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QATAR-UAE SUPER CUP

Al Rayyan ready to meet Shabab Al Ahli in tough clash

Challenge Shield contest to be held at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium today

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Rayyan will take on United Arab Emirates' Shabab Al Ahli in a strong contest for the Challenge Shield of the Qatar-UAE Super Cup at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium today. The kick-off is at 6pm.

The Lions enter the match following on the heels of their recent morale-boosting 6-2 win over Umm Salal in Week 12 of the Ooredoo Stars League, and will strive to keep up the momentum despite the difference in competition between the two tournaments - the league and the Challenge Shield.

Speaking yesterday, on the eve of the match, Al Rayyan coach Artur Jorge said: "It is a great thing to reach this stage, and now we play for a title, but this is a responsibility for the technical staff, the coach and the players. It is a strong challenge and it is one of my goals to achieve a title."

He added: "I know Paulo Sousa, the coach of the Shabab Al Ahli team very well, his capabilities and his professional career, and I know the rivals and the team's collective and individual capabilities. The good thing is that our team's mentality is to achieve victory. The players would need the support of the fans who give them strength inside the stadium, and winning this match will give a great motivation to the team, especially since it would be for a title."

Al Rayyan player Andre Amaro said: "We have implemented what the coach asked of us, and we corrected some mistakes. We will enter the next match with a winning mentality, and take the positive things from the last match, and at the same time work to correct the flaws. The new coach has come with new ideas, and we will face the rivals with enthusiasm, ferocity and without fear," he added.

Shabab Al Ahli's Portuguese coach Paulo Sousa said: "I am happy to be in Doha, and it is also a great thing to be at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium, and for me this is a very important and big match and



Al Rayyan coach Artur Jorge and Shabab Al Ahli's coach Paulo Sousa (below) addressing the media yesterday, on the eve of their Challenge Shield of the Qatar-UAE Super Cup match.



it will be competitive and at a high level. Each team will work hard to win and be crowned with the Challenge Shield.

"The match will be decided on small details. This is how the finals are, and from our side we need to be at the highest levels of focus and work well and give our best to achieve what is required."

He added: "The players and everyone have the passion and desire to win the title. We have great enthusiasm and look forward to this match with great anticipation and caution."

Shabab Al Ahli player Saeed Ez-zat said: "We respect Al Rayyan

and we know the team and their players and how strong they are, but we have one goal which is to win all the championships and compete for the titles."

The second edition of the Qatari-UAE Super Cup has the participation of 8 clubs - 4 Qatari teams, and 4 Emirati teams, competing among themselves for 4 titles. The first - called the Challenge Shield brings together Al Rayyan, the runners-up of the league championship during the 2023-2024 season, and Shabab Al Ahli, runners-up of the UAE League for the last season as well.

UAE's Al Nasr, runners-up of

the UAE President's Cup, will meet Qatar SC, runners-up of Amir Cup, for the Super Cup on January 17, 2025, at the Al Maktoum Stadium in Dubai.

The clash for the Super Shield will see Al Sadd, the Qatar Stars League title holders, meet Al Wasl, the UAE League champions, on January 18, 2025 at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha.

Al Wakrah, the 2024 Qatar Cup champions, will play Al Wahda of the UAE, the Abu Dhabi Islamic Bank Cup champions, for the Challenge Cup on January 19, 2025, at the Al Nahyan Stadium in Abu Dhabi.

PREVIEW

HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al-Thani Rifle Day on Saturday

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Under the patronage of the President of the Qatar Olympic Committee HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC) will organise His Excellency's Rifle Race Meeting on Saturday.

The event will take place on the turf track at Al Rayyan Racecourse with action featuring 10 races commencing at 11:00am.

The highlight of the day will be the 10th race, the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al-Thani Rifle contest. The winning horse of this race will earn a coveted spot in the Shalfa race scheduled during the prestigious HH The Amir Sword Festival, which will be held at Al Rayyan Racecourse in February.

In addition to the 10 races, the event will feature the final qualifiers to determine the champions of the traditional Al Sabiq races. Held during major events at QREC, this heritage racing event attracts a wide participation of outstanding Qatari riders.

The HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al-Thani Rifle, a 2,200m Class 1 contest for Thoroughbreds, will see some powerful and highly-rated horses compete for the title. Among the prominent entries is Simca Mille (Tamayuz x Swertia), owned by Wathnan Racing, who will be saddled by Alban de Mieuille, to defend his title from last year, and partnered by Maxime Guyon. Challenging him is Haunted Dream (Oasis Dream x Red Halo), representing Wathnan Racing as well, but for trainer Hamad al-Jehani with James Doyle in the saddle. Also in the race is Aafoor (Qurbaan x Filfila), carrying the colours of Al Jeryan Stud, trained by M H K al-Attiyah and will be ridden by Szczepan Mazur.

The meeting features several other races with prestigious trophies and cups. These in-



clude the Rifle race (the feature event), as well as the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al-Thani Trophy, a Gr 3 PA for Purebred Arabians over 2,200m in the penultimate race.

The HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al-Thani Trophy for four-year-old Purebred Arabians will be run over 1,750m in Race 8 and, like Races 9 and 10, will carry a purse of \$100,000.

Purebred Arabians will also take on each other in an open 1,750m race for another HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al-Thani Trophy and a purse of \$50,000.

In Race 6, the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al-Thani Trophy, a 1,400m open race for Thoroughbreds, another \$50,000 will be up for grabs. Race 5, the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al-Thani Trophy, will feature Local Thoroughbreds racing over 1,750m with a prize of \$55,000.

In Race 4, three-year-old Thoroughbreds will vie for over 1,500m for the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al-Thani Trophy, which carried a purse of \$50,000. Race 3 will see Thoroughbred sprinters compete in a 1,200m open contest for the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al-Thani Trophy, offering a purse of \$50,000.

The first two races in the card will carry a prize of \$30,000 each. The opener will see promising maidens and debutants taking on each other to open their records in the 1,750m Local Purebred Arabian Premium Maiden Plate. The following race, the Local Purebred Arabian Novice Cup, will be run over 1,400m.



Ten thrilling races to be held on HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al-Thani Rifle Day on January 18.

HORSE RACING

Al-Naimi's Rammah claims Al Kharrara Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Rammah yesterday bounced back to form with a commanding victory in the Al Kharrara Cup at Al Rayyan Racecourse.

Ridden by jockey Jefferson Smith, the Hamad Nasser H al-Naimi-owned gelding secured a dominant win in the 1,200m Purebred Arabian Handicap feature race. Trained by Ahmed Kobeissi, the nine-year-old veteran produced a scintillating late surge in the home straight, storming past the competitors to secure an impressive three-length victory. Deputy Director of the QREC Registration & Studbook Department Saad Ali al-Kubaisi presented trophies to the winners.

It was a marathon day at 21st Al Rayyan Race Meeting featuring 10 races with jockey Youssef Lachhab shining with three victories, guiding Dukhan (Local Thoroughbred Handicap), Gold Lily (Thoroughbred Handicap 60-80) and Solmax (1,700m Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate) to title wins. The day started with Lukas Delozier steering Jassim Ghazali-trained Master Of Brazil to win in the Thoroughbred Handicap (45-65). The experienced jockey also led Lulwat Al Faisal to the Local Thoroughbred Graduation Plate crown.

In other races yesterday, Insignia won the Thoroughbred Handicap (50-70) with Alberto Sanna in the saddle, while Almutawakel, ridden by Saleh Salem al-Marri prevailed in the Thoroughbred Handicap (0-70).

Marco Casamento notched up

a win with Maximus Alexios in the 1200m Thoroughbred Maiden Plate while Faleh Bughanaim guided Bojdoor to victory in the Purebred Arabian Handicap (50-70).

RESULTS: 21st Al Rayyan Race Meeting - Al Kharrara Cup

- Winners: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)**
- 1 - Al Kharrara Cup, Purebred Arabian Handicap (85-105)** Rammah, Ahmed Kobeissi, Jefferson Smith
- 2 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (50-70)** Dukhan, Mohamed Rashid Seif al-Kuwari, Youssef Lachhab
- 3 - Local Thoroughbred Graduation Plate** Lulwat Al Faisal, Khalifa Hamed Nasser al-Sawai, Lukas Delozier
- 4 - Thoroughbred Handicap (60-80)** Gold Lily, Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki,

- Youssef Lachhab
- 5 - Thoroughbred Handicap (50-70)** Insignia, Yousef al-Jumaili, Alberto Sanna
- 6 - Thoroughbred Handicap (0-70)** Almutawakel, Nayef Batal al-Otibi, Saleh Salem al-Marri
- 7 - Thoroughbred Maiden Plate** Maximus Alexios, Jassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento
- 8 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate** Solmax, Mohammed Ghazali, Youssef Lachhab
- 9 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (50-70)** Bojdoor, Jean de Mieuille, Faleh Bughanaim
- 10 - Thoroughbred Handicap (45-65)** Master Of Brazil, Jassim Ghazali, Lukas Delozier



Jockey Jefferson Smith guided Rammah to Al Kharrara Cup victory at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday. **PICTURE: Juhaem**

SPOTLIGHT

Vince Dubai-bound after attacks on home

AFP
London

World Cup winner James Vince is to stand down as captain of Hampshire after a decade in charge and move to Dubai following attacks on his family home, the English cricket county announced yesterday.

Although he will miss the 2025 English domestic first-class County Championship or red-ball season, Vince will continue to play white-ball (limited-overs) cricket and skipper Hampshire in the T20 Blast.

The 33-year-old batsman, a member of the England squad that

won the 2019 50-over World Cup on home soil, saw his family home near Hampshire's headquarters attacked twice last year.

Vince, who said the incidents left his young family fearing for their safety, told Britain's *Daily Telegraph* in July he believed the attacks were a case of mistaken identity. "James Vince has signed a revision to the final year of his contract which fulfils his obligation to play for Hampshire Hawks in the 2025 Vitality Blast campaign and confirms that he is not planning to play red-ball cricket this year," said a Hampshire statement.

"After 10 consecutive years as club captain, Vince will also step down from this position but will remain as team captain of Hamp-

shire Hawks. "In 2024, Vince endured a challenging year on a personal level, following several attacks on his family home. As a result, the family have taken the decision to move to Dubai."

Vince added he needed to "understand what is best for my family, and combine that with the stage of my career I am at".

He made his Hampshire debut in 2009 aged 18 and has scored over 22,000 runs for the county.

Vince is the Blast's all-time leading run scorer and has played in Hampshire's three title-winning T20 teams, while representing England 55 times across all formats. Vince has also been retained by the Karachi Kings for this season's T20 Pakistan Super League

on a contract worth a reported £100,000 (\$122,000).

The PSL has made a one-off move from its usual February-March slot to take place between April 8 and May 19, the same time as the first half of the County Championship.

English cricket chiefs have introduced rules preventing England-contracted players or red-ball county players from appearing in overseas leagues such as the PSL that take place during the English season, with the exception of the Indian Premier League, cricket's wealthiest T20 franchise tournament. But the policy appears to have helped persuade Vince, who won the last of his 13 Test caps in 2018.



James Vince (right) in action during one of the T20 Blast matches for his team Hampshire Hawks in this file photo from last year. (@hantscricket)

CRICKET

Pakistan plot spin blitz as WI return after 19 long years

'WE NEED TO LEARN HOW TO LAND THE FIRST PUNCH'

AFP
Multan, Pakistan

Pakistan will look to formidable spin duo Noman Ali and Sajid Khan to torment the visitors when the West Indies play their first Test series in the country in 19 years from tomorrow.

Pakistan capitalised on home advantage when England came in October, tailoring pitches for slow bowling to snap a painful winless streak with a 2-1 victory.

Noman and Sajid played starring roles and are joined in the squad by Abrar Ahmed, hinting at a three-pronged spin assault in the two-match series in Multan.

The West Indies last toured Pakistan in 2006, before a militant attack on the visiting Sri Lanka team three years later scared off international sides.

Andre Coley is in charge of a West Indies team which has won only two of its last 13 Tests, before he hands over the reins to white-ball coach Daren Sammy in April.

"It's a new series, a new opportunity," Coley told reporters as the team arrived last week.

"When you talk about Test cricket, it's not only the opposition's skill that provides tests, but the different conditions, different environments and different game situations."

Pakistan selectors delivered victory against England by taking the bold decision to drop ace batsman Babar Azam and pace pair Shaheen Shah Afridi and Naseem Shah.

Left-arm spinner Noman and off-spinner Sajid shared 39 of 40 England wickets on pitches baked with patio heaters and dried with fans, clinching the series after losing the first match.

"We bounced back well against



Pakistan's Kamran Ghulam bats during a net session at the Multan Cricket Stadium yesterday.

England," said skipper Shan Masood of a series that salvaged his reputation after Pakistan lost their first six matches under his captaincy.

"With backs against the wall we did well. We need to learn how to land the first punch," he said after his team suffered a 2-0 defeat in South Africa last week.

Azam has regained his place but Shaheen and Naseem remain out in a bid to manage their workloads. Opener Saim Ayub is suffering from a calf injury sustained in South Africa and his partner Abdullah Shafique is dropped because of poor form, leaving the door open for the return of experienced Imam-ul-Haq.

To match Pakistan's spin attack, the West Indies will deploy left-armers Gudakesh Motie and Jomel Warrican, as well as Kevin Sinclair.

Kemar Roach will head the pace attack in the absence of Shamar Joseph - out with a shin injury - and Alzarri Joseph who has opted to play T20 cricket in the UAE.

The second Test starts January 25, with the series deciding which team will finish bottom of the World Test Championship table.

Pakistan currently rank eighth and the West Indies ninth and last.

South Africa and Australia have already qualified for June's WTC final at Lord's despite Australia's

shock loss to the West Indies in Brisbane last year.

Squads: Pakistan: Shan Masood (captain), Saud Shakeel, Abrar Ahmed, Babar Azam, Imam-ul-Haq, Kamran Ghulam, Kashif Ali, Khuram Shahzad, Mohammad Ali, Mohammad Huraire, Mohammad Rizwan, Noman Ali, Rohail Nazir, Sajid Khan, Salman Agha

West Indies: Kraigg Brathwaite (captain), Joshua Da Silva, Alick Athanaze, Keacy Carty, Justin Greaves, Kavern Hodge, Tevin Imlach, Amir Jangoo, Mikyle Louis, Gudakesh Motie, Anderson Phillip, Kemar Roach, Kevin Sinclair, Jayden Seales, Jomel Warrican

ANNOUNCEMENT

South Africa's star pacer Nortje ruled out of Champions Trophy



AFP
Johannesburg

Fast bowler Anrich Nortje was yesterday ruled out of the Champions Trophy because of a back injury.

The latest injury setback for the 31-year-old was announced by Cricket South Africa a day after he was named in his country's 15-man squad for the tournament in Pakistan next month.

Nortje, at his peak the fastest bowler in international cricket, underwent a scan on Monday, according to a statement by CSA, "which revealed the extent of the

injury". The statement did not specify the exact nature of the injury.

Nortje, who has played in 19 Tests, 22 one-day internationals and 42 T20 internationals, has not played any international cricket since the final of the T20 World Cup in Barbados last June.

He had been in line to make a comeback against Pakistan last month but suffered a broken toe while batting in the nets.

Nortje was also ruled out of the ongoing SA20 franchise competition in which he was due to play for Pretoria Capitals.

CSA said a replacement would be named later.

FOCUS

Australia to play 2 ODIs during Sri Lanka tour

AFP
Colombo

Australia will play an additional ODI during their Sri Lanka tour starting later this month for two Tests as part of the ICC World Test Championships, the hosts said yesterday.

Both teams were originally due to play a one-off one day international at Hambantota but another match has been added to the schedule, with both to now be staged in Colombo.

Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) said the two ODIs will be held on February 12 and 14 after the two Tests.

The first of the games begins just two days after the scheduled fifth day of the second Test in Galle so it remains to be seen how many players featuring in that match can turnaround for the one-dayer if the Test goes the distance.

However, Australia have nine players in their preliminary Cham-

pions Trophy squad who aren't part of the Test series, including captain Pat Cummins and fellow quick Josh Hazlewood.

But Cummins' participation remains uncertain as he is carrying an ankle injury which he played with during the India Test series.

Australia's ODI players are expected to arrive in Sri Lanka around the start of the second Test.

Their first match in the Champions Trophy is against England on February 22 followed by South Africa on February 25 and Afghanistan on February 28.

The Test series will pitch top-ranked Australia against sixth-ranked Sri Lanka.

The first Test will begin from January 29, while the second is scheduled to start on February 6. Both matches will be played at the Galle International Cricket stadium.

The Australians last visited Sri Lanka for a two-match Test series in 2022, which was drawn.

BOTTOMLINE

beIN SPORTS launches new English podcast

A new year means a new podcast series at beIN SPORTS as the global home of sports prepares to release its new English-language production of 2025. Tales, Tears & Trophies is a six-part series of shows hosted by former Manchester United and Arsenal player Mikael Silvestre and focusing on the highs and lows of life at the top end of the professional football pyramid.

Promising unique content and exclusive insights, the fortnightly series kicked off yesterday with the global release of an hour-long episode in which the four-time Premier League winner sat down with former Manchester City and England goalkeeper Joe Hart to discuss his journey from England's lower leagues to Premier League glory, missed opportunities with the Three Lions, and how Pep Guardiola told him his services were no longer required.

Other guests lined up for the coming weeks include Ashley Cole, the England international who controversially moved from Arsenal to London rivals Chelsea in 2009 and went on to be considered the best full-back in the world; Glenn Hoddle, who coached Tottenham Hotspur, Wolves and England during Silvestre's career; Joe Cole, the England and Chelsea



midfielder once considered a generational talent; and former Liverpool stars Jason McAteer and Luis Garcia, the latter of whom played in the Reds' unforgettable 2005 UEFA Champions League final win over AC Milan.

In the Middle East and North Africa alone, beIN SPORTS has enjoyed great success in recent years with Arabic-language podcasts such as Asateer (Legends) which focuses on

sporting heroes from around the region, and The beIN Podcast, which gives a platform for different fan opinions following major sports events. beIN SPORTS' continued investment in digital audio showcases the sports network's growing footprint in the podcast space.

Tales, Tears & Trophies will be available on beIN SPORTS' official YouTube channel as well as Apple Podcasts and Spotify,

Second round of Doha International Equestrian Tour from today

Doha: The second round of the Doha International Equestrian Tour, featuring three days of thrilling action, will begin today at the Longines Arena, Al Shaqab. Organised by the Qatar Equestrian Federation, Al Shaqab and the Qatar Olympic Committee, the event will feature competitions across one-star, two-star, and four-star categories, as well as a local round for future knights at a height of 60 cm.

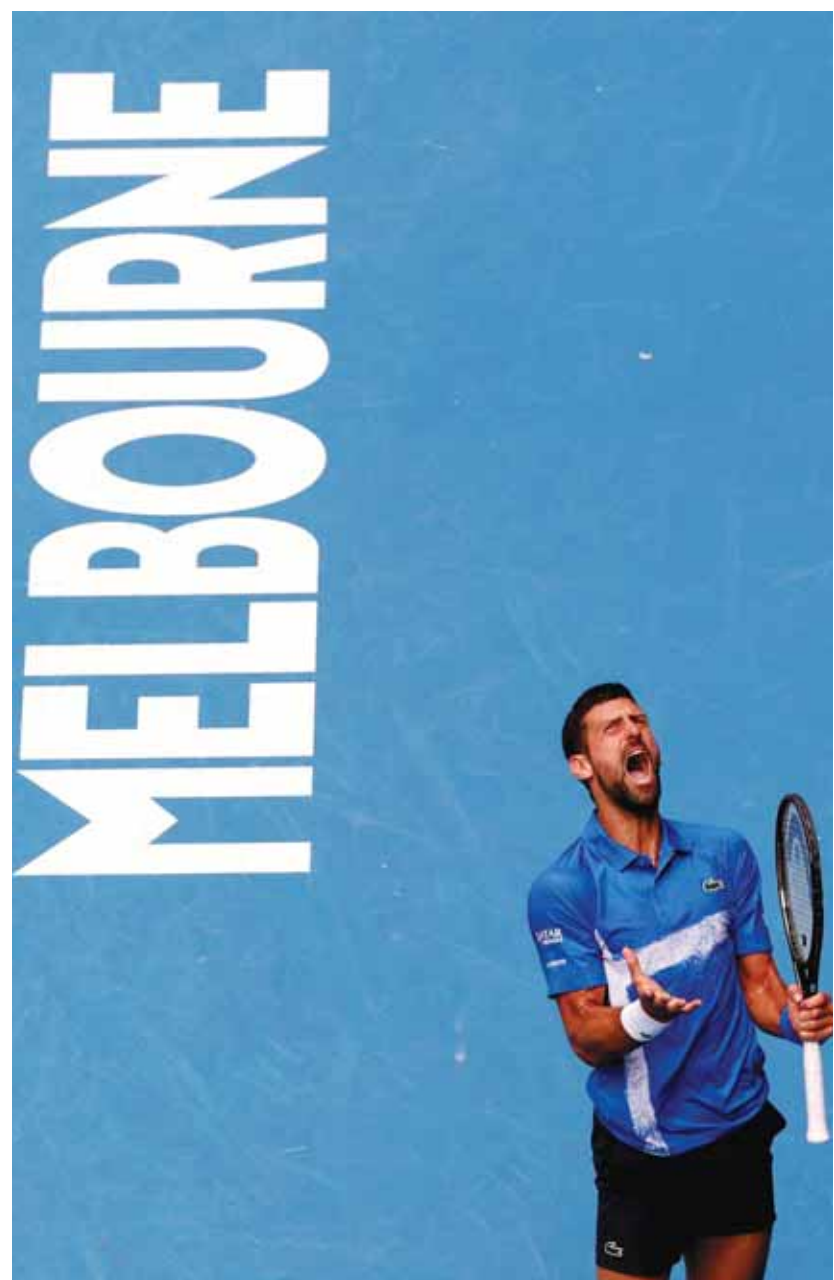
The first day of the second round will begin at 9:30am with the two-star category round at 130 cm, followed by the one-star category round at 110 cm at 12:30pm. The two-star category round at 145 cm will take place at 1:40pm and the local round for future knights will be at 4:10pm.

The four-star category round at 140 cm will start at 4:45pm, followed by the one-star round at 120 cm at 6:15pm. The day will conclude with the four-star round at 145 cm at 7:30pm. The Doha Tour consists of three rounds, with the first and second rounds featuring one-star, two-star, and four-star categories, and the third round, from January 23-25, featuring one-star, three-star, and the prestigious five-star category. The championship has attracted 277 riders from around the world, with a total prize pool of €1.7m. The event also offers a dedicated public area with entertainment, food, and beverage options, as well as activities for all age groups.

TENNIS

Djokovic, Sabalenka win as Zheng, Ruud make early exit

Djokovic claims another record merely by taking to the court for his 430th Grand Slam match



Serbia's Novak Djokovic reacts during his second round match against Portugal's Jaime Faria at the Australian Open yesterday. (Reuters)

Reuters
Melbourne

Novak Djokovic and Carlos Alcaraz swept into the third round of the Australian Open in the wake of women's top seed Aryna Sabalenka yesterday as the rain returned and Olympic champion Zheng Qinwen bowed out.

While Zheng, who was stunned 7-6(3) 6-3 by Laura Siegemund, was the first top-10 women's seed to exit, sixth seed Casper Ruud became the fourth to fall on the men's side after going down 6-2 3-6 6-1 6-4 to Czech teenager Jakub Mensik.

"We can see that tennis is moving on," said 19-year-old Mensik, whose triumph followed Brazilian teenager Joao Fonseca's stunning victory over ninth seed Andrey Rublev in the opening round on Tuesday.

"We can see different or new names on the tournaments. For the fans, for the tennis, for everything, it's really great. That's it. New blood is coming."

Djokovic, however, continued to defy the rise of the younger generation and took another step towards a 25th Grand Slam title with a 6-1 6-7(4) 6-3 6-2 victory over 21-year-old qualifier Jaime Faria on Rod Laver Arena.

"Overall it was another big test. Another three-hour match, back-to-back against the youngsters," said the 37-year-old seventh seed, who claimed another record merely by taking to the court for his 430th Grand Slam match.

"Again, I'm happy with the way I ended up the match. Good fashion, good mindset."

Second seed Alexander Zverev made light work of contemporary Pedro Martinez 6-1 6-4 6-1 in the final match on the main showcourt, while Alcaraz, still only 21, served up another quick-fire win to advance past Yoshihito Nishioka 6-0 6-1 6-4.

Sabalenka, bidding to become the first woman to claim three straight Australian Open titles since Martina Hingis in the late 1990s, had a much trickier time in the opening match on Rod Laver Arena.

The Belarusian trailed Jessica Bouzas Maneiro 4-1 in the second set but battled



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka reacts after a point against Spain's Jessica Bouzas Maneiro during their Australian Open match in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

back to win 6-3 7-5 and extend her winning streak at the hardcourt Grand Slam to 16 matches.

"She played incredible tennis today and it was a really tough one," Sabalenka said.

"I'm super happy with the win in straight sets, especially against someone like her, who makes you work for every point."

Third seed Coco Gauff also made heavy work of her second-round tie against Britain's Jodie Burrage in the evening session on the main showcourt but got the job done in two sets, 6-3 7-5.

"IT'S TENNIS, NOTHING MORE."

Morning rain delayed the start of the matches on the outer courts and returned to disrupt the programme in the late afternoon. Belinda Bencic eased past Suzan Lamens 6-1 7-6(3) in the first match on Court Six but Zheng, her successor as Olympic champion, was fighting back the tears on John Cain Arena after being stunned by unseeded German Siegemund on John Cain Arena.

"I felt she was playing really good," the fifth seed told reporters after regaining her composure. "It's tennis, nothing more."

Bencic will next face twice champion Naomi Osaka, who rallied past 20th seed Karolina Muchova 1-6 6-1 6-3 to reach the third round of a Grand Slam for the first

time since taking a break to have a child. "It definitely was something that is a goal of mine, especially after last year (when) I wasn't able to beat a seed in a Grand Slam," she said.

"I'm obviously very thankful that that happened so early this year."

Members of Australia's large Lebanese community were in place on Court Three long before qualifier Hady Habib's match against Frenchman Ugo Humbert.

They were not rewarded for their patience as the first Grand Slam main draw campaign for a Lebanese player ended in a 6-3 6-4 6-4 defeat.

"I hope this week has inspired a bunch of kids to start tennis and know that there is a pathway to get to this position," said Habib.

"Hopefully one day we'll have more Lebanese tennis players on this stage."

There were still plenty of cheers echoing around the precinct late into the night as Australia's Aleks Vukic took out 22nd seed Sebastian Korda 6-4 3-6 2-6 6-3 7-5 and local Thanasi Kokkinakis battled it out over five sets with Jack Draper.

Kokkinakis was broken while serving for the match in the fourth set and British 15th seed Draper silenced the crowd by prevailing 6-7(3) 6-3 3-6 7-5 6-3.

"It was a tough atmosphere to deal with," said Draper.

SPOTLIGHT

Serve better! Title hopeful Gauff outlines must-do for next Melbourne clash

AFP
Melbourne

Coco Gauff extended her unbeaten start to the year yesterday but admitted she will need to serve better if she is to stay alive at the Australian Open.

The American survived a bout of erratic serving during a second-set wobble before securing a hard-fought 6-3, 7-5 win over Britain's Jodie Burrage in Melbourne.

The world number three, who ousted former champion Sofia Kenin in the first round, battled back from 5-3 down in the second set to reach the third round.

She plays 30th seed Leylah Fernandez tomorrow for a place in the last 16.

Gauff beat the Canadian in straight sets at the United Cup in

her first match of the season, but knows that may count for little if she can't improve her delivery with ball in hand.

Asked what she had to do to win against Fernandez, Gauff told reporters: "Obviously serve better!"

Gauff dished up seven double faults as she was broken three times by the world number 173 Burrage.

She said she cannot afford similar against Fernandez, who reached the US Open final in 2021.

"She's going to be aggressive, that's her game," she added.

"She's a great player. Slam finalist and has great results against top players."

"Obviously I did well at the United Cup. It's a different match, different story. Anything can happen."

Big-hitting Burrage collapsed when serving for the second set at



5-3 on her maiden appearance on Rod Laver Arena. She double-faulted twice to al-

low Gauff to level. Another double fault handed Gauff a further break to lead 6-5 and she served out to

win on her first match point. "It was tough. She was serving really well so I was just trying to manage that," said Gauff.

"She really stepped her level up in the middle of the second set. If I landed anything short she was hitting a winner."

"She was returning well so it put pressure on my serve."

"Next time I need to mix up the targets a bit."

Gauff stayed in control of the other aspects of her game, committing only 18 unforced errors.

The 25-year-old Burrage, who is on the comeback trail after missing six months of last year with wrist surgery and a knee injury, landed 21 winners, 16 off her powerful forehand.

"I thought it was on my racquet today, and that's something I can take a lot of confidence in," said Burrage, who had considered quit-

ting tennis for good after her surgery.

"I ended up serving for that second set and played a horrible game, but sometimes that's the way it goes," he said.

Gauff lost in the Australian Open semi-final last year to eventual champion Aryna Sabalenka.

She has been drawn to meet the Belarusian at the same stage this year as she seeks a second Grand Slam title after winning the US Open in 2023.

On current performances, the 20-year-old Gauff must be rated a major contender having finished 2024 with a flourish by winning the China Open and the season-ending WTA Tour Finals.

She took that form to Australia, winning all her singles matches at the United Cup including beating world number two Iga Swiatek in straight sets.

GOLF

McIlroy, Rahm set for top-level meeting in Dubai

AFP
Dubai

Rory McIlroy and Jon Rahm will mount a battle of the No.1 players on the DP World Tour and LIV Golf Tour at the \$9mn Hero Dubai Desert Classic, which begins today.

McIlroy won the season-ending DP World Tour Championship at Jumeirah Golf Estates in November for his third successive Race to Dubai title.

In September, Spain's Rahm had secured the season-long Individual Championship of LIV Golf when he won the last of the regular events in Chicago.

In the absence of Official World Golf Ranking points for the Saudi Arabia-backed league, the former world No 1's ranking has fallen to 31.

McIlroy is aiming for his third successive Dubai Desert Classic win, and fifth overall, while Rahm is making his tournament debut.

The 30-year-old Northern Irishman has an exceptional record in the emirate though, having won the DP World Tour Championship title three times.

"It's always been nice to start my year in Dubai. It's something that I've done most of my professional career," said McIlroy.

"The last couple of years, to come here to



Dubai, open the season and have success, is a really strong start to the season. Obviously, that's the plan again this year." McIlroy was vocal about his opposition to LIV Golf, but the two European Ryder Cup stars have remained good friends through everything.

Another LIV recruit

However, the recent, and yet to be officially confirmed, news that Northern Ireland's Tom McKibbin is moving to LIV Golf - and to Rahm's team - will add an edge to their relationship.

The 22-year-old McKibbin happens to be a member of McIlroy's home club in Holywood and has been supported by the four-time major champion since his junior days. McIlroy admit-

ted he was "slightly disappointed" with McKibbin's decision but revealed that the youngster had often spoken to him about the issue. McIlroy said McKibbin, who he has known since he was 10, had called him in New Zealand as soon as he received the offer from LIV.

Rahm, who is still a member of the DP World Tour and has appealed the fines imposed on him for playing LIV Golf events, said the Dubai tournament was important for him to ensure he is part of the European Ryder Cup team for the event in New York state in September. "It's a tournament I've wanted to play. There's a lot of great champions in this event. I love the city and I love coming here," said Rahm.

"We don't have our first LIV event until the first week of February. So being able to play an event before is nice to get the competition feeling going."

"It's going to be quite tricky for me to play more DP World Tour events until after August. It's nice to play one early on and not have to play too many after the Ryder Cup. I never want to fall short and possibly lose my membership. I don't know what's going to happen in the future, but I can tell you my plan is to be on that (Ryder Cup) team."

Apart from McIlroy and Rahm, the tournament features world No 8 and 2022 champion Viktor Hovland of Norway and Dubai-based world No 10 Tommy Fleetwood of England as well as American phenomenon Akshay Bhatia.

No decision made on Genesis Invitational, says Woods

New York: Tiger Woods admitted he has far greater concerns than the status of next month's Genesis Invitational, the PGA Tour event that he has hosted since 2019. With wildfires ravaging the Los Angeles area, Woods said that real life carries more weight than the event that is slated to be held at the Riviera Country Club in Pacific Palisades from Feb 13-16.

"It's just sad," Woods told reporters in the SoFi Center after his debut TGL match on Tuesday. "Max (Homa) and I have grown up there. We're SoCal kids. To see what has happened, I've known a couple of people who lost everything, so it's just hard. As far as the Genesis, we're just trying to figure everything out and make sure that everyone is safe and we have meetings scheduled going forward. But as of right now, we're not really focused on the tournament. It's

more about what we can do to help everyone who's struggling, who has lost homes and had their lives changed."

Riviera was spared from the fires despite being in the mandatory evacuation zone.

The PGA Tour hasn't made a final decision on whether it will be held there.

Homa, Woods' TGL teammate, said golf should not be the primary focus right now.

"I know that these natural disasters happen far too often. However, this was the first one I can remember where every news clip, every time someone men-

tioned an area, I could picture it so well," Homa said.

"It was very eerie. Fortunately, all my friends and family are safe. Houses not necessarily still intact, but it was nice to be able to talk to quite a few people, and I think their perspective has been amazing about, 'Hey, we're safe, and that's what matters most'."



SPOTLIGHT

Qatar Motorsports Academy Stars Program all set for exciting start

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) on Tuesday announced the launch of the ambitious Qatar Motorsports Academy Stars Program aimed at identifying and nurturing young talent in motorsport.

The program has already attracted over 400 registrations, and buoyed by this impressive turnout, QMMF is committed to leveraging this platform to uncover promising Qatari talent and support them towards thriving careers in competitive racing.

The fully-backed program in terms of funding will run through the year while preparing the passionate youngsters for grueling motorsport action and excellence, it particularly aims at spotting champions of the future.

Speaking during the launch at the Lusail International Circuit, Amro al-Hamad, Executive Director of QMMF, said: "The program is a testament to our belief in the untapped potential of Qatar's youth. We aim to provide a platform that identifies and nurtures the next generation of Qatari motorsport talent. This initiative is not just about racing; it's about building future ambassadors for Qa-

tari motorsport." He added: "When Qatar's current stars like Nasser al-Attiyah and Abdulaziz Al Kuwari came around it was more due to someone spotting their talent at the start. Now things are more organized and the Qatar Motorsports Academy Stars Program is designed to provide the best of opportunities to those who desire to excel.

"As you can see, today, we are seeing many kinds of different activities to help the driver, to show the skills, to give us the opportunity to bring them to the first of all national rally or Baja. This is a chance for all the young boys and girls from 15 years to 25 years old. This program is amazing because it's open for everybody. We are really, really happy to see that 400 have already registered in a really short period."

Nicolas Bernardi, a former French Rally champion and WRC driver, who is the Off Road and Rally Racing Activities Consultant for the program, said, "We have designed a path to try to get to the junior category in the Middle East with one of our winners. We will also have a driver, which will be in the Middle East running for classification. And we will also try to get the trophy to the Middle East, which is our target. So first, this is what we designed for 2025. Of course, in the future we would like to see a professional driver at the top level."



Amro al-Hamad, Executive Director of QMMF and Nicolas Bernardi, former French Rally champion addressing the media at the Lusail International Circuit.

He added, "As we see today, the WRC is a competition, which is a little bit unstable. And I'm sure that from 2027, the regulation will change and we will be able to start to bring maybe the junior WRC trophy to Qatar in 2027, 2028. And of course, also in the Dakar Rally there are many categories and we can have our youngsters there. This is what we want to do. We want to bring back a lot of trophies. I cannot tell you exactly what the future will be, but I'm sure that in the next five years. We will have some people knocking at the door of the professional team."

The selection process for the program will feature a short slalom course using plastic obstacles such as cones and tecpro barriers. Participants will drive easy-to-use vehicles, competing to achieve the best times. Top qualifiers from the initial round will advance to compete on longer slalom courses. Ultimately, the 35 fastest drivers will proceed to the finals, which will be held on January 18, 2025 and January 19, 2025.

In the final stages of the selection process 25 drivers, aged 15-25 years old, will be selected (including at least 15 with no prior racing

experience). Moreover, 5 additional slots will be kept for young participants aged 15-18 years old. Finalists will be tested over two days on different vehicles and surfaces, and evaluated by a jury of motorsport experts.

The jury will also assess participants' psychological and physical, to ensure a holistic evaluation of their potential.

The testing will take place at the Qatar Motorsports Academy located at Lusail International Circuit on January 17, 2025. The top three drivers will have the opportunity to:

Compete in the MERC Junior Category and the Qatar National Baja Championship, based on jury selection. Participants (under 18) may join the Qatar Motorsport Academy's training program until they are eligible for a driving license, with at least one receiving the chance to compete in the Qatar National Team.

This initiative reflects QMMF's commitment to fostering local talent, in line with the Qatar National Vision 2030, and growing the motorsport community in Qatar. By providing young individuals with expert guidance and access to professional platforms, QMMF aims to inspire the next generation of racing champions.

Entry Requirements:

- The individual should be a Qatari citizen.
- The individual should be between ages 15 and 25 (15 and 25 included).
- Entry is open for both genders, boys and girls.
- Prior motorsport experience or driving license is not required.

Those interested in participating can register now by visiting Instagram page @qma_jcsc or scan QR code.



MOTORSPORT

Al-Attiyah suffers a setback, Lategan retakes Dakar lead

'THIS IS THE MOST DISAPPOINTING DAY OF MY LIFE'

Agencies
Shubaytah (Saudi Arabia)

Veteran and five-time champion Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah suffered a setback during stage 10 of the 47th Dakar Rally yesterday.

Al-Attiyah, the only former champion with an outside title shot, got lost about nine kilometres in resulting in him losing five minutes to drop back to 30.

"I'm very disappointed, but what can you do?" al-Attiyah said. "We had a good pace but we lost a lot of time. This is the most disappointing day of my life.

"But we'll see what position we're in and what we can do tomorrow. Every day is very important, and we had a good pace, but we lost a lot of time."

Meanwhile, South African Henk Lategan moved back atop the overall standings after the 10th stage, won by Spain's Ford driver Nani Roma. Roma covered the 120km special in sand dunes from Haradh to Shubaytah in 2hr 6min 34sec, handing Ford their first Dakar stage win since 2015.

Brazil's Lucas Moraes (Toyota) was second, 18sec adrift, with Saudi Arabia's Dania Akeel (Taurus) rounding out the podium, at 1min 40sec.

"It's been a tough rally for us from the beginning," said Roma, a two-time Dakar winner (2004 on a motorbike, 2014 in the car category). "We tried to have a clean day. This morning we were so fast.



Qatar's Nasser al-Attiyah and French co-driver Edouard Boulanger compete in stage 10 of the Dakar Rally, between Haradh and Shubaytah, Saudi Arabia, yesterday. (AFP)

"We understood that we needed to set another speed. We are happy for the team. The car is good, a really strong car, and we are happy with how the team works."

Overnight leader and home hope Yazeed al-Rajhi (Overdrive) lost precious minutes after becoming stuck in sand to hand Lategan, in his Toyota, the advantage. The South African now sits 2min 27sec ahead of the Saudi driver in the general classification.

"It wasn't the plan to go quickly today," said Lategan. "We were actually going at a very nice and steady pace. Hopefully, there are

some other guys behind us that were a little bit quicker so that they can open tomorrow."

Rajhi remained in good spirits. "We got stuck because we were taking it easy," said Rajhi. "Everything is going good, that's the most important. I have a good position, I hope. No pressure, I hope everything will go well."

Thursday's 11th stage, the Empty Quarter Challenge, features a testing 275km special around Shubaytah in which organisers said it was "not too late to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat or climb onto a podium" on a terrain rid-

dled with pitfalls in gravel sand, as well as in the salt lakes in between.

The race to be crowned motorbike champion seems much more clear cut as Australia's KTM rider Daniel Sanders holds a lead of more than 16 minutes on Honda's Toshia Schareina of Spain.

The stage honours went to South Africa's Michael Docherty, also riding a KTM. The 30-year-old, who is well-acquainted with the desert and its challenges as he is based in the United Arab Emirates, timed 2hr 0min 3sec.

"I am very happy to be back in the dunes," said Docherty.

FOOTBALL

Liverpool deserved more than a Forest draw, says Slot

AFP
Nottingham, United Kingdom

Arne Slot insisted Liverpool deserved to beat Nottingham Forest after the "outstanding" Premier League leaders needed Diogo Jota's equaliser to rescue a 1-1 draw against their title rivals.

Slot's side were rocked by Chris Wood's eighth-minute opener at the raucous City Ground.

But Jota came off the bench to head in fellow substitute Kostas Tsimikas' corner just 20 seconds after Slot sent on the pair in the 66th minute.

Although Liverpool had struggled to cope with Forest's intensity and rock-solid defending until Jota's leveller, they laid siege to the Forest goal in the closing stages.

It took a series of superb saves from Forest goalkeeper Matz Sels and a goal-line clearance from Ola Aina to ensure Nuno Espirito Santo's team held on.

"Their goalkeeper had to make a few incredible saves but their defenders also made some good blocks with quite a few chances. They blocked almost every shot," Slot said.

"I could not have asked for more. Second half was outstanding. There are not many teams that can create so many chances against an opponent so defensively strong. Unfortunately we couldn't get a second."

It was a pulsating clash that recalled the golden era when Liverpool and Forest won five European Cups between them from 1977-1981.

They were also both English champions during that period and, while Forest are unlikely to ever emulate the Brian Clough era, this tenacious display indicated a title challenge is not beyond them.



Liverpool manager Arne Slot reacts during Premier League match against Nottingham Forest in Nottingham. (Reuters)

Forest had already beaten Liverpool 1-0 at Anfield in September - the leaders' only defeat in 20 league games - and Slot needed no reminding of their qualities.

"We were definitely better than the last time that we played them. That wasn't that difficult though. Back then we did not create much, today we did," he said.

"It is so, so hard for every team to create here. And at times it was one chance after another.

"To win games in the second half of the season is more difficult than in the first. Teams get used to playing you and they improve, they can even bring in new players or a new manager, and they fight for every point."

Chasing a first English title since 2020, Liverpool remain in control of their own destiny.

Arsenal can close the gap on the Reds to four points with a win against Tottenham, but Liverpool will hold a game in hand and Slot sees no reason to panic after two successive league draws.

"For us to come from behind shows the character and quality the team has," he said.

FOCUS

Man City's Premier League title defence is over, says Foden

AFP
London

Phil Foden admitted Manchester City's bid to win a fifth successive Premier League title is over after the troubled champions drew 2-2 at Brentford.

Foden netted twice to put City in control against the Bees on Tuesday, but they collapsed late in the game, with Yoane Wissa and Christian Norgaard earning a point for the home side.

Sixth-placed City are languishing 12 points behind leaders Liverpool and Foden conceded they will have to focus on finishing in the top four rather than winning another title.

"The title? Yeah, yeah, it's done for sure, it's done," the England forward said.

"We know. We're not stupid. So we've got to aim for top four, that's the next target now and then obviously Champions League as well. So it's not as if the season has gone.

"But we've got to be realistic, haven't we? The performances have not been good enough to get up there.

"The top four is our aim now and then see where we can be in the other trophies. We can't dwell on it. We've got to try and aim for the top four now and make things right."

City are two points behind fourth-placed Chelsea in the battle to qualify for next season's Champions League.

Foden said City are trying to learn the lessons of their dismal decline, which has come as a huge shock to Pep Guardiola's team after a dynastic run of six titles in seven seasons.

"Like you said, I've not been in this situation before where I've lost this many games and been in this situation," said Foden, whose side return to action at struggling Ipswich on Sunday.

The 2023 treble winners also face a vital Champions League trip to Paris Saint-Germain on January 22, with their place in the last 16 far from assured.

"It's a learning curve and it's just about how you get back to your best, not just me, but the team as well. And how we come back from this," Foden said.



Manchester City's Spanish manager Pep Guardiola reacts during the English Premier League match against Brentford at the Gtech Community Stadium in London. (AFP)