing career, the



father-of-one, still proudly wearing his iconic number '46', has showcased his versatility across multiple racing disciplines.

His journey in four-wheel racing has included testing a Formula One Ferrari alongside legends Schumacher, Coulthard, and Webber, competing in GT World Challenge Europe with Team WRT in an Audi R8 LMS, and securing a podium finish in Dubai's 24Hours Series with the BMW M4 GT3.

As Rossi prepares to get behind the wheel of his GT3 BMW once again alongside his Omani teammate, Ahmed al-Harthi, fans can expect another masterclass in racing from this once-in-a-generation talent.

Known for his artistic ability to handle high speeds and remarkable corner dexterity throughout his career, Rossi continues to create unforgettable memories on track, regardless of the number of wheels beneath him.

Fans can witness this motorsport icon in action at Lusail International Circuit from February 26-28, 2025, as the FIA World Endurance Championship returns to Qatar for another thrilling season opener. Three-day event tickets are priced at QR200, which provides fans access to grandstand, fan zone, Lusail Hill and the teams Paddock (subject to capacity restrictions).

CRICKET

# From success story to a major headache: ICC grapples with Afghanistan dilemma

Reuters  
Dubai

After years of showcasing Afghanistan's remarkable rise as a success story, the International Cricket Council (ICC) is under pressure to crack the whip on its member nation, which has seen major curtailment of women's rights by the Taliban government.

England and South Africa have been urged to boycott next month's Champions Trophy matches against Afghanistan, whose maiden appearance in the men's 50-overs tournament as one of the world's top eight teams is a testament to their growth in recent years.

The rapid rise of their men's team has coincided with the disbanding of their women's squad even though that team never played any international match.

The Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) had 25 contracted women players in 2020 but most of them are now living in exile in Australia following the Taliban takeover of their country in August 2021.

The new rulers clamped down

on the rights of women and girls, restricting their access to education and work, curbing their freedom of movement, and forcing them to cover their faces and bodies.

"Where's the hope for women that want to play sport, want to go to school, that want to be able to work? Where is the hope for them?" Tonia Antoniazzi, a Labour MP in the UK, told *BBC*.

"This is a bigger issue around sex-apartheid that I feel very strongly about."

While the English and the South African boards have ruled out boycotting Champions Trophy fixtures against Afghanistan, they placed the onus on the ICC to formulate a unified approach to the tricky issue.

The Dubai-headquartered governing body said it was on the task.

"We are committed to leveraging our influence constructively to support the Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) in fostering cricket development and ensuring playing opportunities for both men and women in Afghanistan," an ICC spokesperson told Reuters.

The ICC has formed a task force headed by its deputy chairman

Imran Khwaja, who is leading "the ongoing dialogue on this matter", the official said.

While the women's team has been disbanded, Afghanistan men's team have shifted base to Dubai.

Star players Rashid Khan and Mohammad Nabi have raised voice against the "deeply unjust" move to deny Afghan women access to education.

"This decision has profoundly affected not only their future but also the broader fabric of our society," Rashid, who has been the face of Afghan cricket, wrote on X last month.

Former captain Nabi echoed Rashid's view on the same social media platform.

"Denying girls the chance to learn and serve their people is a betrayal of both their dreams and our nation's future," wrote Nabi.

"Let our daughters study, grow, and build a better Afghanistan for everyone. This is their right, and it is our duty to protect it."

Afghanistan became a Test-playing nation in 2017 and finished sixth in the 2023 ODI World Cup beating former champions England, Pakistan and Sri Lanka



Rashid Khan (second right) poses with teammates after Afghanistan beat Zimbabwe in their Test series last week. (@ACBofficials)

in group matches. Their English coach Jonathan Trott also guided them to the semi-finals of the T20 World Cup in West Indies and the United States last year. Afghanistan's full-membership looked at stake under the Taliban rule but most ICC members felt banning them would achieve little in a strife-torn country where the

game remains a major source of happiness.

Britain's Culture minister Lisa Nandy was also apprehensive of the utility of boycotting a cricket team.

"I think they are counterproductive, penalise hard-working athletes," Nandy told *BBC*.

"They are not the people we

should be penalising for the Taliban's appalling actions against women and girls...

"The question is, what are the right levers? Diplomacy and public pressure. We are raising awareness but we should allow sport to be sport."

England, who have ruled out any bilateral cricket with Afghanistan, forfeited a 2003 World Cup game against Zimbabwe in protest against Robert Mugabe's regime.

Australia also play Afghanistan only in multi-team ICC events and have refused to host them more than once.

South Africa Sports Minister Gayton McKenzie has likened the Afghanistan situation to the Apartheid era in his own country when much of the sporting world boycotted them.

The Afghan board did not respond to Reuters request for comments.

Afghanistan begin their Group B campaign against South Africa in Karachi on Feb 21 before taking on England and Australia.

India, who will play their matches in Dubai, are in Group A with defending champions Pakistan, New Zealand and Bangladesh.

CYCLING

# Vingegaard eyes Tour de France glory in 2025

'My biggest goal will of course be the Tour de France again'

AFP  
la Nucia, Spain

Jonas Vingegaard will eye a third Tour de France title and also race the Vuelta a Espana this year, he announced yesterday as his Visma team prepare for the new season.

His teammate Wout van Aert will race in both the Tour and the Giro d'Italia, although his main aims will be to win one-day classics the Tour of Flanders and Paris-Roubaix. Vingegaard, 28, also attempted a Tour de France-Vuelta double in 2023, but finished second to American Sepp Kuss in the Spanish race.

"It (Tour de France) is the race that means the most for me. It's the biggest race of the year and there's something special about the Tour de France," said Vingegaard, who won the coveted yellow jersey in 2022 and 2023.

"I want to be there with the best possible preparation and in the best possible shape I can be."

"My biggest goal will of course be the Tour de France again, to try to win that for the third time... then later on I will do the Vuelta a Espana."

The Danish star finished second on the Tour last year behind Tadej Pogacar after being hospitalised following a nasty crash on the Tour of the Basque Country in April.



Team Visma-Lease a Bike's Danish cyclist Jonas Vingegaard (right) speaks during an interview at the presentation of their team for 2025 at a hotel in La Nucia, near Alicante, eastern Spain, yesterday. (AFP)

He said the injuries were worse than initially reported.

"The injuries were very bad, I had seven broken ribs, a broken sternum, my collar bone was in three or four pieces, I had a broken finger and both of my lungs were punctured, so that was not so good of course," said the 28-year-old.

"I was in intensive care for eight days, that really says how

bad it was... That I was able to make it to the Tour de France was a victory in itself and something that I'm really proud of."

Vingegaard will race both Paris-Nice and the Tour of Catalonia to prepare for the start of the Tour de France in Lille on July 5.

Belgian Van Aert also endured an injury-hit 2024 campaign after two heavy crashes.

The 30-year-old will focus on

trying to add to his one career 'Monument' one-day victory, which came in the 2020 Milan-San Remo. Van Aert has finished second or third six times in the five major classics since.

"I'm not in the shape I want to be in yet but I still have time until the season starts," he said. "The injury is healed and I can train like I should so I believe it won't affect me in 2025."

SPOTLIGHT

# Deadly Los Angeles fires prompt 2028 Olympic Games debate

AFP  
Los Angeles

The Los Angeles wild fire disaster has cast a shadow over preparations for the 2028 Olympics, raising questions over whether the city can deliver a safe and successful Games.

So far, none of the more than 80 venues due to stage Olympic competition in Los Angeles have been directly affected by the infernos that have left at least 24 people dead and reduced entire neighbourhoods to smouldering ruins.

But experts say the ongoing disaster has underscored the challenges of staging the world's largest sporting event in a region increasingly under threat of wild fires.

"The situation is clearly grave and given the prospect of significant climate change, you do have to wonder whether the current situation might be repeated, possibly even during the Games," Simon Chadwick, professor of sport and geopolitical economy at Skema Business School in Paris told British daily *The iPaper*.

"This raises very serious questions, not least about insurance, and whether Los Angeles' big-ticket 2028 attraction might be about to become an uninsurable mega-event."

While the flames that razed Pacific Palisades came uncomfortably close to the Riviera Country Club - which will host 2028's Olympic golf tournament - the overwhelming majority of venues are situated outside what would be regarded as high-risk fire zones.

Historical data, meanwhile, indicates that the chances of a similar disaster erupting during the 2028 Olympics are highly unlikely.

Prior to last week, no fire in Los Angeles County had appeared on a list of the 20 most destructive fires in California history, according to statistics provided by CalFire, the state's fire agency.

The 2028 Olympics will also be taking place in July, a time of year when there are no Santa Ana winds, the powerful seasonal gusts widely seen as the biggest factor

behind the unprecedented scale and scope of last week's carnage.

And Los Angeles has already staged the Olympics successfully on two occasions - in 1984 and 1932.

Bill Deverell, a professor of history at the University of Southern California, said the ongoing disaster could provide important lessons for 2028.

"Once this is over... there's no question that we would expect that there would be lessons learned about ways we could presumably try to mitigate cataclysmic disasters like this," Deverell told *AFP*.

Pennsylvania State University professor Mark Dyerson has floated the idea of the Olympics being moved to 2024 hosts Paris if LA was unable to deliver the games.

"They could go back to Paris," the academic told the *New York Post*. "It would be unfortunate, but I'm sure they have some kind of committee - the IOC is a huge bureaucracy - that allegedly looks at contingencies."

California Governor Gavin Newsom, however, told *NBC's* "Today" morning program that planning for the 2028 Olympics and the FIFA World Cup in 2026 - where eight matches take place in Los Angeles - was on track.

Newsom said the flurry of major sporting events in Los Angeles over the next few years - the city will also host the Super Bowl in 2027 - should be seen as an opportunity.

"My humble position, and it's not just being naively optimistic, (is) that only reinforces the imperative (of) moving quickly, doing it in the spirit of collaboration and cooperation," Newsom told *NBC*.

Conservative pundits however have wasted no time in demanding that Los Angeles be stripped of the Olympics.

"The Los Angeles Olympics should be cancelled," right-wing provocateur Charlie Kirk wrote on X last week.

"If you can't fill a fire hydrant, you aren't qualified to host the Olympics. Move them to Dallas, or Miami, so the world's athletes can compete in a place capable of actually safely building and running something."

## DUTCH STAR HASSAN SET FOR LONDON MARATHON RETURN AFTER STUNNING DEBUT

London: Sifan Hassan said yesterday the London Marathon is "in my heart" as she gets ready to return to the scene of an extraordinary debut in the distance two years ago.

The Dutch athlete, born in Ethiopia, marked her maiden marathon by winning the 2023 race in London with a stunning display. Hassan triumphed despite stopping twice on the streets of the British capital and trailing the leader by 28 seconds at one stage.

The 32-year-old has since proved that victory was no fluke, winning gold at last year's Paris Olympics in a Games women's record time of two hours, 22 minutes and 55 seconds - a feat she achieved barely 36 hours after taking bronze in the 10,000m.

Now Hassan, who did not compete in the 2024 London Marathon, is looking forward to returning to a course filled with happy memo-



ries when this year's edition is held on April 27. "If you look back, London is in my heart," she told reporters. "It's amazing, it is almost kind of like Paris. I

thought I don't know what I'm going to do, but sometimes it is a miracle, sometimes a miracle happens."

She added: "I was so scared of (the) marathon, contemplating: 'Am I going to finish, is it going to hurt, what's going to happen?'. Everybody's going to say: 'Oh she's no good, why's she tried that?'"

Hassan won three Olympic medals at Tokyo 2020, taking gold in the 5,000m and 10,000m as well as bronze in the 1,500m and added to her collection with three more in Paris, including bronze in the 5,000m. But she still has career goals she wants to achieve ahead of the 2028 Games in Los Angeles.

"I want to run four marathons in one year, four major marathons," Hassan said yesterday.

"I want to see how far I can go."



An aerial view of homes destroyed in the Palisades Fire as wild fires cause damage and loss through the LA region on January 13, 2025 in Pacific Palisades, California. (AFP)

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

# Medvedev advances after meltdown, Fonseca dazzles

MEDVEDEV SURVIVES FIVE-SETTER, FRITZ UP AND RUNNING, RYBAKINA POWERS INTO SECOND ROUND



Russia's Daniil Medvedev reacts while holding his smashed racquet during his Australian Open first round match against Thailand's Kasidit Samrej in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters)



Brazil's Joao Fonseca celebrates after winning his Australian Open first round match against Russia's Andrey Rublev yesterday. (Reuters)

Reuters  
Melbourne

Three-times Australian Open finalist Daniil Medvedev allowed his frustrations to boil over in a Melbourne Park meltdown before advancing to the second round yesterday while Taylor Fritz made a strong start in his bid to end a 22-year Grand Slam drought for American men.

The third day of action concluded with Brazilian teenager Joao Fonseca more than living up to the hype around him as the qualifier crushed Russian ninth seed Andrey Rublev in a stunning Grand Slam main draw debut.

Danish 13th seed Holger Rune was pushed all the way to five sets and Emma Navarro also had a tough time in one of three all-American ties, the women's eighth seed surviving a major scare to beat Peyton Stearns 7-6(5) 6-7(5) 7-5.

It was plain sailing for former Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina as she blitzed Australian

wildcard Emerson Jones 6-1 6-1 with new coach Goran Ivanisevic watching on impressed.

In a French thriller on Court Three, experience got the better of potential as Gael Monfils edged Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard 7-6(7) 6-3 6-7(6) 7-6(5) 6-4, while there were also wins for 2021 U.S. Open champion Emma Raducanu, ninth seed Daria Kasatkina and former men's world number six Matteo Berrettini.

Home hope Alex de Minaur also moved through as he beat Dutchman Botić van de Zandschulp.

Russian Medvedev, runner-up last year, smashed his racket and a net camera after dropping serve in the third set but rallied for a 6-2 4-6 3-6 6-1 6-2 win against Thai wildcard Kasidit Samrej.

The frustrated fifth seed's behaviour earned him a code violation for racket abuse as play was held up before the fourth set as staff swept up debris from the court but he cut a happy figure after the match.

"At the end of last year, this match I probably would have lost," said Medvedev. "Now it's a new



Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina celebrates winning her first round match against Australia's Emerson Jones yesterday. (Reuters)

year and new energy ... So I'm happy to win this match."

Fourth seed Fritz stayed cool throughout his match against compatriot Jenson Brooksby, the U.S. Open finalist easing to a 6-2 6-0 6-3 win that showed why he is now considered best placed to end America's 22-year wait for a major men's prize.

The 27-year-old played an integral part in the United States win-

ning the United Cup to begin the new season and continued his fine form with a 106-minute drubbing of Brooksby.

Brooksby, returning from two years on the sidelines after having operations on both wrists and serving a 13-month doping suspension, fought until the bitter end but was no match for Fritz, who sealed the victory with his 34th win. "I'm super happy

with how the match went today," said Fritz, who will next face qualifier Cristian Garin.

"It's never easy playing that first match in a slam so there were some nerves."

Those who stayed last on Margaret Court Arena will not forget it in a hurry as the 18-year-old Fonseca dazzled under the lights in a 7-6(1) 6-3 7-6(5) defeat of Rublev.

His win meant he is only the second teenager since 1973 to beat a top-10 ATP player on his Grand Slam debut. Crushing 51 winners, Fonseca looked completely at home on the big stage as he set up a second-round clash against Italy's Lorenzo Sonego.

Navarro was on the back foot for almost the entirety of her three hour, 20-minute clash on Rod Laver Arena with world number 46 Stearns before rallying from a break down to win the final four games of the third set and claim victory. "Crazy match today," Navarro said after sealing the deal with an emphatic backhand winner.

"I was just trying to make the most of the skills I had today, maybe wasn't my best, but she

played really well and it feels really special to get the win."

Berrettini came from a set down to beat Britain's Cameron Norrie 6-7(4) 6-4 6-1 6-3 and claim his first win at Melbourne Park since his run to the semi-finals in 2022.

His reward is a second-round tie against 13th seeded Dane Rune, who was tested over five sets by China's Zhang Zhizhen before running out a 4-6 6-3 6-4 3-6 6-4 winner. Raducanu reached the second round for the fourth year in a row but her 7-6(4) 7-6(2) win over 26th seeded Russian Ekaterina Alexandrova was not all smooth sailing.

The 22-year-old, playing her first match in months, racked up 15 double faults over the contest, including one as she blew a 30-0 lead when serving for the match.

She rallied with some brilliant tennis in the subsequent tiebreak to set up a second-round clash with American Amanda Anisimova, who beat Argentine Maria Lourdes Carle 6-2 6-3.

"I'm not sure what I changed in my serve today. I think it had a mind of its own," said Raducanu.

FOOTBALL

# Klopp hopeful Salah will agree new Liverpool deal

AFP  
Salzburg, Austria

Former Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp expressed hope yesterday that Mohamed Salah will sign a new contract to stay at Anfield beyond the end of this season.

"I hope he stays. He is a fantastic player, a fantastic human being, an outstanding athlete, the best ambassador your country could have. So I hope he will stay at Liverpool," Klopp replied to a question about Salah from an Egyptian journalist during a press conference in Austria.

Klopp was speaking at his unveiling as Red Bull's head of global soccer, a role in which he will oversee the energy drinks conglomerate's football empire.

The German is starting out in the position having left Liverpool at the end of last season, after close to nine years as the club's manager.

Red Bull controls clubs in several countries around the world, including RB Leipzig in Klopp's native Germany, while it recently acquired a minority stake in French second-tier side Paris FC.

Liverpool, meanwhile, have enjoyed a seamless transition to life without Klopp, as they sit



Jurgen Klopp, Red Bull's new "Global Head of Soccer" is interviewed at a press presentation in Salzburg yesterday. (AFP)

six points clear at the top of the Premier League and top of the Champions League standings under his successor Arne Slot.

Klopp reiterated that he felt it was the right time to step down at Anfield and said he did not miss the daily grind of club management.

"I am more than happy not to be there," he said.

"It is really great that they are doing so well, I wish them all the best. I watch as many games as I can.

"It is great football. Even if you don't support Liverpool right now you had better watch them because it is really top football, maybe the best balanced in the world right now?"

The former Borussia Dortmund coach added that he hoped Salah's fellow stars Virgil van Dijk and Trent Alexander-Arnold would also choose to extend their contracts, which expire at the end of the season too.

"I am so happy I am not in charge in that situation, having to answer these questions," he sighed.

"From my point of view I would love all three of them to extend their contracts but I don't know, they didn't tell me."

Asked if he could try to sign any of them for the Red Bull empire, which includes New York Red Bulls in Major League Soccer, he responded with a touch of irony:

"Oh yeah. Virgil I am sure would love to have five more years at Liverpool and then play from 41 to 44 for New York Red Bulls because he probably underestimates US football.

"Mo, yes I would love to, but I don't think we have a chance to pay him to be honest.

"I am just really happy I am no longer a part of it."

## Qatar-UAE Super Cup Organising Committee signs sponsorship deal with Visit Qatar

The Organizing Committee of Qatar-UAE Super Cup announced the signing of a sponsorship agreement with Visit Qatar to support the tournament's second edition, which will kick off on Friday with the participation of eight clubs from Qatar and the UAE. Visit Qatar is the main arm of Qatar Tourism, which is responsible for marketing and promoting the tourism sector in the State of Qatar.

Through this sponsorship, it seeks to enhance its role in supporting sports and promoting the State of Qatar as a leading destination on the global tourism map.

Nasser al-Hajri, Executive Director of Marketing and Operations at the Organizing Committee, expressed his pride in the partnership with Visit Qatar and described it as a strategic partnership that contributes to the continued success of the tournament, which enjoys wide public interest in the two brotherly countries. Al-Hajri said, "This sponsorship reflects the importance of co-operation between sports and tourism, and we look forward



to achieving great success in this edition, continuing the excellence witnessed by the previous edition."

He added that the partnership with Visit Qatar represents a great support for promoting sports events and unique hospitality experiences offered by Qatar, which enhances its position as a global destination for sports and tourism.

Al-Hajri concluded by praising the pioneering role played by Visit Qatar in supporting sports tournaments, stressing the importance of this co-operation in achieving the tournament's goals and providing a distinctive experience for fans.

(qsl.qa)

## SPAIN'S RAHM VOWS RYDER RETURN, PLANS 'TO BE AT BETHPAGE'

Jon Rahm vows to be part of Team Europe when the Ryder Cup begins this fall while he awaits the appeal of his DP World Tour fines assessed for playing in LIV Golf events. The next Ryder Cup will be played September 26-28 at the Bethpage Black Golf Course in Farmingdale, N.Y. "I don't know what's going to happen in the future but I can tell you my plan is to be on that team at Bethpage," Rahm said yesterday in Dubai

ahead of the Hero Dubai Desert Classic at the Majlis Course at Emirates Golf Club. "I don't know what's going to happen, and I'm hoping they don't try to settle the appeal before the Ryder Cup. I don't think that would be good for anybody. But my plan is to be at Bethpage."

Rahm earned three points for Team Europe in the dominant 2023 Ryder Cup win in Rome prior to joining LIV Golf. The 30-year-old

Spaniard is a two-time major winner (2023 Masters, 2021 U.S. Open). Team Europe can consider Rahm for the event if he makes four starts on the DP World Tour. During the appeal of sanctions by the tour handed down in September, Rahm is allowed to play in DP World Tour events. Poland's Adrian Meronk and Tyrrell Hatton of England are appealing their own sanctions. The current European points standings are led by Rory

McIlroy with 792.07 points. He's the defending champion at this week's event, which is sanctioned by the DP World Tour. Rahm, the individual champion on the LIV Golf circuit last season, ranks 17th (275.8) in the standings used to determine Europe's Ryder Cup roster. Rahm is not holding out hope that he'll be admitted to the Ryder Cup by virtue of LIV Golf and the PGA Tour finding common ground in their lagging merger talks. "It's

hard to tell at this point," Rahm said of whether he thinks there will be movement in the LIV-PGA negotiations. "I think a lot of us would say that when that framework agreement was done over a year and a half ago, things would be further along at this point. And it's real hard to know what goes on behind closed doors, right? It's up to people much higher up than me. I don't know what their vision is or what they are expecting out of

it, right? I think so many of us want some kind of resolution to come together and get the best product possible for the consumer, which is what I think we're still in a position to do." Europe's 2025 Ryder Cup roster won't be completed until August but will start with the top six in total points as automatic qualifiers after the conclusion of the Belfred British Masters on August 24. European captain Luke Donald also will make six captain's picks.

## MOTORSPORT

## Three Middle East Rally champions set for season opener in Oman

By Sports Reporter  
Muscat

The three most recent FIA Middle East rally champions, Abdulaziz al-Kuwari, Nasser Saleh al-Attayah of Qatar and Abdullah al-Rawahi, head a 23-strong entry for the opening round of the regional series to be held in Oman from January 23-25.

The revised Oman International Rally is being organised by the Oman Automobile Association (OAA) and will be based at the Sohar Entertainment Centre (SEC) from January 19th. It has attracted competitors from nine nations, including seven crews in Rally 2, nine Rally 3 and Rally 5 machines, two Can-Ams competing in T4 and an additional five entered in the Oman National Championship and running at the tail end of the field.

Qatar's al-Attayah will be bidding to win the event for a record-breaking eighth

occasion and teams up with his regular French WZRC co-driver Edouard Boulanger for the first time in the FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC).

Switzerland-based Boulanger started his career as an enduro rider before switching to the navigator's seat to partner the likes of Peter Jerie, Khalid al-Qassimi, Dakar legend Stéphane Peterhansel and now al-Attayah in cross-country events. The duo are currently chasing glory on the 47th Dakar Rally in Saudi Arabia with the official Dacia team.

Al-Rawahi is a two-time winner of his home event in Oman and again teams up with Jordanian Ata al-Hmoud, while defending MERC champion al-Kuwari calls upon the services of Irishman Lorcan Moore for the Sohar-based season opener.

There are also Rally2 Ford Fiesta entries for Qatari veteran Nasser Khalifa al-Atya, Indian driver Payyaakkal Panikkaveetil and a Peugeot 208 for Qatar's Rashid al-Muhannadi.

With Saudi Arabia set to join the regional series in May after a 15-year absence, there are Saudi entries from rally cross and WRC regular Rakan al-Rashed (Toyota GR Yaris Rally 2), Hamza Bakhshab (the son of 1995 MERC winner Abdullah Bakhshab) and Ibrahim al-Muhanna.

In the absence of last year's FIA MERC2 winner Shaker Jweihan, fellow Jordanian Shadi Shaban heads the list of contenders in their fleet of Subarus and Mitsubishi. Other entrants include local drivers Abdullah al-Zubair and Zakariya al-Aamri, Lebanon's Ahmad Khaled, Jordan's Issa Abu Jamous and India's Mohamed Mansoor Parol.

Shadi El Fakih returns to defend his FIA MERC5 crown at the wheel of his two-wheel drive Renault Clio and Saudi driver Yosra Jazzar joins al-Muhanna in a pair of T4 Can-Ams.

Crew will tackle 13 special stages and 232.39 competitive kilometres in a route of 636.41km.



Nasser Saleh al-Attayah will be bidding for a record-breaking eighth win in Oman.

## PREMIER LEAGUE

## Gabriel suffers ACL injury as Arsenal eye transfers

Brazilian forward could be sidelined for the rest of the season

AFP  
London

Arsenal forward Gabriel Jesus will need surgery on a serious knee injury as Gunners boss Mikel Arteta scrambles to replace the Brazilian in the January transfer window. Jesus was stretchered off in the first half of Sunday's FA Cup third-round match against Manchester United, which ended in a defeat for the Gunners on penalties.

The 27-year-old saw specialists this week to assess the extent of the problem, which has now been diagnosed as an anterior cruciate ligament injury to his left knee.

Jesus could be sidelined for the rest of the season in a major blow to Arsenal's hopes of winning a first Premier League title since 2004.

"Gabby will undergo surgery in the coming days and will soon begin his recovery and rehabilitation programme," Arsenal said in a statement.

"We will continue to keep everyone updated with Gabby's recovery, with everyone at the club fully focused on supporting Gabby to ensure he is back to full fitness as soon as possible."

After scoring just once in his first 20 games in all competitions this season, Jesus had netted six times in six matches before the United match. The former Manchester City star's injury, combined with the extended absence of England forward Bukayo Saka after hamstring surgery, has added to growing concerns over Arsenal's lack of goalscoring threat.

Arsenal are second in the Premier League table, six points behind leaders Liverpool, but they have failed to win any of their past three games in all competitions. Arteta's men face an uphill battle to qualify for the League Cup final after a 2-0 home defeat by Newcastle and are out of the FA Cup.

Arsenal are the only club in the Premier League's top six without a goalscorer in double figures - Kai Havertz has seven in the English top-flight this season. Arteta, whose team face Tottenham in today's north London derby, was asked at his pre-match press conference whether the club were targeting a striker in the January transfer window.

"We are actively looking in the market to improve the squad, and that's been since day one," said the Spaniard, who had admitted he was "very worried" about Jesus's injury before



Arsenal defender William Saliba trains in London yesterday.

receiving the gloomy medical update later in the afternoon.

"We would be naive not to do that because it's an opportunity always to evolve the team, to improve the squad, and especially with the circumstances that we have. So yes, we are looking and we are trying, and let's see what we are able to do."

## SPURS BOSS BATTLES ONGOING INJURY CRISIS AHEAD OF ARSENAL CLASH

Ange Postecoglou said Brazil forward Richarlison is fit to face Arsenal today but Timo Werner will miss out as the Tottenham boss continues to juggle a daunting injury list. Spurs, a lowly 12th in the Premier League, are desperate for a win against their north London rivals after three defeats and a draw in their past four league games.

Postecoglou has wrestled with a string of injuries this season. Germany winger Werner, who picked up a hamstring injury in Sunday's FA Cup win at Tamworth, joins Guglielmo Vicario, Micky van de Ven, Cristian Romero, Ben Davies, Destiny Udogie, Rodrigo Bentancur and Wilson Odobert on the sidelines.

But Postecoglou told his pre-match press conference that he saw positive signs on the injury front after a tough few months. Richarlison has not played since he sustained a muscle injury during a 4-1 win over Aston Villa in November.

"Hopefully some light at the end of the tunnel in terms of players coming back," said the Australian.

"Hopefully that means we can look at this back half of the season as something where we can make an impact. Big game tomorrow night, big game for the club, big game for our season, big game for our supporters, so looking forward to it."

The former Celtic boss, used to the bitter Old Firm rivalry in Glasgow, said he was aware of the intensity of the north London derby from the moment he arrived at the club. But he is yet to beat Arsenal in three attempts as Spurs manager.

"I have been big on it from the first game and this year is as big as they ever come, especially for us and our season," he said. "We need to start winning games in the league and there is no better place to start."

## ATHLETICS

## Qatar's Samba prepares for new season with training camp in Spain

QNA  
Doha

The Qatar Athletics Federation (QAF) has announced the preparation programme for 400m hurdler **Abderrahman Samba** ahead of the new season. The programme includes a training camp in Valencia, Spain. In a statement, QAF said Samba is undergoing intensive training as part of his preparations for the 2025 season.

Samba, one of the world's leading 400m hurdlers, has made an impressive comeback after recovering fully from an injury that sidelined him for more than two seasons. During his absence, he

faced significant setbacks but returned stronger, clinching the gold medal in the 400m hurdles at the Asian Games in China. He subsequently competed in the Diamond League and the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, delivering notable performances.

This year, Samba is set to participate in the Diamond League, the Asian Championship in South Korea this June, and the World Athletics Championships in Tokyo in September. He holds the second-fastest time in the history of the 400m hurdles, clocking 46.98 seconds during the 2018 Paris Diamond League. The world record for the event is held by Norway's Karsten Warholm, with a time of 46.70 seconds.



## Kimpembe set for PSG return in cup game against minnows Espaly

**Reuters:** Paris St Germain defender Presnel Kimpembe could make a return to action after an almost two-year absence in the Coupe de France tie against fifth-tier side FC Espaly, manager Luis Enrique said.

Kimpembe has been on the sidelines since rupturing his Achilles tendon in February 2023 and returned to training last month. Wednesday's game gives the coach the perfect chance to ease the 29-year-old back into the team. "Tomorrow is an ideal match for us to see certain players," Luis Enrique said ahead of the round of 32 game. "After speaking to Presnel to see if he feels ready, he feels much better. He has been able to train with the team. I can see in training that he is able to help the team."

The coach was giving little way in terms of who would make the squad, and whether players reported to be on their way out

of the club, such as Milan Skriniar and Randal Kolo Muani, will be involved. "We will release the squad list tomorrow morning. I like my players to get that information first before all of you," the Spanish manager said. "We will see tomorrow if they are in the squad or not."

PSG will be expected to ease into the next round, and have a seven-point lead at the top of Ligue 1, but they are struggling to make the next phase of the Champions League. Enrique's side are 25th in the standings, one point off the knockout phase playoff places, and their penultimate game against Manchester City is next week, which will likely take precedence over the cup tie and Saturday's league game at Lens.

"Now we have the Champions League games coming up, we want to be in the best possible condition," Enrique said.

## LA LIGA

## I am blameless over Olmo registration issue: Barca chief Laporta

AFP  
Barcelona

Barcelona president Joan Laporta defended his handling of the **Dani Olmo** registration issue and lashed out at enemies attacking the club in a fiery speech yesterday.

Midfielder Olmo and striker Pau Victor both missed two matches after La Liga and the Spanish football federation (RFEF) refused them new licenses to play, saying Barcelona had failed to meet the deadline at the end of 2024. The financially-struggling Catalan giants sold seats in VIP boxes at their under-construction Spotify Camp Nou stadium to Middle Eastern investors to help pass La Liga's strict financial fair play restrictions for the new licenses.

Barcelona approached Spain's national sports council for a temporary measure which would allow the duo to play before a final ruling is made on their case against

La Liga and the RFEF, which they were granted last week. "Nothing which has happened in these last weeks regarding the registrations has surprised us," Laporta told reporters in a news conference which lasted nearly two hours.

"If you look at Barca's history you can expect these reactions, it's not just by chance that when Barcelona are rising, various parties unite to tell a tale that is not true at all. They didn't get what they wanted, because of the determination of the board and the staff, they wanted to destroy us but we never gave up."

Playmaker Olmo, Barca's marquee summer signing, appeared as a substitute in the emphatic 5-2 Spanish Super Cup final win over Real Madrid in Saudi Arabia on Sunday, the club's first piece of silverware under coach Hansi Flick. Laporta said La Liga had unexpectedly asked for additional documentation from the club on December 31 regarding the sale of the VIP seats, which led to Barcelona missing the deadline.



The president said investors from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates had bought the seats but the money had not arrived by the end of 2024 and La Liga were de-

manding to see proof of it. Spanish media reported some opposition and fan groups were considering asking Laporta to resign but the president scoffed at the idea.

"I don't think a Barca president should step down because of a decision from La Liga," said Laporta. "This was a clear attack to destabilise us before the Super Cup which we all wanted to win... It's not about supporting Laporta, it's about supporting Barca, they destabilised the team... I value the mental strength of Flick (and the players)."

Laporta said one of the reasons for the registration debacle was because the club did not accept a new sponsorship deal with sportswear brand Nike in the summer. That was in order to work on a better deal which they have now signed, worth a reported 1.7bn euros until 2028.

"At the time we could have sealed a deal with Nike which is worse than the one that we have, but because we had other options, we went with them," said Laporta. "We thought about registering (Olmo and Victor) with the Nike deal, but we waited, to keep negotiating, and we earned around 300mn euros more on the contract."