

To subscribe
GULF TIMES
Newspaper
Please call
444 666 35



CRICKET | Page 2

Rizwan and Shakeel guide Pakistan in Multan Test



TENNIS | Page 3

Sabalenka into Australian Open fourth round as Alcaraz shines

To advertise here,
PLEASE CALL
444 666 21

Saturday, January 18, 2025
Rajab 18, 1446 AH

GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

Premier League title battle not a two-horse race, says coach Arteta

Page 4

DOHA INTERNATIONAL EQUESTRIAN TOUR

Qatari riders shine, British sweep in CSI4* 1.50m class

Claiming her second title on successive days was Millie Allen, riding grey gelding Clearround IL

By Sports Reporter
Doha

British riders' completed a podium sweep in the CSI4* 1.50m class, while Qatar riders impressed in the CSI* events during the second round of the Doha International Equestrian Tour 2025 yesterday.

In the day's feature event, British riders stood out on the vast Longines outdoor arena of Al Shaqab under lights with as many as eight riders qualifying for the jump off.

Claiming her second title on successive days was Millie Allen, riding grey gelding Clearround IL Mondo Z to a fabulous error-free winning routine in 35.57 seconds. She finished ahead of compatriot Ellen Whitaker, who astride bay mare Korlenski finished his round in 37.42 seconds. Great Britain's famous rider Scott Brash, on chestnut mare Hello Folie, settled for third after clocking 37.58 seconds. The winners were crowned by Saeed Salem al-Aida, member of the Organising Committee.

Meanwhile, Emanuele Gaudiano continued to domination at Al Shaqab as the Italian won the CSI4* - Faults & Time - 1.45m class. Gaudiano rode Vasco 118, a darkbay stallion, to claim the top podium place with a swift and flawless routine in 54.28 seconds.

Allen on bay mare Quick Diamant HR had to be content with the second spot after clocking 56.26 seconds, while Austrian Gerfried Puck astride stallion Idiaal Special HJ ended up in third, clocking 58.83 seconds. The winners were crowned by Bader bin Mohammed al-Darwish, Vice-Chairman of Organising Committee of Doha International Tour.

Germany's Philipp Weishaupt also showed his liking for glorious Al Shaqab arena to win the first and third podium places in the CSI2* Jump Off 1.35m class. Weishaupt combining superbly with Callao L, a grey gelding, registered the best jump-off time of 33.33 seconds, and rode darkbay gelding Poivre Bleu du Gibet to clock 33.55 secs for the third place.

Ingigo Lopez De La Osa Franco of Monaco, astride bay stallion Golden Diamond was second with a time of 33.45 seconds. The winners were crowned by Ibrahim al-



Abdullah bin Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani astride grey mare Cassandra is thrilled after winning the CSI1* - Faults & Time - 1.10m class during the second round of the Doha International Equestrian Tour at Al Shaqab yesterday.

Amadi, Director of Creativity Department at Al Kass Sports.

Meanwhile, Roberto Previtali of Italy continued his good show in the second round as he claimed the CSI2* - Faults & Time - 1.45m class on bay stallion Hachiko, clocking a flawless ride in best time of 57 seconds. Great Britain's Ellen Whitaker claimed the second place astride bay stallion Quainton X-Rated with a time of 58.08 seconds, while Frenchman Antoine Ermann on bay gelding Pegasus Dawsons Flex was third in 58.33 seconds. Hamza al-Kuwari, member of the Organising Committee, honoured the winners.

CSI* TITLE FOR ABDULLAH BIN TAMIM BIN HAMAD AL-THANI

The CSI1* - Faults & Time - 1.10m class was bagged by Abdullah bin Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, who rode grey mare Cassandra 352 with ease and elegance to finish flawless best in 49.36 seconds.

Moroccan Achraf Oualla on bay gelding

Diamant D Amour was a close second in 49.89 seconds, while Libyan rider Shaheen Abu Green finished third with bay mare Henriette with a time of 50.89 seconds. The winners were crowned by Abdulrahman al-Kaabi, member of the Organising Committee.

The following CSI1* - Faults & Time - 1.20m class saw a top performance from Qatari rider Hussain Ali al-Kaabi, who excelled on bay mare Contenta Della Verdina and clocked 58.1 seconds to claim the top podium place.

Egyptian Naden Asaal, riding bay mare Happy Road, was second in 62.02, while Saudi rider Foonon Alhumaidan on bay gelding Underline des Marais finished third with a time of 62.4 seconds. The winners of the class were honoured by Abdullah al-Qashouti, Marketing and Communications Manager of Doha International Tour.

FUTURE RIDERS STAND OUT

In the Future Riders' National Competi-



Britain's Millie Allen, riding grey gelding Clearround IL Mondo Z, in action en route to winning the CSI4* 1.50m class yesterday.



Bader bin Mohammed al-Darwish, Vice-Chairman of Organising Committee of Doha International Tour, poses with CSI4* - Faults & Time - 1.45m class winner Emanuele Gaudiano, runner-up Millie Allen, third-placed Gerfried Puck.



The podium winners of the CSI1* - Faults & Time - 1.20m class Hussain Ali al-Kaabi of Qatar, Naden Asaal of Egypt and Foonon Alhumaidan of Saudi pose with Abdullah al-Qashouti, Marketing and Communications Manager of Doha International Tour.

tion - Optimum Time - 0.80m class held at the Longines Indoor Arena, Khalifa bin Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani excelled once again on his trusted mount Zion II, returning flawless and fastest routine in 60.31 seconds to claim the top podium place.

The second spot was shared by Amna

Jassim al-Sumaiti, riding Zorro, and by Hassan Ali Almarhoon on Anyway II. Both clocked a similar 60.37 seconds. Khalifa Khalid al-Naimi astride Irbal des Maronniers finished third in of 59.61 seconds. Mohammed Jaber al-Khayaren, Event Director, Tour, honoured the winners.

MOTORSPORT

Al-Rajhi takes maiden Dakar crown, al-attiyah finishes fourth

Reuters
Shubaytah, Saudi Arabia

Local hero Yazeed al-Rajhi secured his first Dakar title yesterday, finishing the 12-stage rally almost four minutes ahead of his closest competitor Henk Lategan, while Red Bull KTM's Daniel Sanders maintained his lead to win in the motorcycle category.

Five-times Dakar winner Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah of Qatar finished second on the day to take fourth place overall.

South Africa's Lategan, who lost his lead on Thursday and was trailing al-Rajhi by over six minutes at the start of stage 12 in Shubaytah, made a fast start but was unable to catch up with the Saudi Arabian in the shorter 61km (38 miles) special.

The off-road endurance event, which moved to Saudi Arabia in 2020 after a decade in South America, was originally held between Paris and the Senegalese capital Dakar. It moved out of the Europe-to-Africa route format after the 2007 edition over security concerns.

Overdrive's al-Rajhi, who became the first Saudi Arabian to win the Dakar Rally, received a rousing welcome at the finish line with teammates lifting the 43-year-old on their shoulders.

"I'm very, very happy to do it. It's not an easy race, it's the toughest one that I've done in 11 years," al-Rajhi said. "For sure, we've made a lot of records today. The first Saudi driver to win and also in the last 25



Yazeed al-Rajhi celebrates after winning the Dakar Rally title in the car category at the end of the 12th and last stage in Shubaytah, Saudi Arabia, yesterday. (AFP)

years no private team beat a factory team but we did it this time!"

Toyota's Lategan, who finished three minutes and 57 seconds behind al-Rajhi, said he gained valuable experience from the race. "I sat out a year and to jump back in and immediately be fighting with the top guys is unbelievable. We had a great race. It's sad to lose it by such a small margin with everything that's happened but we'll come back fighting," he added.

Brazilian Lucas Moraes, who fell out of the championship race after losing nearly three hours last Saturday, won

the stage finishing 33 seconds ahead of Qatar's al-Attiyah.

In the motorcycle category, Sanders left second-placed Spaniard Tosha Schareina eight minutes and 50 seconds behind in the overall rankings to become the second Australian to win the Dakar title after Toby Price.

"When I came out of the dunes... I could see the bivouac and I just got instant chills through my whole body, I was super nervous. I couldn't believe it. All the emotions started coming through and I could see the finishing line," Sanders said.



The Dacia Sandriders' Nasser al-Attiyah and co-driver Edouard Boulanger after Stage 12 of the Dakar Rally in Saudi Arabia yesterday. (Reuters)

"It's the biggest race in the world of motorbikes and off-roading. To win the six-day international enduro and now the Dakar, it's just ticked off all the goals for my career and everything I've wanted to achieve."

Second-placed Schareina congratulated Sanders on his victory.

"I'm super happy for Daniel, he has done a great job and had a great two weeks. I think the 10 minutes more or less he took on the first day allowed him to control the race from then," the Spaniard added.

Defending champion Ricky Brabec finished fifth overall, with the American trailing Sanders by over 12 minutes.

CRICKET

Shakeel and Rizwan lead Pakistan's fine recovery in fog-hit first Test in Multan

AFP
Multan

Saud Shakeel and Mohammad Rizwan hit unbeaten half-centuries to lead a Pakistan fightback in the first Test against the West Indies yesterday as the hosts reached 143-4 at the close of a fog-hit opening day.

When bad light in Multan ended play with just 41.3 overs bowled, Shakeel was on 56 for his ninth half-century and Rizwan was 51 not out for his 11th.

The pair added 97 after coming together with Pakistan in real trouble at 46-4.

The left-right combination of Shakeel and Rizwan negotiated the three-spinner West Indies attack with aplomb after fast bowler Jayden Seales initially left the home team struggling.

"This pitch is tough to bat on," said Rizwan.

"We batted with caution and just took advantage of loose balls. It's tough to judge what should be a good total, but we will target 300 plus."

Sensing the dry and grassless Multan Stadium pitch will be tricky for batting on the last two days - and with spin set to

play a major role - the home team opted to bat after winning the toss.

But play was delayed because of early morning fog compounded by poor air quality, resulting in limited visibility and wiping out the first session.

Shakeel has so far cracked four boundaries while Rizwan has seven hits to the fence.

Seales finished with 3-21 off 10 overs. "My aim was to build pressure and get wickets," he said. "I sense spin will play a major role on this pitch going forward."

Both teams started with three spinners and just one frontline fast bowler, and the tourists opened the bowling with left-arm spinner Gudakesh Motie alongside Seales.

It was Seales who provided the breakthrough, forcing an edge off debutant Muhammad Hurraira to wicketkeeper Tevin Imlach in the sixth over. Hurraira scored six.

Three overs later, Motie dismissed skipper Shan Masood off a faint edge to the wicketkeeper for 11, before Seales trapped Kamran Ghulam leg-before with a sharp incoming delivery for five.

It became 46-4 when Babar Azam edged Seales behind the wicket for eight, continuing a poor run of scores at home

for Pakistan's premier batter. Seales said yesterday: "It's about backing the skills and preparation we had in Islamabad and just knowing if we get the ball in the right areas we could get lucky. From me it's all about being able to hit that length as much as possible to draw the batsman forward and draw false shots and bowl as few bad balls as possible."

He added: "I have been trying to develop my other balls and strengthen my stock ball."

When asked about his county stint, he said: "It allowed me to express myself a lot more, understand the conditions and understand myself as a player and a bowler. We just need to continue bowling good balls on this pitch. There is something in it for spinners and fast bowlers. Keeping them to probably 250 will be good on this pitch."

The two-match series is part of the World Test Championship. Pakistan currently rank eighth and the West Indies ninth and last.

BRIEF SCORES (First Test, Day 1)
Stumps Pakistan 143 for 4 (Shakeel 56*, Rizwan 51*, Seales 3-21) **vs West Indies** (yet to bat)



Pakistan's batsmen Mohammad Rizwan (left) and Saud Shakeel run between the wickets during the first day of the first Test against the West Indies at the Multan Cricket Stadium yesterday. (AFP)

GOLF

McIlroy 9 shots off Dubai pace, Rahm misses cut

FOUR-TIME WINNER MCILROY MIXED 3 BIRDIES WITH 2 BOGEYS

AFP
Dubai

Rory McIlroy will need a spectacular weekend to win a third straight Dubai Desert Classic title after slipping nine shots behind halfway leader Ewen Ferguson yesterday, while Jon Rahm missed the cut.

Four-time champion McIlroy mixed three birdies with two bogeys to card a one-under-par second round of 71 and sit on three-under for the tournament.

The world number three is playing his first event since winning the DP World Tour Championship in Dubai last November.

"A little frustrated. But I thought the conditions were a little tricky," he said.

"Get out there early tomorrow and try to post a score and get myself up the leaderboard and give myself a chance for Sunday."

McIlroy, who started the tournament with a two-under 70, bounced back from an opening bogey with a birdie on the second hole but missed several chances.

A five-foot birdie putt slid by on the short par-four 17th, but McIlroy made a birdie on the final green.

"The greens will continue to get a little bit firmer, and will put such a premium on putting it in the fairway and hitting a lot of greens," added McIlroy.

Scotsman Ferguson snatched a one-shot lead over Daniel Hillier with an eye-catching finish.

He followed a birdie on the penultimate hole with a stunning approach shot on the 18th to set up a closing eagle.

Ferguson leads on 12-under overall after signing for a seven-under 65.

World number 223 Hillier also made a brilliant eagle on the par-five last hole, finishing off a bogey-free 65. The New Zealander will head into the weekend chasing just his second title on the European Tour, after his 2023 British Masters victory.

Rahm struggles

Rahm opened with a three-under first round but paid for a terrible start to his second day to miss out on the weekend.

The two-time major champion, starting on the back nine, made double-bogeys on both the 12th and 18th holes and eventually carded a five-over-par 77 to finish two shots below the cut line.



Scotland's Ewen Ferguson plays a shot on the first hole during day two of the Dubai Desert Classic 2025 at the Emirates Golf Club in Dubai yesterday. (AFP)



Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland looks on after a shot during day two of the Dubai Desert Classic 2025 yesterday. (AFP)

"Not the way you want to start the year, but if there's any positive side of it, it is the beginning of the year," said LIV star Rahm, who is hoping to play well enough on the European Tour to automatically qualify for Luke Donald's Ryder Cup team later this year.

"There's a lot of golf and a lot of months to look forward to."

"I have a pretty clear idea of what I need to work on."

Viktor Hovland, who showed signs of form late last year after a difficult season, also missed the cut after adding a 73 to his disappointing 75 on Thursday.

His 2023 European Ryder Cup-winning teammates Tommy Fleetwood and Robert MacIntyre remain in the chasing pack, on four-under and five-under overall respectively.

Tyrrell Hatton, who plays alongside Rahm in LIV Golf, is only four strokes off the top of the leaderboard in a tie for third place after firing 65.

SPOTLIGHT

India cricketers to curb family time on tour after Australia defeat

AFP
New Delhi

India's cricket board has capped the amount of time players can spend with their families on tour after a string of Test defeats including a 3-1 drubbing in Australia this month.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) issued new policies on Thursday for the senior men's team detailing guidelines to "promote discipline, unity and a positive team environment".

As part of the new guidelines, families will be allowed to stay with the players for a maximum of two weeks during overseas tours of 45 days or more.

The guidelines, seen by AFP yesterday, also make participation in domestic cricket "mandatory to be eligible for selection in the national team".

Non-compliance could result in disciplinary action including fines and a ban on participating in the lucrative Indian Premier League (IPL), Indian broadcaster NDTV reported.

The new rules come on the heels of sharp criticism of the board, which critics have accused of allowing a "star culture" to thrive.

"The cricket board needs to stop acting like admirers and put their foot down," retired Indian batting great Sunil Gavaskar told news channel *India Today* earlier this month after the Australia tour.

Top players, including captain Rohit Sharma and star batsman Virat Kohli, have not played in the domestic circuit in years.

Both have come under fire for failing to deliver wins in recent bilateral series. Rohit, who missed the only India win in Australia because of the birth of his second child, managed 31 runs in three matches. Kohli scored one century but managed only 90 runs across his eight other innings.

The new BCCI rules prohibit players from travelling separately to and from matches and practice sessions.

"Separate travel arrangements are discouraged to maintain discipline and team cohesion," the board said, adding that all team members were "required to stay for the entire duration of the scheduled practices".

"This rule ensures commitment and fosters a strong work ethic within the team," said the board.

India's next Test tour is slated for June in England, where they will play five matches.

FOCUS

Former champ Jimenez on top again at Hualalai

Reuters
Hualalai

Spain's Miguel Angel Jimenez, a three-time champion of the Mitsubishi Electric Championship at Hualalai, rolled in a long eagle putt and wound up tied for the lead after the event's first round on Thursday.

In the PGA Tour Champions season opener at Hualalai Golf Club in Ka'upulehu-Kona, Hawaii, Jimenez and Argentina's Ricardo Gonzalez each shot 7-under-par 65.

Germany's Alex Cejka and Canada's Stephen Ames share third place at 6 under.

Brett Quigley, Tim O'Neal, Joe Durant, Fiji's Vijay Singh and South Africa's Ernie Els are tied for fifth at 5 under.

Gonzalez and O'Neal, both first-time winners on the circuit last year, are competing in the event for the first time.

Defending champion Steven Alker of New Zealand is tied for 20th at 2 under.

Jimenez's eagle came at the par-5 10th hole, in the middle of a bogey-free round.

"(I) still need to work, need to adjust my game because I (am) still missing some shots," said Jimenez, who won this event in 2015, 2020 and 2022 in 10 previous starts.

"Every shot I miss, I miss in the right place, it's important. Apart from that, the game is OK, quite



good. We are dealing with that."

As for his continued success at Hualalai, Jimenez said: "Everybody wants to come here and play the tournament. It's a little far away in the middle of the Pacific, but when you are here, it's a beautiful place. Nice golf course, nice people around. That's what you need. That's what makes you feel good."

Gonzalez's bogey-free round featured three birdies on the front nine and four more on the back nine, including one to conclude the day.

"I played solid, especially my putting," said Gonzalez, the 2024 PGA Tour Champions Rookie of the Year.

"Last year was good (overall). This year (I) start good again. And when the putter's hot, all is different, you play more relaxed. My tee shot is in the middle of the fairway and just some good shots to the flag. But I think the key is the putter today?"

PGA TOUR EVENT NEAR LA FIRE DISASTER TO BE MOVED: OFFICIAL

Los Angeles: Next month's Genesis Invitational PGA Tour event due to be staged near the carnage of the Los Angeles fire disaster at Pacific Palisades will be switched to another location, officials confirmed yesterday. A statement from the PGA Tour and Genesis organisers said a new venue for the February 13-16 tournament at Riviera Country Club - which will also host the 2028 Olympics golf tournament - would be revealed "in the coming days". "The PGA Tour's focus continues to

be on the safety and well-being of those affected by the unprecedented natural disaster in Greater Los Angeles," the PGA Tour said in a statement.

"We are grateful for the life-saving efforts of first responders and the tireless work being done to put an end to the tragic wildfires. "We have determined that The Genesis Invitational 2025 will be played at an alternate location the week of February 10-16. A venue update and additional tournament informa-

tion will be provided in the coming days." The future of this year's Genesis Invitational had been in doubt since devastating fires erupted across Los Angeles last week, leveling nearby Pacific Palisades and other areas in a trail of destruction which has so far left at least 24 people dead and destroyed some 12,000 structures. Riviera did not suffer any damage in the fires, but did fall just within the boundaries of the mandatory evacuation zone.

TENNIS

Battling Sabalenka into AO 4th round, Alcaraz sparkles

Grand Slam king Novak Djokovic was in vintage form for his late match against Tomas Machac



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka reacts during her third-round match against Denmark's Clara Tauson at the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters)



Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates winning his third-round match against Czech Republic's Tomas Machac at the Australian Open yesterday. (Reuters)

Reuters
Melbourne

Defending champion Aryna Sabalenka overcame a wobbly display to reach the Australian Open fourth round while Novak Djokovic and Carlos Alcaraz were at their dazzling best on a warm but windy yesterday at Melbourne Park.

Third seed Coco Gauff swept through in straight sets in the evening, but it was the end of the road for twice champion Naomi Osaka after an abdominal strain forced her to withdraw from her match against Belinda Bencic.

Djokovic was in vintage form for his late match against Tomas Machac, the 37-year-old ramping up his serve to crush the Czech 6-1 6-4 6-4 and remain on course for his 25th Grand Slam title and 11th in Melbourne.

"Best match of the tournament for me. I didn't have too many drops in the concentration and the level of tennis," he said.

"I think I prepared myself very well and played a terrific match."

Djokovic is likely to have to beat Alcaraz in the last eight and the French Open and Wimbledon champion continued to carve his way through the draw despite dropping his first set of the tournament in his 6-2 6-4 6-7(3) 6-2 win over Nuno Borges.

"I'm just really happy with my level," the 21-year-old said. "Could be better. I made a lot of mistakes that I shouldn't have... but in general, I'm just happy and have things to improve in approaching the next match."

Second seed Alexander Zverev continued to fly under the radar in search of his first major title, as the German eased past Briton Jacob Fearnley 6-3 6-4 6-4.

Blazing sunshine and intermittent gusts of wind caused problems for some players early in the day but they might look back on the cooler conditions with fondness as the temperatures soar over the next few days.

Sabalenka was one of those who



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz speaks at a press conference on day six of the Australian Open yesterday. (AFP)

struggled but she came away unscathed from a 7-6(5) 6-4 victory over Clara Tauson that kept the Belarusian on track for her third straight title.

"Conditions are really tough for serving, the balls are heavy and the surface slow," said Sabalenka, who conceded four breaks in the open-

ing set. "I was playing this match thinking, 'girl, you're really tough! So many times, I thought 'I'm done', but I was like, 'keep pushing!'"

Up next for Sabalenka is a meeting with Mirra Andreeva after the 17-year-old Russian moved past Magdalena Frech 6-2 1-6 6-2.

Teenagers made a big impression in the men's draw in the first week of the tournament with a trio of Grand Slam debutants taking out top 10 seeds.

Czech 19-year-old Jakub Mensik, who ousted sixth seed Casper Ruud in the second round, had match points against Alejandro Davidovich Fokina yesterday but the Spaniard rallied for a 3-6 4-6 7-6(7) 6-4 6-2 win.

"I had decided this year to fight every point. It doesn't matter what the result is. Don't look at the result," said Davidovich Fokina, who also came from two sets down to win his second round match against Felix Auger-Aliassime.

Tommy Paul, the men's 12th seed, romped past his Spanish opponent Roberto Carballes Baena 7-6(0) 6-2 6-0 to raise the Stars and Stripes in the fourth round with five of his compatriots bidding to join him today.

Gauff, a semi-finalist last year, ensured a presence for the United States in the women's last 16 by dismantling Leylah Fernandez 6-4

6-2 to book a clash with Bencic. "It felt great," said the 2023 US Open champion.

"It definitely was efficient. I thought I played well. I thought it was good quality tennis from both ends."

Her fellow American Jessica Pegula crashed out, however, the seventh seed going down 7-6(3) 6-1 to Serbian Olga Danilovic in the final match on Rod Laver Arena.

Bencic progressed when Osaka, who also pulled out midway through the Auckland final earlier this month due to the same abdominal injury, was unable to continue after losing the first set on a tiebreak.

"It's not fantastic and I'm feeling not great, not bad. In the middle somewhere," Osaka said.

In the late men's matches, Ugo Humbert took an all-French tie when Arthur Fils retired while trailing in the fourth set. British 15th seed Jack Draper survived a late-night scare to squeeze past Australia's Aleks Vukic 6-4 2-6 5-7 7-6(5) 7-6(8).

'IT SUCKS': STOMACH INJURY ENDS OSAKA'S RUN AT THE AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Melbourne: Two-time Australian Open champion Naomi Osaka said "it sucks" after retiring yesterday with a stomach muscle injury during her third-round match against Belinda Bencic in Melbourne. Osaka needed treatment at 6-5 in a first set which she went on to lose on a tiebreak to her Swiss opponent, before shaking hands and leaving the court.

The former number one had a disrupted build-up to the first Grand Slam of the year, retiring from the final in Auckland, again with an abdominal injury.

"I mean, it was a little hectic trying to manage it because obviously my

draw was quite tough," Osaka told reporters at Melbourne Park.

"But we were also doing everything we could. I was going to therapy every day and stuff like that into the night. So the days have been very long for me."

Japan's Osaka came to Melbourne happy and in confident mood, saying that her injury was improving.

The four-time Grand Slam champion reached the third round of a Slam for the first time since returning last year after the birth of daughter Shai with fine wins over Caroline Garcia and Karolina Muchova.

Both went to three sets and clearly took a toll.

"Obviously after my last match it got way worse," said Osaka.

"It was just, I guess, a little inevitable," she said. "But I think the competitor in me just wanted to see it through until the end."

Osaka led 5-2 in the first set against Bencic before becoming hampered on her serve and in her movement, allowing the Tokyo Olympic champion to draw level and take it to a tie break, which she won 7-3.

Osaka could not continue and left John Cain Arena smiling and waving to fans but feeling disappointed.

"If I could have served, then I could have potentially won and I could

have maybe gone far in the tournament," she said.

"I was in the final in Auckland, too, and it sucks. I also think I could have maybe won that tournament, my first tournament win back."

"I just hope that I can figure it out and figure out how to get healthy in time."

Bencic will face either American third seed Coco Gauff or Canada's Leylah Fernandez in the fourth round.

"It's not the way you want this match to end. I thought it was getting to be a good match," Bencic said. "Hopefully she will be fine soon and can play well for the rest of this year."



Japan's Naomi Osaka leaves the court after retiring due to injury during her women's singles match against Switzerland's Belinda Bencic. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Kipchoge eyes record-extending fifth London Marathon title in April

Reuters
London

Former marathon world record holder Eliud Kipchoge will race the London Marathon in April, organisers and the record four-time winning athlete said yesterday.

The 2016 and 2020 Olympic marathon champion, who holds an unofficial world record as the only person to have run a marathon distance inside two hours, returns to London for the first time since 2020.

"I am excited to share that my next race will be the TCS London Marathon," Kipchoge said in a statement.

"It is a race that holds a very special place in my heart... After a good period of rest, I have returned to training with renewed energy and focus. I feel re-fuelled to give my very best in London."

Kenya's Kipchoge, 40, is a record five-time winner of the World Marathon Majors series, the highest tier of marathons in the world that comprises annual races for the



cities of Tokyo, Boston, London, Sydney, Berlin, Chicago and New York. He was the men's marathon world record holder from 2018-2023, until compatriot Kelvin Kiptum surpassed him at the 2023 Chicago Marathon.

"Eliud Kipchoge is the greatest marathon runner of this or any other age," said London Marathon CEO Hugh Brasher.

"Indeed, you could make a compelling case that his incredible stretch of dominance in marathon racing for such a lengthy period makes him the greatest athlete we

have ever seen. His four victories here in London is a record in the elite men's category and, after five years away, it's so exciting to be welcoming him back... for our historic 45th edition."

Kipchoge will face Sebastian Sawe, who last month won on his marathon debut in Valencia, reigning Berlin Marathon champion Milkesa Mengesha and Abdi Nageeye, who won the latest edition of the New York City Marathon.

Jacob Kiplimo will also race in men's field on April 27, making his marathon debut.

RUGBY

Watson retires on medical grounds

Reuters
London

England wing Anthony Watson has been forced to retire from professional rugby on medical grounds, his club Leicester Tigers said yesterday.

Watson, 30, has earned 56 caps for England and been a part of three Six Nations-winning campaigns since making his international debut in 2014.

The former London Irish and Bath player missed the 2023 World Cup with a calf injury, and has made only five appearances for Leicester this season due to Achilles and back issues.

"To be able to play for England 56 times is a dream come true. All I wanted to do at the start was play for England once and to be able to do it as many times as I have fills me with pride," Watson said in a statement released by England Rugby.

"I can look back with so many fond memories and a smile on my face. I am happy with what I've achieved and I'm ready for what's next."

England head coach Steve



Borthwick congratulated Watson on a successful professional career.

"I was fortunate to have coached Anthony both at Leicester Tigers and England. He is a humble, hard-working professional man who is universally liked and admired in the game," Borthwick said.

"Anthony not only brought his incredible talent to the England shirt every time he played, but he was also a player who was immensely proud to represent his country. We all wish him the best in the next chapter and thank him for everything he did for the England team."

Maher says rugby union must do more to grow game

Social media sensation Ilona Maher has said rugby union needs to undergo a culture shift if the sport is to attract new fans.

Maher, who won rugby sevens bronze with the USA at the 2024 Paris Olympics, has more than eight million followers across Instagram and TikTok, making her the world's most followed rugby player. "It is great having all these record numbers, but what we want is for them to keep coming back for the next game," Maher said at a press conference.

"One and done is not enough. I am sprinkling a little bit here. But we need people to keep coming. It is not just me alone."

Maher urged rugby to break its self-imposed shackles, saying: "We are a very stoic sport in a way. I would love to see more personalities in the men's game."

"There is a culture in rugby we need to shift. It's an amazing sport, but also an old sport where the same things have been happening for years. We keep talking about how do we get young people into the game. Those people are online. We have to shift our mindset if the sport is going to evolve."

MATCH REPORT

Al Nasr claim Qatar-UAE Super Cup

By Sports Reporter
Dubai

An Ali Mabkhout brace saw Al Nasr of United Arab Emirates outclass Qatar SC 5-1 to claim the Qatar-UAE Super Cup in the second edition at the Al Maktoum Stadium in Dubai yesterday.

Buoyed by the presence of their home fans, the UAE President's Cup runners-up Al Nasr gained an early breakthrough and kept up the pressure on the rivals to emerge victorious. Mabkhout scored in the 13th & 71st minutes, while Manolo Gabbiadini (45+3'), Abdoulaye Toure (81st minute), and Ahmed Abdulla Mohamad Jashak (88th minute - Penalty) added the others goals for Al Nasr. For Qatar SC, Ben Malango pulled one back in the 74th minute.

Al Nasr caught Qatar SC off-guard at the start when they moved in from an unmarked right side of the danger area where Gabbiadini provided a fine assist and Mabkhout made a successful strike after Moussa Ndiaye's kick was blocked by Qatar SC goalkeeper Satea Abdelnasser but the ball bounced out.

The lead was doubled by Al Nasr with Adel Taarabt slipping in a through pass between Qatar SC defenders for Gabbiadini to score in the added time of the first half (2-0).

Qatar SC came back with more intent after the break looking to attack and in the 54th minute a Carlinhos strike hit the bottom of the right post. Carlinhos made another attempt a minute later but this time Al Nasr goalkeeper Ahmed Mohamed Shambieh leapt to punch the ball over.

The tussle continued as the two sides shared



Al Nasr players celebrate with the trophy at the Al Maktoum Stadium in Dubai yesterday.

exchanges before Mabkhout returned to encash on an Abdoulaye Toure cross from the left to score his second goal, the third for his team. Toure had done well to grab a long ball on a counter before making the cross.

Qatar SC hit back three minutes later as Malango picked on a Badr Benoun assist to strike from the centre of the box (1-3).

The visitors couldn't benefit greatly as Al Nasr pressed on and Toure struck after failing

to beat Qatar SC goalkeeper in his first try but turned around to get to the ball again and score.

A penalty decision added to Qatar SC woes towards the end after Qatar SC goalkeeper charged on an advancing Jashak. The player soon stepped up to score from the spot make it 5-1 in Al Nasr's favour.

The inaugural edition had seen Al Arabi triumph in the Super Cup, overcoming Sharjah of the UAE with a solitary goal.

SPOTLIGHT

Striker Haaland signs record new City deal until 2034

AFP
London

Erling Haaland has signed a blockbuster new deal at Manchester City to keep the prolific forward at the Etihad until 2034, the Premier League champions announced yesterday. The 24-year-old striker's existing contract was due to expire in June 2027 but he has now committed his future to the club for the next decade.

The deal is the longest in the Premier League, eclipsing the nine-year contract Cole Palmer signed with Chelsea year, and Haaland will reportedly earn about £500,000 (\$610,000) per week. A post on the club's X account read: "Erling's here to stay! We're thrilled to announce Erling Haaland has extended his contract at City to 2034."

City boss Pep Guardiola said the new deal for Haaland was "exceptional news".

The Norwegian made an instant impact after joining City from Borussia Dortmund in 2022 and his overall tally for the club stands at a remarkable 111 goals in 126 games. Haaland, who had been linked with a move to Real Madrid, said he is "City no matter what" after committing his future to the club.

"I am really happy to have signed my new contract and to be able to look forward to spending even more time at this great club," said the powerful forward.

"Manchester City is a special club, full of fantastic people with amazing supporters, and it's the type of environment that helps bring the best out of everybody."

Haaland has put pen to paper just two months after Guardiola's decision to sign a new two-year deal of his own, which is set to take him beyond a decade at the club. "It's exceptional news for all of us," the City manager said, ahead of a weekend trip to relegation-threatened Ipswich.

"When one player decides to sign this type of contract, never done before, it's because he wants to show how desperate he is to be here."

Haaland fired 52 goals in all competitions to help the club win a Champions League, Premier League and FA Cup treble in



his first season at the Etihad, in 2022/23.

That included a record 36 league goals in a Premier League season, two more than the long-standing mark shared by Alan Shearer and Andy Cole.

Haaland scored a further 38 goals in all competitions last season as City won a record-breaking fourth consecutive top-flight league title to extend their dominance of English football.

The length of the new deal, which reportedly removes a release clause in the original contract, means Haaland could threaten Shearer's overall record of 260 Premier League goals.

Haaland's decision to commit his long-term future to City is a major coup for the club during a season in which they have unexpectedly struggled on the pitch.

They are sixth in the Premier League table, 12 points behind leaders Liverpool and realistically out of the title race.

"I am really confident that we will turn things around," said the forward, who has scored 21 goals in total so far this season.

"Things have been difficult as we are so used to winning games, but also it is a challenge for us."

The deal also appears to be a huge show of faith from the player at a time when the club is waiting to learn the outcome of a major disciplinary case.

City faced an independent commission hearing last year to examine more than 100 charges from the Premier League concerning alleged breaches of its financial rules, charges the club have always strenuously denied.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Title battle is not a two-horse race: Arsenal's Arteta

Gunners are four points behind Liverpool, who have a game in hand

AFP
London

Mikel Arteta said yesterday the Premier League title race cannot be boiled down to a straight shootout between Arsenal and Liverpool as he urged his players to relish the battle.

The Gunners moved to within four points of Arne Slot's table-topping Reds following their 2-1 comeback victory against Tottenham at the Emirates on Wednesday. Liverpool had dropped two points against high-flying Nottingham Forest the previous day, though they still have a game in hand over their rivals.

Chelsea are 10 points behind Liverpool following a slump, while champions Manchester City are a dozen points off the pace.

But Forest are just two points behind Arsenal and in-form Newcastle are also in the mix. "I don't think so," Gunners manager Arteta said when asked if Liverpool and Arsenal were in a straight fight for the title.

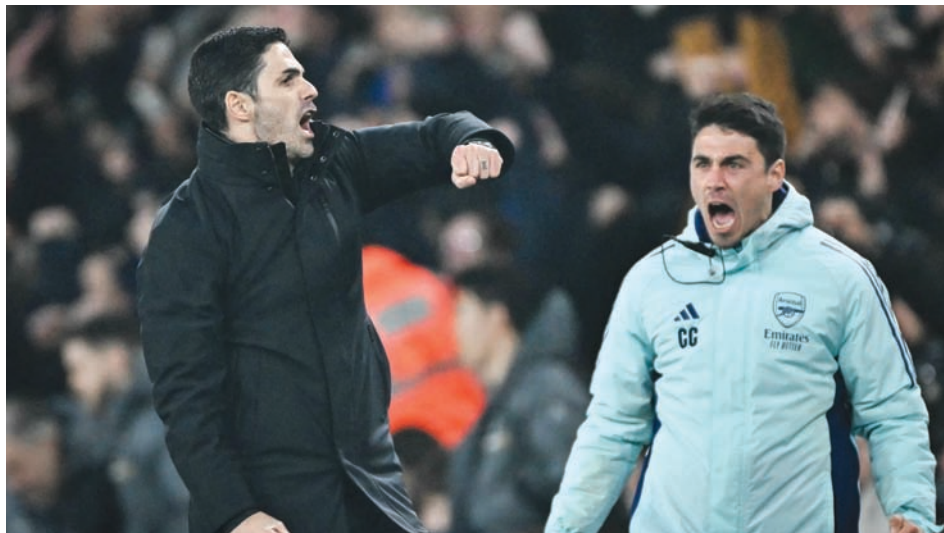
"When you look at every game in the Premier League and the margins and how teams are winning football matches, it can go either way.

"In two or three weeks we could be talking about something different. We are still in January so it is going to be a long, long run."

Arsenal host Aston Villa at the Emirates today fresh from their comeback triumph over Spurs, which breathed fresh life into their bid to land a first league title in two decades.

"If you want to be fighting for the top trophies with the top teams for 11 months, like we have been doing for the last two-and-a-half years, you have to enjoy these moments, circumstances or challenges and the pressure that comes with it because it's the beauty of it," said Arteta. "We are playing to win and that's exactly where we want to be."

The 42-year-old Spaniard added: "It's always important when we are able to win and capitalise on other teams dropping points, firstly because we won, and secondly because for the rest it's not what they wanted. It has been a good week. But we need many more of those at the



Arsenal's manager Mikel Arteta (left) celebrates after his team's win over Tottenham Hotspur in the Premier League match at the Emirates Stadium in London on Wednesday. (AFP)

moment because of where we are (in the table)!"

Arsenal are without long-term absentee Bukayo Saka and Gabriel Jesus following his season-ending cruciate ligament injury. Jesus' injury leaves Kai Havertz as the club's sole recognised forward and Arteta reiterated his desire to make a move in the January transfer window.

LIVERPOOL'S SLOT BRACED FOR TOUGH TEST AGAINST BRENTFORD

Arne Slot says the second half of the season will be even tougher than the first as he targets a record-equalling 20th English top-flight title for Liverpool in his first campaign at Anfield.

The Reds have been the outstanding team in England and Europe this season, losing just two of their 31 games in all competitions. Four points clear of second-placed Arsenal with a game in hand, they face a testing match against mid-table Brentford on Saturday.

The London side, who drew 2-2 with Manchester City this week, have the joint-highest number of home wins in the league this season

- equal with Arsenal and Liverpool on seven.

"This season, maybe more than every other season, shows the strength of every single team that's in the league," Slot said.

"In the second half of the season that it's even harder to win your games than in the first half of the season, because teams are longer together, managers are working longer with the team, you've played already once against each other so maybe there's a different game plan, some teams bring players in to strengthen the squad and teams are fighting for getting into Europe, winning the league, trying to stay in the league."

Brentford were the opposition in Slot's first home league game in August - a match Liverpool won 2-0. "I already thought, 'If this is going to be the resistance we get every week then this is a more difficult league than the Eredivisie', which I knew before I came but it was proven that day as well," he said.

The Dutchman said Liverpool, who have drawn their past two games, were not obsessing over the table "every second of the day".

Neymar says Mbappe 'jealous' over Messi during PSG spell

Sao Paulo: Brazilian striker Neymar said yesterday that former Paris Saint-Germain teammate Kylian Mbappe became "jealous" of his relationship with Lionel Messi when the Argentine superstar joined the club in 2021.

Speaking on a podcast hosted by former Brazil striker Romario, Neymar blamed a clash of egos for the failure of the three stars to gel during their spell together at the French club. The 32-year-old Neymar, who left PSG for Saudi club Al Hilal in 2023, said he initially got on well with Mbappe when the France international joined him at PSG in 2017. "I had my issues with him, we had a little fight, but he was a boy who at the beginning, when he arrived, was fundamental," Neymar said of Mbappe. "I always told him, I joked with him, that he was going to be one of the best, I always helped him, I talked to him. He came to my house, we went out to dinner together."

But Neymar said Mbappe's behaviour changed when Messi arrived from Barcelona in 2021. Neymar already had a relationship with Messi from their successful stint as teammates

at Barcelona between 2013 and 2017. "We spent some good years together, but then, when Messi arrived, I think he got a little jealous," Neymar said. "He didn't want to share me with anyone and then the fights began, the change of behaviour," he added.

Neymar added that a lack of teamwork lay behind the failure of PSG's superstar trio to fully realise their potential. "You have to realise that you don't play alone. You have to have the others on your side: 'I'm the best, OK', but who's going to give you the ball? You have to have good people who give you the ball," Neymar said. "It was everyone's ego... so it couldn't work. Nowadays, if nobody runs, if nobody helps each other, it's impossible to win," he added.

Meanwhile, Neymar declined to give clues about his future amid recent speculation he may seek a move back to Brazil or Major League Soccer.

Neymar has struggled with injuries in Saudi Arabia and played only a handful of games in 16 months. Neymar said although he remained happy in Saudi Arabia, "in six months, everything can change".

FOCUS

Belgium fire coach Tedesco after disappointing results

AFP
Brussels

Belgium's football association yesterday announced the sacking of national team coach Domenico Tedesco after disappointing performances at Euro 2024 and in the Nations League.

Tedesco was appointed in February 2023 to replace Roberto Martinez and rebuild the squad as the country's "golden generation" departed. Tedesco's team qualified

for Euro 2024 but were eliminated in the last 16 by France, who then beat Belgium twice more in the Nations League as the Red Devils finished third in their group.

They face a relegation play-off against Ukraine in March. Five members of Tedesco's support staff and coaching team were also fired. The RBFA did not announce a timetable for appointing a successor but Belgian media named Frenchmen Rudi Garcia and Thierry Henry as leading candidates. Belgium kick off their 2026 World Cup qualifying campaign with a trip to North Macedonia in June.

FRANKFURT DROP MARMOUSH, CONFIRM MAN CITY TALKS

Eintracht Frankfurt left forward Omar Marmoush out of their matchday squad for the home clash with Borussia Dortmund due to "transfer talks" with Manchester City. Marmoush has been heavily linked with a winter move to City after a stellar first half of the season.

The 25-year-old has scored 15 goals in 17 league games, one fewer than leader Harry Kane, and laid on 10 assists. "Eintracht Frankfurt is currently in talks with another club for the transfer of Omar Marmoush.

The player is therefore not part of the team today," the club wrote on social media just hours before the Dortmund clash.

Speaking before the game, Frankfurt sporting director Markus Kroesche confirmed Marmoush was set "to leave us in the direction of Manchester City." "It looks like Omar will be leaving us and that's why he's not in the squad. We've been in regular discussions with Manchester City for the past few days."

The Egyptian arrived in Frankfurt on a free transfer from Wolfsburg in the summer of 2023.