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Australia on
brink of Test
series sweep
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Bencic wins
first title since
becoming
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GOLF

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MIDDLE EAST RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

Record-breaking 18th win for al-Attiyah at Qatar Rally

Ostberg runner-up for the third time as al-Rawahi rounds off podium places; MERC2 success for al-Aamri

By Sports Reporter
Lusail

Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and his Spanish co-driver Candido Carrera won five of the 13 special stages on the way to a resounding victory in the Qatar International Rally yesterday. A second success of the Qatari's 2025 campaign to win a 20th FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) title also marked his 18th in Qatar from 25 starts and gives him a strong foundation on which to build this year's title challenge in his Autotek-run Skoda Fabia RS. The win was the 88th in his illustrious MERC career.

A delighted al-Attiyah said: "I am really happy to win this race. It is a home rally and we did a good job. I am happy with Candido and the team. It is a nice start for 2025. Just 0.8 (seconds) between me and Mads on the Power Stage. It was a good level."

His new co-driver Carrera earned his second career MERC rally win in the space of three weeks. The Spaniard said: "The start of the new partnership is very good. I am very happy with two victories with Nasser. It's very easy to work with him. It's good for the championship. It's good for me because it's a long time since I was reading the pace notes in English. It's different rallies, very strategic, with the flags and fences. But I am very happy."

On his fourth visit to the event, Mads Ostberg finished as runner-up for a third year in succession after failing to finish on his first appearance in 2022. Punctures on Friday put paid to an aggressive challenge by the Norwegian and his Romanian co-driver Sergiu Itu but the crew won eight of the 13 stages, including a clean sweep of six fastest times over the final day to finish 1min 12.8sec behind Al-Attiyah.

Ostberg said: "Eight stage wins but that doesn't count. It takes only one stage to lose the rally. I have learned that on more than one occasion. It's a shame, but I look at the positives. To be here and to enjoy this rally is really amazing. I take that from here and even just to fight with Nasser on these stages and compare our stage times is really an adventure. I love it. We can see that we have the speed. We just need to nail the strategy. We tried something else this year and it didn't pay off at all. We need to go home and investigate and try again."

Abdulaziz al-Kuwari and Lorcan Moore ceded second to Ostberg on the first stage of the morning but were able to fend off a fierce late challenge from Abdullah al-Rawahi and Ata al-Hmoud to claim the final place on the podium and a vital haul of MERC points in their Citroen C3 by just 3.3 seconds. But the Qatari was handed a five-second penalty yesterday evening and that dropped him to fourth place.

Rakan al-Rashed enjoyed his first appearance in Qatar and managed his pace sensibly over the two days of high-speed action in the northern deserts to finish fifth overall in a Toyota GR Yaris Rally 2 with Portuguese co-driver Hugo Magal-



Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and his co-driver Candido Carrera celebrate after winning the Qatar International Rally at Lusail Boulevard yesterday. Mads Ostberg and Sergiu Itu finished second, while Abdullah al-Rawahi and Ata al-Hmoud were third.



Saad al-Harqan and Mohammed al-Marri excelled on their rallying debuts with the Qatar Motorsport Sports Academy. The rookies guided their Peugeot 208s to 14th and 15th overall with al-Harqan winning the Junior MERC category and second in the MERC4 category. Al-Marri was second in the MERC Junior category, while he came third in the MERC4 category.

haes. Coupled with his runner-up spot at round one in Oman, al-Rashed is now in a strong position to challenge championship leader al-Attiyah this season.

Nasser Khalifa al-Alya is chasing Masters Championship and MERC points with Lebanese co-driver Ziad Chehab in a Motorola Ford Fiesta. He surrendered sixth overall to a hard-charging Denis Krotov and Yury Kulikov in their SRT Skoda Fabia RS but earned a second win in the new Masters Championship and collected valuable MERC points to boot with seventh overall.

Rashid al-Muhammadi guided his Peugeot 208 Rally 4 to a second successive victory in the MERC4 category. The Qatari teamed up with Irishman Gary McElhinney

again to finish eighth.

The battle for supremacy in MERC2 developed into a showdown between the Omani duo of Abdullah al-Zubair and Zakariya al-Aamri. When mechanical issues sidelined al-Zubair before the penultimate stage, that opened the door for al-Aamri to claim the win and 10th overall behind ninth-placed Jordanian driver Shadi Shaban.

Both Saad al-Harqan and Mohammed al-Marri excelled on their rallying debuts with the Qatar Motorsport Sports Academy. The rookies guided their Peugeot 208s to 14th and 15th overall with al-Harqan winning the Junior MERC category.

The 50th anniversary rally was held under the chairmanship of QMMF President

Abdulrahman al-Mannai, senior committee member Abdulrazaq al-Kuwari and the QMMF's Executive Director Amro al-Hamad.

The FIA Middle East Rally Championship now heads to Saudi Arabia for the first time since 2010 for the new Jeddah-based round of the series on May 1st-3rd.

FINAL POSITIONS AFTER SS13:

1. Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Candido Carrera (ESP) Skoda Fabia RS Rally 2; Total time: 1hr 42min 15.0sec
2. Mads Ostberg (NOR)/Sergiu Itu (ROU) Skoda Fabia RS Rally 2; 1hr 43min 27.8sec*
3. Abdullah al-Rawahi (OMA)/Ata al-Hmoud (JOR) Skoda Fabia RS Rally 2; 1hr 44min 40.7sec
4. Abdulaziz al-Kuwari (QAT)/Lorcan Moore (IRL) Citroen C3 Rally 2; 1hr 44min 42.4sec
5. Rakan al-Rashed (KSA)/Hugo Magalhaes (POR) Toyota GR Yaris Rally 2; 1hr 50min 35.0sec
6. Denis Krotov (KGZ)/Yury Kulikov (CYP) Skoda Fabia RS Rally 2; 1hr 52min 01.1sec
7. Nasser Khalifa al-Attiyah (QAT)/Ziad Chehab (LBN); Ford Fiesta Mk II Rally 2; 1hr 53min 35.7sec
8. Rashid al-Muhammadi (QAT)/Gary McElhinney (IRL) Peugeot 208 Rally 4; 2hr 07min 17.2sec
9. Shadi Shaban (JOR)/Samer Issa (JOR) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX; 2hr 07min 36.9sec
10. Zakariya al-Aamri (OMA)/Mohammed al-Mazroui (OMA) Subaru Impreza N14; 2hr 08min 55.0sec
11. Jad al-Aawar (LBN)/Vicken Kanledjian (LBN) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 2hr 13min 53.0sec

12. Jassim al-Muqahwi (KUW)/Suleiman al-Helal (KUW) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 2hr 14min 48.9sec
 13. Ahmad Khaled (LBN)/Samer Sfeir (LBN) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 2hr 15min 50.9sec
 14. Saad al-Harqan (QAT)/Pierre Delorme (FRA) Peugeot 208 Rally 4; 2hr 19min 56.0sec
 15. Mohammed al-Marri (QAT)/Yannick Roche (FRA) Peugeot 208 Rally 4; 2hr 20min 50.2sec
 16. Payyaakkal 'Saneem' Panikkaveetil (IND)/Musa Sherif (IND) Ford Fiesta Rally 2; 2hr 22min 23.5sec
 17. Christiano Gabbarrini (ITA)/Alessandro Forni (ITA) Subaru Impreza WRX STi; 2hr 22min 53.0sec*
 18. Ibrahim al-Muhanna (KSA)/Hani al-Noumesi (KSA) Can-Am Maverick X3 (T4); 2hr 33min 05.6sec
 19. Shadi El Fakih (LBN)/Joseph Kmeid (LBN) Renault Clio; 2hr 45min 31.7sec
 20. Mirko Carrara (ITA)/Stefano Tiraboschi (ITA) Can-Am Maverick X3 (T4); 2hr 49min 13.1sec*
 21. Yosra Jazzar (KSA)/Faisal al-Suwayh (KSA) Can-Am Maverick X3 (T4); 3hr 22min 03.7sec
- Abdullah al-Zubair (OMA)/Taha al-Zadjali (OMA) Subaru Impreza; RETIRED - after SS11
Mohamed Mansoor Parol (IND)/Lenin Joseph (IND) Subaru Impreza; RETIRED - SS10
Mohammed al-Atteya (QAT)/Savvas Laos (CYP) Lancer Evo X; RETIRED - SS10*
Ihab al-Shurafa (JOR)/Ahmad Jankhout (JOR) Lancer Evo X; RETIRED - after SS9
- 28 starters, 21 finishers**
*denotes not registered for the MERC

FOOTBALL

Gharafa, Shahania and Arabi win on a thrilling day at QSL

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Gharafa and Al Shahania scored valuable wins while Al Arabi edged past Al Khor in Qatar Stars League yesterday. At the Al Bayt Stadium, Al Gharafa recorded a 2-1 victory over Al Shamal.

Baghdad Bounedjah opened the scoring for Al Shamal in the 56th minute before Ferjani Sassi equalised for Gharafa in the 60th minute. Later, in the second minute of stoppage time, Mohammed Muntari snatched the winner for Al Gharafa, who remain

third in the table with 31 points while Al Shamal are sixth with 19 points.

At the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium, Al Shahania continued their winning run as they beat Al Rayyan 2-1. This was Al Shahania's fourth win on the trot since the start of the second leg of the league. Two superb opening half goals from Sven van Beek (32nd minute) and Francesco Antonucci (37th minute) set up Al Shahania's win even as a stoppage-time penalty saw Roger Guedes pull one back for Al Rayyan (90+4 minute).

The win pitchforked Al Shahania into fifth place in the rankings with a tally of 20 points while Al Rayyan

moved down from 6th to 8th with 18 points.

Meanwhile, Marco Verratti scored a brace in a seven-goal thriller at the Al Khor stadium as Al Arabi edged the hosts 4-3 in a battle to escape the relegation zone. With the win Al Arabi moved to 16 points in 10th place while Al Khor remain at the bottom in 12th with 7 points.

While Khaled Radwan (9th minute), Ricardo Gomes (45th), and Sofiane Hanni (90+5) scored for Al Khor, the goals for Al Arabi came from Yousef Msakni (14th minute), Ahmed Alaaeldin (27th), and Marco Verratti (46th and 90+2).



Al Shahania's Sven van Beek (right) celebrates after scoring against Al Rayyan at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

HORSE RACING

Sheikh Ahmad's Eifrit claims Ain Sinan Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Sheikh Ahmad bin Mohamed FN al-Thani-owned Eifrit registered a comfortable victory in the Ain Sinan Cup at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

With a powerful sweep down the home straight, Jassim Ghazali-trained bay horse overtook the leaders to secure victory by a commanding five lengths, claiming his first win of the season and completing a double on the day for jockey Marco Casamento. The six-year-old powerhouse, finished ahead of HE Sheikhha Iman MK al-Thani's Haman.

Meshaal bin Ali al-Attiyah, ambassador of the State of Qatar to Bosnia and Herzegovina, crowned the winners of the Ain Sinan Cup.

Earlier in the day, Casamento guided Khalifa Saif AR al-Kubaisi-owned and Mohammed Ghazali-trained Arenteiro to victory in the 2000m contest - the Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate - for the four-year-olds.

Eng. Hassan Ali AM Alabdulmalik-owned and Debbie Mountain-trained Cei Connah won the



Connections of Eifrit celebrate after the bay gelding won the Ain Sinan Cup at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim

2200m race - the Thoroughbred Handicap (65-85) for the four-year-old+ - by four lengths. The Grey Gelding beat Al Ghazali Stud's Venedegar by a four lengths margin.

In the card opener, Al Jeryan Stud-owned and M.H.K al-Attiyah-trained Gazwan won the Lo-

cal Thoroughbred Maiden Plate for four-six-year-olds (3 runners only) by 2½ lengths.

RESULTS
16th Al Uqda Race Meeting - Ain Sinan Cup
Winners (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

Ain Sinan Cup, Purebred Arabian Open Race, 4YO+, 2000m

Eifrit, Jassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento
Thoroughbred Handicap (65-85), 4YO+, 2200m
Cei Connah, Debbie Mountain, Jefferson Smith



Jockey Marco Casamento guided Eifrit to victory yesterday.

Local Thoroughbred Handicap (30-50), 3YO+, 1300m

S K Azam, Saeed Mohammed Shafi al-Shafi, Alberto Sanna
Thoroughbred Handicap (0-75), 3YO+, 1300m
Torvar, Mohammed Ghazali, Faleh Bughanaim
Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate, 4YO, 2000m

Arenteiro, Mohammed Ghazali, Marco Casamento
Thoroughbred Maiden Plate, 3YO, 1300m

Suhail Star, M.H.K al-Attiyah, Szczepan Mazur
Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate, 4-6YO, 1300m
Gazwan, M.H.K al-Attiyah, Szczepan Mazur

CRICKET

Australia on the brink of Sri Lanka Test series sweep

'IT'S NOT GOING TO BE EASY BATTING IN THE FOURTH INNINGS'

AFP
Galle, Sri Lanka

Australia are two wickets away from ending Sri Lanka's second innings in the second Test yesterday, with the hosts reeling at 211-8 at stumps on day three in Galle.

With Sri Lanka leading by only 54 runs, Steve Smith's side will be eager to mop up the tail early today and seal a 2-0 sweep.

Angelo Mathews was the linchpin of Sri Lanka's innings, holding things together as wickets tumbled at the other end.

But just 15 minutes before the close of play, he swept Nathan Lyon straight to square leg, where Beau Webster pocketed a sharp chance. The 37-year-old warhorse had dug deep for a fighting half-century, but Sri Lanka needed a marathon knock, not his well-compiled 76.

Mathews finds himself in the crosshairs, with just one fifty in his last eight innings.

Ahead of this Test, the selectors had made it clear - unless he starts churning out big runs, his spot in the next cycle of the World Test Championship was not fixed.

His sixth-wicket partnership with Kusal Mendis worth 70 runs was a lifeline for Sri Lanka, preventing an innings implosion and ensuring the game stretched into a fourth day.

Prabath Jayasuriya said Sri Lanka were "not out of it yet".

"Kusal Mendis is still out there and he has been batting well - and if he can give us a decent lead, then we can put pressure on them," he said. "It's not going to be easy batting in the fourth innings."

There was an unusual moment



Australia's players celebrate after the dismissal of Sri Lanka's Angelo Mathews during the third day of the second Test at the Galle International Cricket Stadium in Galle yesterday. (AFP)

in the afternoon session when a delivery from Lyon drifted down the leg-side. It clipped the helmet placed behind the wicketkeeper for a close-in fielder, and triggered an automatic five-run penalty for Sri Lanka, a rare bonus in a match where runs were hard to come by.

With the picturesque Galle Fort providing a natural grandstand, hundreds of Australian supporters perched themselves atop the historic ramparts to enjoy a commanding performance from their side.

The fans celebrated as off-spinner Lyon became only the third Australian to claim 550 Test wickets, joining the exalted company of Shane Warne (708) and Glenn

McGrath (563).

Lyon was well-supported by Matthew Kuhnemann, sharing seven wickets between them.

Earlier, Alex Carey turned entertainer-in-chief with a swash-buckling 156 - his career-best knock, peppered with 15 boundaries and two towering sixes.

While Smith (131) also took another big hundred - his second of the series - it was Carey who made batting look easy.

With Sri Lanka on the ropes and Australia poised for the knockout punch, day four promises high drama. Kuhnemann said Australia still faced a "not easy" chase.

"Whatever they put up it will be tough," he said.

"It is going to turn a lot on day four, and we are looking forward to knock them over, score whatever the runs required - and wrap up the series."

The visitors have already put the Warne-Murali Trophy beyond Sri Lanka's reach, having taken an unassailable 1-0 lead with a crushing victory in the first Test.

That innings and 242-run humiliation stands as Sri Lanka's worst defeat in Test history.

BRIEF SCORES: Sri Lanka 257 & 211 for 8 (Mathews 76, K Mendis 48*, Kuhnemann 4-52, Lyon 3-80) **lead Australia 414** (Carey 156, Smith 131, Jayasuriya 5-151) **by 54 runs.**

FOCUS

Phillips, Santner lead New Zealand to 78-run win over Pakistan

AFP
Lahore

Glenn Phillips cracked a maiden century and Mitchell Santner grabbed three wickets to help New Zealand overpower Pakistan by 78 runs in the opening match of a tri-nations series in Lahore yesterday.

Phillips hit 106 not out from 74 balls, with seven sixes and six boundaries to help the tourists post an impressive 330-6 in 50 overs before Santner's 3-41 helped dismiss Pakistan for 252 in 47.5 overs.

South Africa are the third team in the series, a warm-up event for the Champions Trophy from February 19 to March 9 in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

Phillips also added the prized wicket of Pakistan opener Fakhar Zaman who top-scored with a 69-ball 84 including four sixes and seven boundaries.

Fakhar and Babar Azam, promoted to open the innings, had given Pakistan a solid start of 52 before Michael Bracewell broke through with the wicket of Azam who made just ten.

Santner then exploited the slow Gaddafi Stadium pitch, dismissing Kamran Ghulam (18), skipper Mohammad Rizwan (three) and Khushdil Shah (15) to put Pakistan on the back foot.

Salman Agha (40) and Tayyab Tahir (30) added 53 for the fifth wicket but that wasn't enough in a tough chase.

Pacer Matt Henry took 3-53 and Bracewell 2-41.

Earlier, Phillips built on the good work by Daryl Mitchell (81) and Kane Williamson (58) after New Zealand chose to bat.

Phillips added a quickfire 54 off just 47 balls with Bracewell

for the sixth wicket. Bracewell scored 31 from 23 balls, with three sixes.

New Zealand plundered 123 runs in the last 10 overs, including 84 from the final five.

Phillips smashed a boundary and two sixes off pace bowler Shaheen Shah Afridi to reach his hundred off 72 balls, taking 25 in the 50th over.

Shaheen ended up with expensive figures of 3-88 from his 10 overs, although he gave Pakistan an early breakthrough by removing opener Will Young for four with the fourth ball of the match.

Spinner Abrar Ahmed had opener Rachin Ravindra caught and bowled for 25 but Williamson and Mitchell then added 95 off 112 balls to rebuild the innings.

Williamson hit seven boundaries in his 46th half century, his first one-day international since November 2023, before edging Shaheen to wicketkeeper Rizwan.

Mitchell appeared well set for a hundred but miscued a shot off Abrar in the 38th over to be caught after hitting four sixes and two boundaries.

Pakistan was hit hard when pace bowler Haris Rauf walked off in the 37th over after suffering a side strain, having bowled 6.2 overs that included the wicket of Tom Latham for nought.

BRIEF SCORES: New Zealand 330-6 in 50 overs (G. Phillips 106 not out, D. Mitchell 81, K. Williamson 58; Shaheen Shah Afridi 3-88, Abrar Ahmed 2-41) **v Pakistan 252 in 47.5 overs** (Fakhar Zaman 84, Salman Agha 40; M. Santner 3-41) **Result:** New Zealand won by 78 runs

Next match: New Zealand vs South Africa, Lahore tomorrow.



New Zealand's Glenn Phillips celebrates after scoring a century during the tri-nation series first ODI against Pakistan at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore yesterday. (AFP)

BALBIRNIE, TUCKER HALF-TONS BOOST IRELAND IN ZIMBABWE

Captain Andy Balbirnie and Lorcan Tucker scored half-centuries as Ireland posted 298 in their second innings to take control of a one-off Test against Zimbabwe yesterday. Then, needing 292 runs to avenge a four-wicket loss in Belfast last year, Zimbabwe slumped to 38 for three at the close of the third day at the Queens Sports Club in Bulawayo.

The odds in a seesaw match have swung toward Ireland as Zimbabwe have never scored 292 runs to win a Test when batting last. Zimbabwe have also been weakened by the unavailability of three

potential big scorers - captain Craig Ervine, Sean Williams and Sikandar Raza.

Balbirnie made 66 and wicket-keeper Tucker 58 while seamer Richard Ngarava was the pick of the Zimbabwe bowlers, taking four wickets for 55 runs.

Balbirnie patiently built his innings, facing 160 balls and hitting two fours before he was dismissed in a tight leg-before call that gave Wessly Madheveru his maiden Test wicket.

Tucker was caught in the covers by stand-in skipper Johnathan Campbell after getting a top edge

to a Ngarava delivery. His 95-ball knock included a six and six fours. Ngarava then claimed the wickets of Mark Adair (15) and Barry McCarthy (11) to match his Test-best of four in an innings.

Blessing Muzarabani, who took seven wickets in the first Irish innings, had to settle for just one second time round.

Seeking a historic win, Zimbabwe made a disastrous start to their second innings, losing openers Takudzwanashe Kaitano (14) and Ben Curran (4) and Nick Welch (5) with just 32 runs on the board. Curran was caught by Tucker after

getting an outside edge off a Barry McCarthy ball and a Mark Adair inswinger puzzled Kaitano, leading to his off stump being uprooted. Test debutant Welch, who made 90 in his first innings, faced only 20 balls before misreading the line of a Matthew Humphreys delivery and was trapped leg before.

BRIEF SCORES
Ireland 260 and 298 (A. Balbirnie 66, L. Tucker 58; R. Ngarava 4-55) **v Zimbabwe 267 and 38-3**

Match situation: Zimbabwe need 254 runs to win with seven wickets standing

QATAR TOTALENERGIES OPEN

No 1 Sabalenka could meet wild card Raducanu

Swiatek, bidding for a historic 4th Doha title in a row, likely to meet Sakkari

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Emma Raducanu, a wild-card entrant, will be on show on the centre court against Russian Ekaterina Alexandrova on the opening day of the Qatar TotalEnergies Open 2025 the first WTA 1000 event of the year, at the Khalifa International Tennis & Squash Complex today. The match is scheduled for 5.50pm.

The British No 2 and world number 56 Raducanu had reached the third round of the Australian Open before being beaten by Iga Swiatek.

Since then, Nick Cavaday has stepped back from his role as Raducanu's coach for health reasons, while the 22-year-old has lost back-to-back matches.

She was beaten by Cristina Bucsa of Spain in the opening round of the Singapore Open before losing to former Wimbledon champion Marketa Vondrousova at the Abu Dhabi Open.

Raducanu would surely look to make a roaring start. If she wins then Raducanu will have the world No 1 and Australian Open finalist Aryna Sabalenka waiting for her in the second round.

Danger lurks at the first hurdle for almost every high seed in the 2025 Qatar TotalEnergies Open draw.

The top 8 seeds all have first-round byes, and all but one potentially faces a former top 20 opponent in the second round.

Swiatek, bidding for a historic fourth Doha title in a row, will start against either former No 3 Maria Sakkari or a qualifier.

No 6 seed Jessica Pegula faces the winner of a first-round match-up between former Wimbledon champion Marketa Vondrousova and Elina Svitolina. And No 7 seed Zheng Qinwen will begin her campaign against either three-time major finalist Ons Jabeur or McCartney Kessler, who has won her first two WTA Tour titles in the past seven months.

Meanwhile, No 3 Coco Gauff will start against either Marta Kostyuk or wild card Zeynep Sonmez, No 4 Jasmine Paolini will take on either former WTA Finals champion Caroline Garcia (competing as a wild card) or Yuan Yue, and No 8 Emma Navarro will open against either former US Open finalist Leylah Fernandez or a qualifier.

No 5 Elena Rybakina is the only top 8 seed who cannot start against a former Top 20 player - though neither Dayana Yastremiska, whose career high is No 21 and who is fresh off the Linz final, nor Peyton Stearns are soft openers



Aryna Sabalenka (left) and Iga Swiatek pose with the Falcon trophy at the Lusail Boulevard ahead of the Qatar TotalEnergies Open.



Emma Raducanu to take on Ekaterina Alexandrova today.

for last year's runner-up. First up though in big action will be Raducanu, the 2021 US Open Grand

Slam champion, and the crowds are surely going to flock the stadium to see her in action.

SUNDAY ORDER OF PLAY

Centre Court: Starts 3.30pm

M Sakkari vs E Ruse
Followed by: K Volynets vs M Andreeva
Followed by: E Raducanu vs E Alexandrova
Followed by: A Anisimova vs V Azarenka

Grandstand 1: Starts 2pm

Y Yuan vs C Garcia
Followed by: G Minnen vs L Fernandez
Followed by: L Samsanova vs L Sun.

Grandstand 2: Starts 2pm

A Parks vs D Shnaider
Followed by: E Mertens vs C tauson
Followed by: M Kostyuk vs Z Sonmez
Followed by: E Avanesyan vs X Wang

Grandstand 3: Stars 2pm

C Bucsa vs A Kalinskaya
Doubles
B Mattek Sands/L Safarova vs Y Xu/Z Yang
Followed by: C Bucsa/M Kato vs X Jiang/F Wu

Grandstand 4: Starts 2pm

T Babos/N Melichar-Martinez vs P Stearns/L Stefani
Followed by: U Eikeri/M Niculescu vs L Noskova/Y Putintseva

TENNIS

'Mini dream come true' as Bencic wins first title since becoming mother

AFP
Abu Dhabi

Belinda Bencic secured her first title since returning from maternity leave with a come-from-behind victory over American Ashlyn Krueger at the Abu Dhabi Open yesterday.

The 2021 Tokyo Olympic gold medalist spent 13 months away from the tour and got back to action last October, just six months after giving birth to her first child Bella.

Bencic recovered from a poor serving performance in the first set to beat the 51st-ranked Krueger 4-6, 6-1, 6-1 and clinch the ninth title of her career and first since her triumph in Abu Dhabi two years ago.

The 27-year-old celebrated with her daughter and husband, Martin Hromkovic, on court and said getting to win a title in front of Bella is a "mini dream come true".

"It's tough to describe into words," said Bencic.

"I think only we know what we went through as a family. We are so appreciative and blessed to have Bella in our lives, and then also to be able to still do what I want to do, and then also having the good results on top of that - the emotions were just that I'm incredibly grateful, blessed and just a mini dream come true."

In the first meeting between the pair, both Krueger and Bencic struggled to serve early on, combining for eight double faults in the opening three games in tricky, windy conditions.

Six of the first eight games went against the serve, with

Bencic wiping out a 1-3 deficit and breaking for 4-3 before Krueger pegged her back and drew level.

The 20-year-old American was racking up the double faults, committing a total of 10 in the first set but she continued to unleash powerful forehands to put pressure on Bencic, who finally surrendered the set after 10 tight games and 65 minutes of play.

Bencic only managed to win 38 percent of her first-serve points in the opening set, but that statistic dramatically improved in the second, allowing the Swiss to carve out a 4-0 lead and she soon got on equal terms to force a decider.

Despite needing a medical timeout to treat hand blisters halfway through the final set, Bencic kept up her momentum and wrapped up the win in two hours and 23 minutes.

Bencic was ranked outside the top 1,000 in November and will re-enter the top 65 when the new rankings are released on Monday.

Meanwhile Krueger is expected to crack the top 40 for the first time by virtue of her run to the final.

Krueger has a quick turnaround as she needs to hop on a flight to Doha, where she is due to face fellow American Sofia Kenin in the Qatar Open first round on Monday.

"It's definitely a little bit of a rush, but it's a good problem to have, making the final and having to rush to another tournament," she said.

"So it's a new thing for me. It's something that I'm willing to take head on and enjoy every moment of it."



Switzerland's Belinda Bencic celebrates with her daughter and the trophy after defeating Ashlyn Krueger of the US in the Abu Dhabi Open final yesterday. (AFP)

FA CUP

City survive Orient scare as Saints crash out

AFP
London

Kevin De Bruyne spared Manchester City's blushes as they came from behind to beat third tier Leyton Orient 2-1 in the FA Cup fourth round, while Southampton's miserable season hit a new low with an embarrassing exit against Burnley yesterday.

Pep Guardiola's troubled side were rocked when Jamie Donley's long-range effort came back off the bar and rebounded in off City goalkeeper Stefan Ortega to give Orient an early lead at Brisbane Road. City finally drew level after 56 minutes when Uzbekistan defender Abdulkodir Khusanov deflected in Rico Lewis's shot for his first Manchester City goal since signing from Lens in the January transfer window.

Guardiola had to turn to his bench more than he would have liked just four days before a mammoth Champions League play-off round first leg against Real Madrid. But the introduction of De Bruyne made the difference as the

Belgian midfielder scored 11 minutes from time.

"It was a typical FA Cup game, that is why this competition is unbelievable. For the fans, how the crowd support and we knew they are strong," Guardiola said.

"It is my ninth season in England. I played many times against lower division teams. It was a tight game and we knew it for the situation that we have, but we reacted really well with great character."

Victory came at a cost for City, though, as new midfielder Nico Gonzalez hobbled off just 22 minutes into his debut after a £50 million (\$62m) move from Porto.

Bottom of the Premier League and seemingly destined for relegation, Southampton got no respite in the FA Cup as second tier Burnley won 1-0 at St Mary's.

Scott Parker's team went in front after 77 minutes when Marcus Edwards scored from close-range on his debut after signing on loan from Sporting Lisbon.

Edwards, 26, was once compared to Lionel Messi before being released by Tottenham and rebuilding his career in Lisbon.

It is almost 600 minutes since Championship promotion chasers Burnley last conceded a goal, with 10 clean-sheets in their last 11 games. The last FA Cup tie at Goodison Park ended in disappointment for Everton, who are moving to a new stadium next season, as Bournemouth cruised to a 2-0 victory.

Andoni Iraola's side went ahead when Everton captain James Tarkowski fouled Antoine Semenyo in the area and the Bournemouth winger picked himself up to convert the 23rd minute penalty.

Dan Jebbison tapped in Bournemouth's second on the rebound after Marcus Tavernier's shot was parried by Jordan Pickford in the 42nd minute. Rodrigo Muniz scored twice as Fulham won 2-1 at third tier Wigan.

Muniz bundled home Ryan Sessegnon's cross in the 23rd minute before Jonny Smith's curler hauled Wigan level after 50 minutes.

Fulham were back in front five minutes later when Muniz slotted home from Andreas Pereira's pass. Ipswich, second bottom of

the Premier League, swept to a 4-1 win against Frank Lampard's Coventry. George Hirst's second minute penalty was quickly cancelled by out Joel Latibeaudiere's eighth minute equaliser for the second tier hosts.

But Jack Clarke restored Ipswich's lead in the 28th minute and struck again after 37 minutes before Jaden Philogene's 63rd minute effort sealed the rout.

Millwall reached the fifth round for the first time since 2018-19 thanks to Femi Azeez's double in a 2-0 win at Championship leaders Leeds. Leeds boss Daniel Farke made 10 changes and paid the price as Azeez opened the scoring with a deflected effort from the edge of the area in the 30th minute. Azeez netted again for the 2004 FA Cup finalists with a fierce drive in the 55th minute before Millwall keeper Liam Roberts saved Pascal Struijk's penalty.

Manchester City's Kevin De Bruyne (left) celebrates after scoring their second goal during the FA Cup fourth round match against Leyton Orient in London yesterday. (AFP)



COMMERCIAL BANK QATAR MASTERS

Haotong takes two-shot lead into final day at Doha Golf Club

A one-under 71 saw overnight leader Robinson-Thompson move to 11 under, enough for second spot



China's Haotong Li plays a shot during the third round of the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters at the Doha Golf Club yesterday. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil

By Sports Reporter
Doha

China's Haotong Li moved into a two-shot lead at the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters with a third round 67 yesterday. At the Doha Golf Club, The three-time DP World Tour winner – 2018 Dubai Desert Classic, China Open, 2022 BMW International Open – advanced to 13-under to overhaul halfway leader Brandon Robinson-Thompson.

A one-under 71 saw Robinson-Thompson move to 11 under, enough for second spot and a place in the final group today, with England's Matthew Jordan and South African Jayden Schaper sharing third on nine under after rounds of 67 and 69 respectively. Haotong wasted no time in wiping out Robinson-Thompson's two-shot overnight advantage as he birdied the first after hitting a superb second into the par five and gained another stroke at the next from five feet.

England's Robinson-Thompson had only one deviation from par over his first 15 holes and that was a bogey at the sixth, with Haotong taking the outright lead with a birdie from three feet at the seventh.

"It felt not easy definitely," said Haotong, who is seeking his first title since the 2022 BMW International Open, where he had claimed the remarkable victory defeating Belgium's Thomas Pieters in a play-off after holing a 50-foot birdie putt on the first extra hole in Moosinning, Germany.

"An opposite wind compared to the last two days. I holed some moments and par putts, especially the one on ten. Overall I'm very pleased. (Two opening birdies) definitely released a lot of pressure from that position. Especially with my driver being a little bit off today. I didn't hit as many fairways as yesterday, I just need to create more chances tomorrow," Haotong added.

Haotong's best Major Championship finish is third to date at the 2017 Open at Royal Birkdale. "So far this year my approach play has been really solid. I just need to keep the momentum going. I didn't look at the leaderboard at all until number ten. Then I saw I was leading and I



England's Brandon Robinson-Thompson tees off at the Doha Golf Club yesterday.

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thought 'okay! It felt like a strange feeling. It's been a while. Hopefully I can continue the momentum going into the final round," the 29-year-old World No 73 said.

Both of the leading protagonists reeled off a long string of pars to the 15th, before cashing in on the driveable 16th, where Robinson-Thompson recorded his first gain of the day.

Haotong looked like finishing the day further ahead when he rolled in a 15 footer at the 17th, but Robinson-Thompson got up and down from the back of the 18th green to close the gap to two.

Robinson-Thompson was tied for eighth in Bahrain last week and was pleased to keep his challenge on course over the clos-

ing holes. "It was a bit of a slow start, honestly," the Englishman said.

"Again the wind was up, pins were tucked a little bit and I kept hitting them to 30 or 40 feet. I kept giving myself chances but not close enough. You never know on this golf course, especially with this wind direction. You can always finish hot and luckily I picked up two towards the end there," he said.

Earlier, Jordan had moved through the field with five straight birdies from the 12th and, although he dropped a shot after three-putting the 17th, he holed a huge 56-foot birdie putt on the last. Schaper also finished strongly, as three birdies in his last four holes gave him a share of third.

SPOTLIGHT

QTF launches first-ever exhibition on tennis history in Qatar

The Qatar Tennis Federation (QTF) will host a landmark exhibition telling the history of tennis in Qatar. This first-of-its-kind initiative is being organised in partnership with the 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum and aims to provide a comprehensive look at the sport's evolution in the country.

Set to open today at the Khalifa International Tennis & Squash Complex, the exhibition will be accessible throughout the duration of the Qatar TotalEnergies Open and the Qatar ExxonMobil Open. A diverse collection of exhibits will tell the story of tennis in Qatar, including objects from His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, the Amir of Qatar, who has been instrumental in the sport's development in Qatar. The display will also feature memorabilia from other influential figures who have contributed to the game's legacy in the country.

Visitors will have the chance to explore prestigious trophies won in Gulf and regional competitions, along with digital content that showcases the sport's progression. The exhibition will also include a selection of historic photographs capturing some of Qatar's most celebrated tennis players.

Additionally, the exhibition will showcase iconic moments featuring international tennis stars who have played in Qatar, further cementing the country's role in global tennis. Other notable pieces on display will highlight the rich history of international tennis, with



Set to open today at the Khalifa International Tennis & Squash Complex, the exhibition will be accessible throughout the duration of the Qatar TotalEnergies Open and the Qatar ExxonMobil Open.

Qatar's legacy deeply embedded in the sport.

Speaking about the exhibition, Tariq Zainal, Secretary-General said: "This exhibition is a tribute to the rich history of tennis in Qatar and reflects our ongoing commitment to celebrating the athletes who have shaped the sport's journey in our country."

He added: "Beyond chronicling achievements, this exhibition stands as a testament to a sporting heritage that has become an integral part of Qatar's national identity. We are immensely proud of the milestones we have reached and remain steadfast in our mission to build on this legacy. With a clear vision for the future, we will continue developing tennis as a vital element of social and sporting progress."

Commenting on the occasion, Abdulla Yousuf al-Mulla, Direc-

tor of 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum said: "We are pleased to join hands with QTF on this momentous event, marking the first exhibition of its kind in Qatar. At 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum, we strongly believe that collaborating with fellow local sport institutions is the cornerstone of enriching cultural experiences. By working together, we not only amplify our resources and expertise, but we also create a shared narrative that connects the community to its sports and cultural heritage in a deeper, more meaningful way. We look forward to welcoming everyone to discover our rich history."

Game-Set-Match exhibition offers a unique opportunity for visitors to delve into the key milestones of Qatari tennis and learn about the individuals who played pivotal roles in shaping its growth.

BUNDESLIGA

Leverkusen lose ground on Bayern with Wolfsburg draw

AFP
Wolfsburg, Germany

Bayer Leverkusen dropped eight points behind league leaders Bayern Munich with a scoreless draw at Wolfsburg yesterday.

Bayern's 3-0 win over Werder Bremen on Friday, their seventh straight league win, upped the ante on Xabi Alonso's defending champions, who host the leaders next Saturday. Alonso named a weakened starting lineup with Florian Wirtz, Patrik Schick and Jeremie Frimpong all left on the bench after playing 120 minutes in Tuesday's extra-time German Cup win over Cologne.

Without their star trio, Leverkusen lacked fluency. Nordi Mukiele had a golden chance to put the visitors in front after 22 minutes, but headed over the bar while unmarked from point-blank range. Wirtz and Frimpong came on after 60 minutes but the visitors had few chances despite dominating possession.

Wirtz went down in the box with 13 minutes remaining after some light contact prompting a VAR check, but the referee waved it away. The 21-year-old had a chance to snatch his side the win in stoppage time, but he blasted just wide.

Leverkusen have dropped four points in their past three league games, leaving their bid to defend their debut title on life support.

Stuttgart won 2-1 at Borussia Dortmund to go fourth, spoiling Niko Kovac's debut in the home dugout. Stuttgart's Deniz Undav and Dortmund's Karim Adeyemi had chances in the opening half before centre-back Waldemar Anton, who left Stuttgart for the Westfalenstadion in the summer, put the visitors in front in the 50th minute.

Stuttgart's Jeff Chabot put the visitors two goals up on the 61st-minute mark, knocking in a superb volley for his first Bundesliga goal. Julian Brandt scored late but it was not enough, as Stuttgart beat Dortmund for a fifth straight time.

Kovac, named coach this week after Nuri Sa-

hin was fired in January, has his work cut out for him, with Dortmund mired in 11th spot. The coach praised his charges, saying "the boys gave it their all – we shouldn't have left the field as losers," adding some poor decision-making had "deprived us of the fruits of our labour."

Freiburg climbed to sixth with a hard-fought 1-0 win over Heidenheim, with a first-half header from Vincenzo Grifo the difference. Italy winger Grifo, known for his set-piece prowess, headed in a lovely Ritsu Doan cross to put his side on track for a third European qualification in four seasons.

Union Berlin chalked up a statement victory in their battle to avoid the drop, winning 4-0 at struggling Hoffenheim. Union, who hosted Real Madrid in the Champions League last season but started the game in 14th, won thanks to a brace from Benedict Hollerbach and goals from Marin Ljubicic and Andrej Ilic.

The win took Union 10 points clear of Heidenheim, who sit in the relegation playoff spot. Also yesterday, Mainz and Augsburg played out a scoreless draw. In the day's final match, Borussia Moenchengladbach host third-placed Eintracht Frankfurt.



Wolfsburg's Mohammed Amoura (right) makes an overhead kick past Bayer Leverkusen's German Robert Andrich during a Bundesliga match in Wolfsburg, northern Germany. (AFP)

PSG BOSS ENRIQUE HOPING TO MAKE HISTORY AFTER SIGNING CONTRACT EXTENSION



Paris: Luis Enrique was delighted to have been given a two-year extension with Paris St Germain as he wants to make history with the French champions. The Spaniard, who arrived at PSG in 2023, expressed his gratitude for the trust the club has placed in him and said he is motivated to leave a legacy in Paris.

"From day one the club has put everything at our disposal and the support only makes me want to continue working and

improving, we want to make history here as a coaching staff," Enrique told reporters following PSG's 4-1 win over Monaco on Friday.

"I don't know how long I'll be here, when you feel comfortable where you are and you feel the trust of those around you, why set limits for yourself. I am very happy for that support, I hope to repay it with hard work, I don't know if with results."

Enrique denied that PSG's convincing

victory, which keeps them unbeaten in Ligue 1 with a 13-point lead at the top of the standings, was the best of their season so far and said it was difficult despite the scoreline. "I don't think we had our best game, I didn't like the last 10-15 minutes, we didn't take the ball away from Monaco and we had some difficulties," he said. "The first half was very even, it was difficult to put pressure on them. In the second half we were able to do more damage and in

the end we deserved the victory but it was very difficult as always against Monaco."

PSG will now turn their attention to the Champions League knockout playoffs, where they face Ligue 1 side Brest on Tuesday. While a slow start to their European campaign meant the Parisians missed out on securing an automatic spot in the last 16, the coach said the struggles had strengthened the team in their quest for a coveted first Champions League title.