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FOOTBALL

Shabab Al Ahli beat Rayyan to clinch Qatar-UAE Challenge Shield

By Sports Reporter
Doha

UAE's Shabab Al Ahli won their second title in as many years in the Qatar-UAE Super Cup after defeating Al Rayyan 3-1 to lift the Challenge Shield at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium yesterday. Shabab Al Ahli had defeated Qatar's Al Duhail 2-1 to win the Super Shield in Dubai in the inaugural bilateral tournament last year.

Shabab Al Ahli's goals came from Yuri Cesar (28th minute), Sardar Azmoun (52nd minute), and Guilherme Bala (90+7 minutes), while Al Rayyan were gifted an own goal by Shabab Al Ahli's Renan in the 42nd minute of the highly entertaining encounter.

The visitors kept their pressure against the hosts, but Al Rayyan's goalkeeper Paulo Victor, who was in fantastic shape, stood between them and what could have been a flurry of goals until the 28th minute when the Brazil-born Emirati midfielder Cesar found the back of the net following an assist by Bala, who snatched the ball from Al

Rayyan's Murad Naji near the centre line.

Al Rayyan's Roger Guedes made some darting moves in the visitors final third in the 42nd minute that resulted in an own goal by Shabab Al Ahli's Renan to ensure the match was even at half-time.

After the break, the visitors took the lead again in the 52nd minute through Azmoun, who finished off a diagonal cross from Bala in the 18-yard box with a simple tap-in. A search for an equaliser by Al Rayyan almost yielded the desired result in the 73rd minute, but Shabab Al Ahli's goalkeeper Hamad al-Mequebaali made a fingertip save of what was almost a headed goal by Guedes. Substitute Tameem Mansour wasted a golden opportunity to equalise for Al Rayyan in two minutes of added time when he was set up for a sitter, but the Qatar forward's right-footed shot went painfully wide.

Five minutes later, Shabab Al Ahli extended their lead by two goals with Bala having the simplest of tap-ins after being fed by Eid Khamis, following a fast counterattack that started from the edge of Al Rayyan's 18-yard box, to make it 3-1 for the Emiratis as they clinch the title.



Shabab Al Ahli players celebrate with the trophy at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium yesterday. **PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil**

EQUESTRIAN

Al-Marri, Allen shine at Doha Tour

Al-Marri thrilled the home crowd with his horse Navaronne

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's Rashid al-Marri emerged triumphant in the CSI4* - Two Phases 1.40m class while Britain's Millie Allen topped the CSI4* - Faults & Time - 1.45m class on the opening day of the second leg of the Doha International Tour at the Longines Arena of Al Shaqab yesterday.

The three-day event is held amidst a large audience presence with a total of six categories for CSI one-star, two-star and four-star categories at different heights, in addition to a round for Future Riders.

More than 400 local and international riders are participating in the event, and the event has total prizes worth more than 400,000 euros.

Al-Marri thrilled the home crowd as he combined with his horse Navaronne to finish on top in a flawless 27.53 seconds. Portugal's rider Duarte Seabra on Van Halen Z came in second place with a time of 28.52 seconds, while Ukraine's Anastasia Bondarjeva, who along with Virunga H Z Anastasia, finished in 30.63 seconds. The winners were honoured by Khalid Issa al-Humaidi, Senior Vice-President Operations at Qatar Airways.

The CSI4* - Faults & Time class witnessed exciting competition with Allen emerging on top astride Quick Diamant HR in 61.69 seconds. The second place was bagged by Abdullah Alsharbatly of Saudi Arabia, clocking 64.24 seconds on Boeckmanns Lord Pezi Junior, while Seabra on Cooper LB was third with a time of 64.3 seconds. The winners were crowned by Sheikh Mohammed bin Fahad al-Thani, representative of Doha Bank.

Meanwhile, Qatar riders impressed in the CSI2* 1.30m class. Faris Saad al-Qahtani excelled on his mount Hidiene to claim the top podium place in 30.52 seconds, followed by Jaber Rashid al-Amri astride Apollon du Banney in second place, clocking 31.32 seconds. Mohammed Khalifa al-Baker completed the Qatar podium sweep as he finished third in a time of 31.65 seconds on Dukhan 3. The winners were crowned by Omar al-Bouainain, Deputy Director of the championship.

The CSI2* - Faults & Time - 1.45m class was clinched by Italian Emanuele Gaudiano as he rode Chalou with aplomb for a fastest routine of 64.15 seconds.

His compatriot Roberto Previtali, riding Hachiko finished in 64.47 seconds, was second while Austrian Gerfried Puck astride Equitron Melody Vd Smidshoeve clocked 65.27 seconds to be third. The winners were crowned by Dr Eman al-Ansari, Adviser to the CEO of Abdulghani Motors.

The CSI1* - Special Two-Phase - 1.10m class was won by Shaheen Abu Green of Libya astride Henriette with the best time of 27.62 seconds. Abed Sanosy of Saudi Arabia was second astride



Qatar's Rashid al-Marri astride Navaronne clears a rail during the second leg of the Doha International Tour at the Longines Arena of Al Shaqab yesterday.



The top six finishers of the Future Riders' National Competition - Optimum Time - 0.60m pose on the podium with Ahmed Khalid al-Humaidi, Heritage and Heritage Specialist at Al Shaqab.

Nina Rite E Z, finishing in 28.03 seconds, while Qatar's Mohammed Faisal al-Marri claimed the third podium spot on his trusted mount Miss Chili, with a time of 28.67 seconds. The winners were crowned by Mohammed Jaber al-Khayareen, Event Director, Doha International Tour.

Saudi's Turki Alsaawy, who along with Falco, clocked the best time of 53.22 seconds in CSI1* - Faults & Time - 1.20m class. He was followed by Qatar's Ibrahim Khalid al-Kuwari on Flexy Bel Z in the second place with a time of 53.31 seconds. Saudi's Mohammed al-Asaker finished third with Scoobylenky Theys in 53.98 seconds. The winners were crowned by Nasser al-Hajri, the Tour's Sports Director.

Future Riders' National Competition - Optimum Time - 0.60m round generated a lot of excitement both among the riders and the fans where Rodha Tamim al-Thani, riding Peter, came on top achieving a time of 38.99 seconds, followed by Tamim Fahad al-Marri on Peter in second place, and Salha Khalid al-Obaidli, riding Lancome Paris, in third place.

Ahmed Khalid al-Humaidi, Heritage and Heritage Specialist at Al Shaqab, honoured the winners.



Sheikh Mohammed bin Fahad al-Thani, representative of Doha Bank, poses with CSI4* - Faults & Time class winner Millie Allen, runner-up Abdullah Alsharbatly and third-placed Duarte Seabra.

DAKAR RALLY

Al-Rajhi takes overall lead; al-Attiyah second in penultimate stage

AFP
Shubaytah, Saudi Arabia

Saudi driver Yazeed al-Rajhi took the lead in the overall car standings at the Dakar Rally in Saudi Arabia after finishing third in yesterday's decisive penultimate stage. Swedish driver Mattias Ekstrom (Ford) won the 11th stage, finishing the 275km special in Empty Quarter dunes 41sec ahead of Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (Dacia) with Rajhi (Overdrive) completing the podium, at 1min 45sec.

Rajhi, who trailed leader Henk Lategan (Toyota) by 2min 27sec going into yesterday's stage, not only caught his rival but opened up a significant gap. He now leads the South African by 6min 11sec going into today's final stage. "I knew I could do it. I trusted myself, I attacked and enjoyed," said the 43-year-old Saudi at the finish.

The 12th and final stage today is mainly symbolic, with a timed special of just 61km, which will make it hard for the South African to alter the outcome. Barring any surprises, Rajhi will become the first Saudi competitor to win the Dakar, which has been based in Saudi Arabia since 2020.

Lategan, now second overall, finished fifth on the day 10min 23sec behind Ekstrom who is 16min 23sec back in third in the overall standings "We couldn't

have done better today, I tried everything," said Lategan. "I'm no dune expert but I'm happy to be at the finish with the car in one piece. It's incredible, we had a very good Dakar with ups and downs, but overall I'm happy."

Spanish rider Tosha Schareina won a fog-shortened penultimate bike stage while Daniel Sanders remained on course to become the second Australian to win the category. Schareina's victory in 2hr 12min 4sec on the 112km 11th stage special did not, however, allow the Honda rider, who is second overall, to threaten Saunders' grip on the race.

The Spaniard clawed back 7min 31sec but Sanders still has a 9min lead going into Friday's final stage so if he safely negotiates the 61km special he will emulate the achievement of fellow Aussie Toby Price who won the bikes in 2016 and 2018.

Due to an early morning fog that prevented the organisation's helicopters from taking off, the stage began three hours late. The weather conditions forced the organisers to stop the motorbike special stage after 152km, out of the 308km initially planned, to avoid the riders having to ride in the dark. Argentinian Luciano Benavides (KTM) finished second in the stage at 33sec with Adrien Van Beveren (Honda) a further 24sec behind. The Frenchman is also third in the provisional overall standings, 15min 50sec behind Sanders.



Overdrive Racing's Yazeed al-Rajhi and Timo Gottschalk in action with The Dacia Sandriders' Cristina Gutierrez and Pablo Moreno during the stage 11 of the Dakar Rally in Shubaytah, Saudi Arabia. **(Reuters)**

CRICKET

Pakistan, Windies seek to improve from WTC lows

'We won against England so it will be important we keep that momentum'

AFP
Multan, Pakistan

Pakistan and West Indies vowed a strong finish when they meet in the first Test in Multan today despite dragging up the rear of the World Test Championship (WTC). Pakistan are currently eighth in the 2023-25 cycle of the WTC, with their rivals in last place far behind finalists Australia and South Africa.

Skipper Shan Masood said the two-test series was significant for Pakistan, who finished sixth and seventh in the first two WTC cycles.

"This cycle is finishing so this series is significant for us as we want to become a better team by being unbeaten in home conditions," he told reporters yesterday.

Pakistan ended a winless stretch of 11 home Tests by beating England 2-1 in October and Masood wants his team to keep winning at home despite a 2-0 defeat in South Africa this month.

"We won against England so it will be important we keep that momentum against the West Indies," Masood said.

West Indies finished eighth in both previous WTCs and skipper Kraigg Brathwaite wants to end on a positive note this time.

"I think this series is very important with two Tests left in this cycle... so we want to start the year strong and that is our focus," Brathwaite said.

He said his players are ready for Pakistan's spin assault led by Noman Ali and Sajid Khan, who took 39 wickets between them against England.

"We have played in spin conditions in Bangladesh and these conditions are similar, so you have to be disciplined and be brave



West Indies' captain Kraigg Brathwaite (right) and his Pakistan counterpart Shan Masood pose with the Test series trophy at the Multan Cricket Stadium yesterday, on the eve of their first match. (AFP)

against any bowler," Brathwaite said. Pakistan deployed industrial fans and patio heaters to dry out the Multan pitch and secure their series win against England after heavy rain.

They are ready to use the same tactic again if needed, with the second Test also to be played in Multan from January 25.

The tourists had a taste of those conditions in their drawn three-day practice game in Islamabad, where Alick Athanaze hit half centuries in both innings and newcomer Amir Jangoo scored an

unbeaten 63. West Indies used a three-prong spin attack of Kevin Sinclair, Jomel Warrican and Gudakesh Motie in that match but will be without pace spearhead Kemar Roach, who is unwell.

Wicketkeeper-batter Joshua Da Silva was overlooked.

Title-holders Australia and South Africa will play the championship final at Lord's in June.

However, WTC bottom-dwellers such as Pakistan and West Indies will be wary of reports that leading nations such as India, Australia and England favour a

two-tier system of promotion and relegation. That plan could mean lower-ranked teams won't get to play Tests against top-tier nations.

"If there is a two-tier system then it has to be exciting," said Masood.

"There should be relegation and promotion of teams and every team should get more Tests.

"We want more and more Test cricket. The setback for most of the countries is that they are playing just four to five Tests a year and this is hurting."

FOCUS

Olympic push for kho kho, India's ancient tag sport



Nasreen Shaikh, a member of India's women's kho kho team, takes part in the World Cup selection trials on January 8 in New Delhi. (AFP)

AFP
New Delhi

The ancient game of kho kho is enjoying a resurgence in India, with organisers of the first international tournament hoping their efforts will secure the sport's place in the Olympics.

Kho kho, a catch-me-if-you-can tag sport, has been played for more than 2,000 years across southern Asia but only saw its rules formalised in the early 20th century. It was played as a demonstration sport at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin but did not gather enough support to be included in the Summer Games and since then has been largely eclipsed by India's ferocious love of cricket.

Nearly a century later, enthusiasts have sought to raise its profile with the inaugural Kho Kho World Cup featuring teams from 23 nations competing in India's capital New Delhi.

The tournament's opening ceremony saw a gala of song, dance and an Olympic-style team parade, reflecting the aspirations of organisers and athletes to take the sport global. "My elder sister played the sport, but was not able to pursue her dreams," Indian women's team player Nasreen Shaikh, 26, told AFP. "We have crossed the first barrier of playing in a World Cup. The next big step would be an entry in the Olympics."

Kho kho is traditionally played outside on a rectangular court, divided in two by a line that connects two poles at either end of the field.

Teams switch between attack and defence, with the former chasing and tagging defending players around the field.

Only one player can give chase at a time and attacking players can only move in one direction around the court, forcing them to tag in teammates crouched on the centre line to take over pursuit. The match is won by whichever team can gain the most points, primarily by tagging defenders faster than the opposing team.



Members of India's men's kho kho team take part in the World Cup selection trials in New Delhi on January 8. (AFP)

The franchise-based Ultimate Kho Kho League, founded in 2022, brought the sport off grassy fields and onto indoor mats, also boosting its profile with a television audience.

Since then the league has become the third most-watched non-cricket sports tournament in the world's most populous country after the Pro Kabaddi League - another ancient Indian tag sport - and the Indian Super League football competition.

"The turning point was when it transitioned from mud to mat. It made it into a global game," Kho Kho Federation of India president Sudhanshu Mittal told AFP.

"Today we are in 55 countries... Native players in countries like Germany, Brazil, and Kenya are embracing the game because of its speed, agility and minimal equipment required."

Mittal said he expected the sport to gain a foothold in dozens more countries by the end of the year, giving it a strong claim to be featured in the Olympics in the coming decade.

That would coincide with India's audacious bid to host the 2036 Games in the city of Ahmedabad, 100 years after kho kho last appeared at the Olympics. The United States, England and Australia are among the nations competing in this week's World Cup in New Delhi, with expatriate Indians heavily represented after taking the game to foreign shores.

But Pakistan is a glaring omission from the competition despite the sport being popular there - a reflection of the deep animosity between the nuclear-armed archrivals. World Cup organisers have refused to comment on the absence, which has failed to dim the sense of optimism at this week's competition that the sport is destined to thrive.

"There has been a sea change in the sport," Indian men's team captain Pratik Waikar, 32, told AFP. "Cricket has a rich history and they developed it well by going live on TV, and now our sport has also gone live," he said. "In the next five years it will be on another level."

Inoue opponent Kim confident despite last-minute switch

South Korea's Kim Ye-joon believes he can shock Japan's unbeaten Naoya Inoue in their super-bantamweight world title fight next week despite having only a fortnight to prepare for the bout. Kim was parachuted in last week as an 11th-hour replacement to face Inoue in Tokyo after the undisputed champion's original challenger Sam Goodman was forced to pull out through injury.

The 32-year-old Kim is ranked No 11 by the WBO in the super-bantamweight division but still believes he can cause an upset against "Monster" Inoue on January 24.

"I don't think Inoue has ever faced a fighter like me before," Kim said on Wednesday.

"I can imagine what he's thinking right now but I want to say that he's completely wrong.

"I think he will understand what I'm saying when we get in the ring and we exchange punches for the first time."

Kim goes into the fight as the rank outsider against Inoue, who has a 28-0 record with 25 knockouts. The 31-year-old Japanese fighter is set to defend his super-bantamweight titles for the third time since becoming undisputed

champion in December 2023. He is just the second man to become undisputed world champion at two different weights since the four-belt era began in 2004. American Terence Crawford was the first. Kim, who grew up in and did not take up boxing until he was 20, has a career record of 21 wins and two defeats with 13 knockouts and two draws. South Korea has not had a world boxing champion in more than 15 years and Kim said he was ready to break the drought against Inoue. "I've been studying him for a long time, and I practice as if I'm going to face him," Kim said.

"All my practice and all my fighting patterns are based on fighting Inoue."

Benn and Eubank Jr boxing bout set to finally take place in London in April

The long-awaited grudge match between Conor Benn and Chris Eubank Jr is set to finally take place in London in April after a delay of several years, it was announced on Wednesday. What should have been an initial bout between the two British boxers in October 2022 was called off when Benn failed a voluntary drug

test in fight week. Benn's two-year battle to clear his name saw his suspension lifted in November.

The 28-year-old took to Instagram on Wednesday to share photos of himself signing a contract with promoter Eddie Hearn and Saudi official Turki Alalshikh, along with the words: "Your Fate has been sealed! @chrisubankjr". Eubank Jr, 35, responded by posting the picture on his Instagram feed, with the message: "@conorbenofficial just signed his own death sentence."

Benn will reportedly have to move up from welterweight to fight Eubank Jr, who has a professional record of 34 wins and three defeats, in what was previously billed as a "catchweight" fight. Alalshikh, chairman of Saudi Arabia's general entertainment authority, posted on X: "Eubank Jr vs Benn done in April, London, by the name of (Fatal Fury City of the Wolves). Soon I will announce the day and the location." The bout has been promoted as a 'second generation' contest that saw the rivals' fathers, Nigel Benn and Chris Eubank Sr, battle it out in two ferocious contests in the early 1990s.

BOTTOMLINE

LA wild fires embolden critics, but relocation unlikely

Reuters
Los Angeles

Wild fires that devastated neighbourhoods across Los Angeles have provided fresh motivation for critics of the 2028 Games and complicated the effort to host the world's biggest sporting event, but experts say a relocation would be unlikely.

The fires that officials said could rank as the most devastating natural disaster in US history continue to rage after several days with desert winds and a parched landscape presenting extremely hazardous conditions.

Governor Gavin Newsom has already moved to assure Angelenos will be ready to host the Games, a massive undertaking even under the best circumstances, and said on Sunday's "Meet the Press" that

the Games will provide a chance for the "community to shine".

LA28 President and Chairperson Casey Wasserman pointed to Los Angeles' "resilience and determination".

"The strength of our communities and our unity in tough times make this city extraordinary, and when Los Angeles welcomes the world in 2028, our spirit will shine brighter than ever before," Wasserman said in a statement. But Eric Sheehan, a key figure in NOLympics LA, a coalition of community groups that have long opposed the 2028 Games, said that the fire and the local response show a city that is ill-equipped to host the quadrennial sport spectacle.

"These fires cement the message that we've been spreading since before we got the bid in 2017, which is that Los Angeles should not host this Games because it cannot take care of its residents



and host the largest - as LA28 is calling it - the largest sporting event in American history at the same time," Sheehan told Reuters.

The fires have so far spared key Olympic venues, with the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, which is expected to host men's and women's soccer, being used as a staging ground for firefighters battling

the blazes. SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, which will host swimming, to Crypto.com Arena in downtown LA, which will host gymnastics, are also so far unscathed.

Organisers have said that the roughly \$7bn budget for the Games is privately funded as it aims to be among the rare few host cities to turn a profit off the Olympics. But taxpayers would be expected to cover any costs over and above that figure.

Last year, the US government pledged \$900mm in federal funds to improve the city's public transportation ahead of the Games. Organisers told Reuters that they expect incoming President Donald Trump to keep that promise. NOLympics says those transit projects would largely serve tourists at the Olympics and not average Angelenos.

"We deserve a resilient LA that can protect its residents from fire,"

said Sheehan. "We deserve that whether or not we're going to have an Olympics."

A cancellation or relocation of the 2028 Olympics - or the eight World Cup matches that SoFi Stadium is set to host in Inglewood next year - is extraordinarily unlikely, experts say, with few editions of the Games disrupted in the past. World War I forced the cancellation of the 1916 Summer Games, while the 1940 and 1944 Summer and Winter Games were called off due to World War II.

In 2020, organisers made the unprecedented move to postpone the Tokyo Games for a year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Jonathan Aronson, an expert in communication and global governance and professor of communications at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, said the fires would amount to "a blip on the radar" when it

comes to LA hosting the Games.

"Finding someone else to host them at this stage would be almost impossible," he said.

"It's such a short time frame and there are so many moving pieces that are already in motion. It will simply continue."

He noted that the city has the advantage of being home to many existing sports venues. Nathan Line, a professor at the Dedman College of Hospitality at Florida State University whose research focuses on hospitality, tourism marketing, and consumer behaviour, said he "didn't see a world" in which LA does not host the Games.

"LA has been preparing for these Games for more than a decade," he said. "The devastation in Los Angeles County is ongoing and we don't know how bad it is. But no matter how bad it is, they're going to rebuild."

TENNIS

Teen qualifier Tien stuns Medvedev in late-night epic

DEFENDING CHAMPION SINNER ROARS BACK IN MELBOURNE AS SWIATEK SETS UP RADUCANU CLASH

AFP
Melbourne

Teenage qualifier Learner Tien stunned last year's Australian Open runner-up Daniil Medvedev in an epic match ending at nearly 3:00 am Friday after defending champion Jannik Sinner roared back to take his place in the third round.

Taylor Fritz was an emphatic winner in his pursuit of a maiden major title but exciting 18-year-old Joao Fonseca was edged out in a five-set thriller.

The 19-year-old American Tien emerged over a gruelling four hours and 48 minutes of nailbiting action to defeat Russia's Medvedev 6-3, 7-6 (7/4), 6-7 (8/10), 1-6, 7-6 (10/7).

The 121st-ranked Tien next faces France's 69th-ranked Corentin Moutet after the biggest win in his young career.

Tien had defeated Argentina's Camilo Ugo Carabelli in five sets in the first round for his maiden victory at a Grand Slam at the fourth attempt.

"I was definitely hoping it was not going to go to a fifth-set tie breaker," said Tien.

"But just really happy to get a win. I know I made it a lot harder than it could have been, but whatever."

It was a painful exit for former world number one Medvedev, who has lost three of the last four finals at Melbourne Park including to Sinner in 2024.

Before the late-night drama, top-ranked Sinner dropped a set for the first time in 14 matches when he lost the opener to Australian wildcard Tristan Schoolkate.

But he wrested back control after a slow start to go through 4-6, 6-4, 6-1, 6-3 against the world number 173 at a cool and breezy Rod Laver Arena.

It was Sinner's 16th consecutive victory in an ominous sign for next opponent Marcos Giron.

"It's always tough to play against someone I don't know very well. He was playing much better than I was at the beginning," said the Italian, 23, who also won the



Learner Tien of the US celebrates winning his Australian Open second round match against Russia's Daniil Medvedev (right) in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters)



US Open last year. "I have to be very happy with my performance and never take things for granted. Very glad to be in the next round.

"I can improve, yes, but I'll take it."

Fritz swept through to a third-round clash against Gael Monfils with a brutal display of power hitting and has dropped just eight games in the tournament so far.

The American fourth seed was untouchable on Margaret Court Arena, swatting aside Chilean qualifier Cristian Garin 6-2, 6-1, 6-0 in 82 minutes.

Fritz only gave up five games to blitz past Jenson Brooksby in the first round and has spent barely three hours on court.

"Always feels great to come out and play a match like that," said Fritz, last year's US Open finalist.

The supremely talented Fonseca has been tipped for the top by Carlos Alcaraz and Novak Djokovic, who has said he sees shades of himself in the Brazilian.

But having stunned ninth seed Andrey Rublev in straight sets in the first round, the teenager went

down to Lorenzo Sonego, the Italian pulling through 6-7 (6/8), 6-3, 6-1, 3-6, 6-3 to disappoint the vocal Brazilian fans.

Sonego's reward is a clash against Hungary's Fabian Marozsan, who took down 17th seed Frances Tiafoe, also in five sets.

In the women's draw, Iga Swiatek set up a showdown with Emma Raducanu in the next round.

Swiatek raced past world number 49 Rebecca Sramkova 6-0, 6-2 while Britain's Raducanu reached the third round for the first time at Melbourne Park by beating Amanda Anisimova 6-3, 7-5.

"Well for sure it's going to be a tough one," world number two Swiatek, a five-time Grand Slam winner but never a Melbourne champion, said as she sized up Raducanu.

"Emma can play great tennis. We all know that."

Raducanu is seeking to claw up the rankings after an injury-hit 2024 and return to the form that brought her a shock US Open crown in 2021 as a qualifier.

"It will be a very good match for me," said the 22-year-old.

Elena Rybakina, the sixth seed and former Wimbledon champion, raced past American wildcard Iva Jovic in straight sets.

Emma Navarro, the eighth seed from the United States, will face Ons Jabeur next after battling through three sets to beat China's 108th-ranked Wang Xiyu.

The Tunisian three-time Grand Slam finalist Jabeur suffered an asthma attack in a 7-5, 6-3 victory over Colombia's Camila Osorio.

"Very, very tough to breathe," she said, adding that she may not have continued if she had lost the first set.

Fourth seed Jasmine Paolini made light work of Renata Zarazua of Mexico, winning 6-2, 6-3 despite some early nerves.

Djokovic, Alcaraz and women's number one and defending champion Aryna Sabalenka all play on a blockbuster Friday.

So do Coco Gauff and Naomi Osaka, who are on a collision course to meet in the next round should they both win.



Tunisia's Ons Jabeur hits a return against Colombia's Camila Osorio during their Australian Open match in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

GOLF

McIlroy hits 'scrappy' two-under first round on Dubai return

AFP
Dubai

Rory McIlroy got his 2025 season underway with a two-under-par 70 first round at the Dubai Desert Classic yesterday, five shots off the three leaders.

US amateur David Ford, Portugal's Ricardo Gouveia and Australian David Micheluzzi all fired opening round 65s to sit top of the leaderboard.

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

And making his first start in two months, the 35-year-old hit four birdies for two bogeys at Emirates Golf Club.

"Yeah, pretty scrappy," McIlroy said.

"Actually I felt I played probably better the first eight holes where I was one over compared to the last 10 where I was three under.

"It was a bit scrappy. First competitive round of the year. First competitive round in a while. Definitely not as comfortable as I was in practice and coming in here.

"But it's nice to get a card in your hand. I got it around and got it in in a couple under, which is nice, and didn't put myself out of the tournament, which is the main thing."

McIlroy is aiming for his third successive Dubai Desert Classic win, and fifth overall.

Spanish rival Jon Rahm carded a 69 after an eagle on the par-five 10th mixed with four birdies and three bogeys.

McIlroy and Rahm are in a battle of the No.1 players on the DP World Tour and LIV Golf Tour at



Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy lines up a putt on the first day of the Dubai Desert Classic at the Emirates Golf Club in Dubai yesterday. (AFP)

the \$99mn Hero Dubai Desert Classic. 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.

Rahm, who is still a member of the DP World Tour and has appealed the fines imposed on him for playing LIV Golf events, wants to ensure he is part of the European Ryder Cup team for the event in New York state in September.

On the first day of action in Dubai, Ford, who plays University golf in the United States and was part of their winning Walker Cup side in 2023, eagled the tenth - his first hole of the day - and mixed

six birdies with a single bogey.

"I try to keep my expectations low," added Ford, 22, who sits sixth on the World Amateur Golf Rankings.

"I know where my game is at right now and I have got a lot of people around me believing in me which is really helpful going into this week."

Micheluzzi had seven birdies in a flawless opening round with Gouveia firing eight birdies and one bogey as he chases his maiden DP World Tour win in his 190th event.

World No.8 and 2022 champion Viktor Hovland of Norway had six bogeys and three birdies in a three-over round of 75.

Dubai-based world No.10 Tommy Fleetwood of England carded 71 and American phenomenon Akshay Bhatia had an opening 69.

FOCUS

Barshim and Ooredoo Qatar: A winning partnership continues

Ooredoo Qatar, the nation's leading telecommunications provider, proudly renewed its partnership with Mutaz Barshim, Qatar's celebrated Olympic and World Champion high jumper, during a special signing ceremony held at the Kids Fun Run yesterday.

The event, which took place at the Fan Village in Sheraton Hotel Park, marked a continuation of Barshim's role in promoting a healthy lifestyle, maintaining physical fitness, and community involvement as Ooredoo's brand ambassador.

Barshim's enduring partnership with Ooredoo Qatar underscores a shared vision to encourage active lifestyles and foster community well-being through sports. As part of the renewed collaboration, Barshim will participate in the record-breaking Doha Marathon by Ooredoo 2025 on January 17, joining over 15,000 athletes in the most anticipated edition of the event to date.

Sheikh Ali bin Jabor bin Mohammad al-Thani, Chief Executive Officer at Ooredoo Qatar, said: "Renewing our partnership with Mutaz Barshim is a moment of great pride for us at Ooredoo. Mutaz represents the spirit of sportsmanship and excellence that resonates deeply with our brand values. His presence at the Kids Fun Run and his participation in the Doha Marathon by Ooredoo 2025 will undoubtedly inspire future generations to pursue their dreams and lead active, healthy lives and it represents our commitment to nurturing the next generation of talent and promoting a healthy, active lifestyle for all."

Later in the day, the spotlight



turned to the future of athletics with the Doha Marathon by Ooredoo Kids Fun Run. Around one thousand children aged 5 to 12 participated in the spirited event, which kicked off at 4:00 PM Aamd featured a special appearance by legendary footballer Nicolas Anelka.

The Doha Marathon by Oore-

doo 2025 promises to be an unforgettable sporting spectacle with athletes from around the world converging on Doha. As one of Qatar's most iconic events, the marathon serves as a platform for world-class athletes and the local community to come together in the spirit of sport, health, and camaraderie.

HORSE RACING

Gold Fleece claims Khor Al Adaid Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Nasser Saeed al-Eida-owned Gold Fleece opened her seasonal record with a Group victory, winning the QA Gr3 Khor Al Adaid Cup at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

Saddled by Jassim Ghazali, the nine-year-old daughter of Nathaniel was given a vigorous ride from Marco Casamento in the concluding stages of the 3,000m marathon race to edge out Hamaki and land her first black-type success by a short head at the line.

Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club Manager Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi crowned the winners.

Earlier, Wathnan Racing's Julica stormed to victory in the Thoroughbred Pearl (Fillies & Mares), securing a treble for trainer Hamad Al Jehani and double for jockey Theo Bachelot. The race was a qualifier for Shalfa race, scheduled during the prestigious HH The Amir Sword Festival at Al Rayyan Racecourse next month.

Meanwhile, the trainer-jockey duo of al-Jehani and Bachelot celebrated their second victory when Ajaan emerged winner in the Silver Sword Trial. Al-Jehani



Connections of Gold Fleece celebrate after the mare won the Khor Al Adaid Cup at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim

registered his first title of the day when Dandy Arabian claimed the Thoroughbred Novice Plate triumph under jockey Abdulla Rashid al-Hajri. In other races, Ray'q, ridden Lukas Delozier, landed the Local Purebred Arabian Conditions (Class 2) title while Ghanem

reigned supreme in the Purebred Arabian Handicap 70-90 with Tomas Lukasek in the saddle.

The Thoroughbred Handicap 65-85 (Class 4) saw Selous, piloted by Saleh Salem al-Marri, sealing a narrow win, while Alberto Sanna rode Rayyan Bu Thaila to win

the opening Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate race.

RESULTS

22nd Al Rayyan Race Meeting - Khor Al Adaid Cup
WINNERS (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1 - Khor Al Adaid Cup -



Jockey Marco Casamento guided Gold Fleece to Khor Al Adaid Cup victory yesterday.

Thoroughbred (Class 1 QA-Gr3)

Gold Fleece, Jassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento

2 - Thoroughbred Pearl (Fillies & Mares) (Class 2) Shalfa Qualifier
Julica, Hamad al-Jehani, Theo Bachelot

3 - Silver Sword Trial - 4yo Purebred Arabian (Class 2)
Restricted race

Ajaan, Hamad al-Jehani, Theo Bachelot

4 - Local Purebred Arabian Conditions (Class 2)
Ray'q, Rudy Andre Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier

5 - Purebred Arabian Handicap 70-90 (Class 3)

Ghanem, Alban Elie De Mieulle, Tomas Lukasek

6 - Thoroughbred Handicap 65-85 (Class 4)

Selous, Khalid Abdulaziz al-Kuwari, Saleh Salem al-Marri

7 - Thoroughbred Novice Plate (Class 5)
Dandy Arabian, Hamad al-Jehani, Abdulla Rashid al-Hajri

8 - Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate (Class 6)
Rayyan Bu Thaila, Jihad El Ahmad, Alberto Sanna

FOOTBALL

Arsenal optimistic in Premier League title race: Raya

Gunners come back from a goal down to beat arch rivals Spurs

AFP
London

Arsenal goalkeeper David Raya believes his title-chasing side can catch Liverpool after closing the gap on the Premier League leaders.

Mikel Arteta's second-placed side moved within four points of Liverpool thanks to their stirring fightback in Wednesday's 2-1 win against arch rivals Tottenham.

Trailing to Son Heung-min's early opener, the Gunners drew level through Dominic Solanke's own goal before Leandro Trossard fired the winner on the stroke of half-time.

It was a much-needed victory for Arsenal, who had gone three games without one in all competitions - a frustrating streak that included an FA Cup third round exit against 10-man Manchester United and a League Cup semi-final first leg loss to Newcastle.

Liverpool are still title favourites as they hold a game in hand over Arsenal, but Raya is optimistic the north Londoners are capable of reeling in the leaders.

"Yes, of course. In football, everything can happen," he said.

"Three weeks ago, people were saying that Liverpool had the title in their hands. But it is just football and everything changes in two or three matches.

"We have to focus on ourselves, try and win every game, and see where we are at the end of the season. We don't want to think too far ahead because that will play badly against us. We have to live in the present, that's the most important thing."

On the eve of the north London derby, Arsenal forward Gabriel Je-



Arsenal's Belgian midfielder Leandro Trossard celebrates after scoring his team's second goal during the Premier League match against Tottenham Hotspur at the Emirates Stadium in London. (AFP)

sus learned he has an anterior cruciate ligament injury that could rule him out for the rest of the season. The Brazilian forward's absence, along with that of Bukayo Saka after hamstring surgery, has left Arsenal short of attacking options.

But Raya said Arsenal's collective mentality would help them cope with those injury blows.

"It was really, really important

to come with a big, big mentality. We know how important the derby is, not just for the league, but for the people that follow us," he said.

"We showed very big character throughout the game, especially when we went behind. We were a little bit stunned but after that, we dominated the whole first half.

"We got the rewards with two goals before half-time. I am very happy with the performance, for

the lads, and for Gabriel Jesus, too. He has a massive injury. This win is for him."

Arsenal take on Aston Villa at the Emirates Stadium tomorrow looking to avoid a repeat of last season's 2-0 home defeat to Unai Emery's men. "We know how good Aston Villa are. We now just have to recover, train and be ready for Saturday because we know how tough it is going to be," Raya said.

FOCUS

Yamal drives Barca past Betis into Copa del Rey quarters

AFP
Barcelona

Lamine Yamal starred as Barcelona sailed into the Copa del Rey quarter-finals with a dazzling 5-1 victory over Real Betis on Wednesday.

Atletico Madrid joined them in the last eight with a 4-0 win at second division Elche. Barca's 17-year-old starlet Yamal scored and helped create two more goals as Hansi Flick's side ran riot at the Olympic Stadium.

Gavi sent Barcelona ahead early on, with Jules Kounde, Raphinha, Ferran Torres and Yamal helping the Catalans rack up an impressive win.

After winning the Spanish Super Cup in Saudi Arabia last weekend by thrashing Real Madrid, Barca came into the cup clash with restored confidence, having stuttered in the final weeks of 2024.

"We have to continue like this," said Barca defender Pau Cubarsi, also 17, who came through the club's youth academy with Yamal. "I've been enjoying watching him for many years, now the whole world is, and he deserves it all."

They dominated from the off against Betis, despite the coach resting a couple of key players including striker Robert Lewandowski.

Dani Olmo, whom Barcelona controversially obtained a temporary playing license for last week, started at false nine in place of the Polish veteran.

The Spaniard helped create the opening goal at the sharp end of a neat team move, with Gavi tucking home in the second minute.

Olmo fired over and hit the post during a particularly busy opening period for the former

RB Leipzig playmaker. Kounde smashed in Barcelona's second after the sublime Yamal dinked a ball through to him on the right of the box.

It was an area the Catalans exploited time after time, with Kounde's second goal from a similar position disallowed for a marginal offside.

At the other end goalkeeper Inaki Pena made a fine save to deny Vitor Roque, on loan at Betis from Barcelona.

Early in the second half Yamal finished clinically after Frenkie De Jong lobbed the ball through to him on the right of the box, but it was disallowed for an offside in the build-up.

Minutes later Barcelona scored their third anyway, with Yamal's surging run from deep in his own half ending up with his deflected effort falling to Raphinha, who struck.

Barcelona netted their fourth when, again exploiting the same part of Betis' area, Olmo chipped a pass to substitute Ferran Torres to finish emphatically.

Yamal finally got on the scoresheet himself after breaking in from the right wing and finishing at the near post.

Roque pulled one back from the penalty spot in the final stages for Betis after Kounde stood on Jesus Rodriguez's foot in the penalty area.

Atletico coach Diego Simeone rested some of his regular starters, including Antoine Griezmann, as his team ran out comfortable winners at Elche.

Alexander Sorloth struck twice for the Rojiblancos in the first half, and the visitors were further bolstered when Elche's Nico Fernandez was sent off early in the second half.

Rodrigo Riquelme extended Atletico's lead with a fine strike from distance and Julian Alvarez rounded off the rout.



Barcelona defender Jules Kounde celebrates with Lamine Yamal (right) after scoring his team's second goal during the Spanish Copa del Rey last 16 match against Real Betis at the Estadi Olimpic Lluis Companys in Barcelona. (AFP)

WEST HAM FACE 'COMPLICATED' TRANSFER WINDOW, SAYS POTTER

Graham Potter admits West Ham face a "complicated" transfer window after Fulham boss Marco Silva shut down talk of Rodrigo Muniz moving to the London Stadium. Potter is just a week into his tenure at the London Stadium but is already embroiled in the club's hunt for new signings.

The Hammers' attacking options have been hit in recent weeks by the loss of Niclas Fullkrug, Jarrod Bowen and Michail Antonio to

long-term injuries. Former Chelsea boss Potter believes he will be backed by West Ham's board if they can find the right target, but he acknowledged that ambition won't be easy to fulfil.

"Every club is the same, you're always looking to try to improve, whether that's externally or internally," he told reporters ahead of Saturday's clash with Crystal Palace. "It's not to say that we're not looking, it's not to say that if

something comes up we can't do it because we can and there's support to do it.

"But it has to be the right thing for us as well. It's a complicated window so you can imagine in a week where you've got three games in eight days, my focus is on the players that are here."

Just 24 hours after Fulham were beaten 3-2 at West Ham in Potter's first victory since replacing the sacked Julen Lopetegui, Cot-

tagers boss Silva reiterated that Muniz is not for sale. Brazilian forward Muniz, 23, has scored four times in 22 games this term in all competitions. "No not at all," Silva said when asked if any clubs have been in contact for Muniz.

"We are not open to listen to anything about Rodrigo and it's better if no one contacts us because it will be a quick and easy answer from us. "There's no chance at all to even start to talk to clubs."