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GULF TIMES
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CRICKET | Page 2

Explosive Pooran
powers Lucknow
to IPL win over
Hyderabad



FOOTBALL | Page 4

Alexander-Arnold's
choice between
Madrid move or
Liverpool legacy



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GULF TIMES

SPORT



MOTORSPORT

Brothers in arms as
Marc Marquez chases
treble at Grand Prix
of the Americas

Page 3

FOOTBALL

Keen contests on cards as QSL business end begins today

Defending champions Al Sadd currently second in the table just a point adrift of title contenders Al Duhail

By Sports Reporter

Doha

The Qatar Stars League (QSL) will be back in action from today after a three-week international break – with more exciting contests and battle for the title heating up.

The 12-team league has only four games remaining for each side in this year's championship.

Defending champions Al Sadd are currently second in the table just a point adrift of leaders and title contenders Al Duhail.

Not just these two domestic giants but Al Gharafa are also in the mix being in third place with a tally of 37 points.

A slip by any of these teams will prove beneficial to their rivals in a big way. So there is little margin for error at the business end of the league.

There is a similar contest in the relegation zone with Al Khor being bottom-placed with 7 points and hoping to notch a few wins to wriggle out of that dreaded spot.

In the play-off 11th spot are Umm Salal with 15 points while Al Arabi (22), Al Wakrah (21) and Qatar SC (21) also fear a fall being in 8th, 9th and 10th places respectively. With a fascinating scenario, all teams would go into week 19 matches hoping to get their plans working towards gaining positive results.

First up today in simultaneous kick-offs will be Al Shamal vs Al Shahania at Al Bayt Stadium, and Al Khor and vs Umm Salal at Al Janoub. Al Khor coach Salam



Al Khor coach Salam Shaker addresses the media yesterday, on the eve of their match against Umm Salal.

Shaker, speaking to the media yesterday, on eve of their match against Umm Salal, said they are still hopeful and have worked on the psychological aspect.

"It is very difficult to change the style of play in a short period of time, but we have worked on the players' psychological aspect. We will adopt a style that is in line with the team, the tasks and the players' duties, and we have worked extensively on it," Shaker said.

"Since there is hope, we must fight until the end and never give up. The Umm Salal match may be our gateway to avoiding relegation. We have studied Umm Salal's strengths and weaknesses from all aspects. There will be no major

changes and the team is ready for this match," he added.

Al Shahania coach Jose Murcia while talking about their match against Al Shamal said they will do everything to gain more points.

"We took advantage of the long break to prepare for this important match against Al Shamal. It will be a direct game between two teams with similar positions and similar goals. Both teams are similar and each team is striving to win, so we will do everything we can to secure the three points.

"This is the most important match of the season. The players are ready and I have great confidence in them. We just have to maintain our focus and follow the

instructions to achieve victory."

He added: "We have a number of absences, most notably Muniesa, Francesco and Ali al-Amri, but our international players such as Alhassan Koroma, Shehab El-lethi and Moaz al-Wadia have recovered."

"Tomorrow will see clashes between teams from the top four with Al Ahli meeting Al Rayyan, Qatar SC playing Al Arabi, Al Sadd up against Al Wakrah, and Al Gharafa facing Al Duhail.

Al Sadd will have many of their players returning to the squad after doing national team duty including star Akram Afif.

For Al Duhail, Almoez Ali will be back in action and the team will



Al Shamal coach Jose Murcia during a press conference yesterday.

QATAR CUP SEMIS ON APRIL 22 AND 23

The Qatar Cup 2025 semi-final stage will get underway on April 22 with Al Sadd's Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium hosting all the matches, the Qatar Stars League has announced. The semi-finals will be played among the top four sides of the top flight Ooredoo Stars League (OSL). The first semi-final will be played on April 22 followed by the second semi-final on April 23. The final is scheduled for May 10. Al Duhail (41 points), Al Sadd (40), Al Gharafa (37) an Al Ahli (29) currently hold the top four positions in the OSL with four rounds left.

look to continue the fine form they have shown in the second half of the league so far.

Al Rayyan's Roger Guedes is at the top of goal-scorers' list with 16 goals followed by Al Sadd's Rafael Mujica (15), and Akram Afif (13). Al Ahli's Julian Draxler is fourth with a tally of 12 goals to his name.

With the big guns looking to fire now, this could well change in the coming days.

FIXTURES: Today (9pm Start): Al Khor vs Umm Salal at Al Janoub Stadium; Al Shamal vs Al Shahania at Al Bayt Stadium.

Saturday (9pm Start): Al Ahli vs Al Rayyan at Al Thumama Stadium; Qatar SC vs Al Arabi at Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium; Al Gharafa vs Al Duhail at Thani Bin Jassim Stadium; Al Sadd vs Al Wakrah at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

HORSE RACING

Al Zwair lands Msheireb Cup with a late surge

By Sports Reporter

Doha

Al Shaqab Racing's Al Zwair delivered a sensational performance to claim the Msheireb Cup at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

The five-year-old grey horse, owned and bred by Al Shaqab Racing and trained by Jean de Mieulle, showcased his class and speed, storming from behind in the home straight under a perfectly timed ride by the in-form Pierre Charles Boudot to win the 1400m contest by one and a quarter length for the Purebred Arabian Handicap ahead of stud-mate Al Khabib.

Al Zwair overtook the leading pack in style, winning comfortably the 1400m race for the four-year-old+ and secured a hat-trick of wins for his jockey. Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi, QREC Racing Manager, crowned the winners.

Earlier Jockey Boudot was in the winners' enclosure when he guided Injaaz Stud-owned and Zuhair Mohsen-trained Kerindia to the 1400m contest for the Thoroughbred Fillies & Mares Plate for three-year-old+ in the penultimate race of the day. Boudot also rode Al Majid Stud's Khattab La Glore to win the 2300m contest for the Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate for four-to-six-year-olds by a margin of seven and a half lengths.

Just Bring It, in the colours of Wathnan Racing, won the Thoroughbred Handicap (80-100) for four-year-old+. Alban de Mieulle-



Connections of Al Zwair celebrate after the grey horse won the Msheireb Cup yesterday. **PICTURES:** Juhaim

trained horse won the 2200m race by a half a length margin under jockey Tomas Lukasek. In the card opener, Umm Al Shukhut Farm's Grace Secret under jockey Fayos Martin Borja won the Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate for three-year-olds by a neck.

On Wednesday, Ezzat Nafs showcased her resilience and class by bouncing back to winning ways in the Al Mafjar Cup. The eight-year-old mare, owned by Sabheeb Awad Ibrahim and trained by Khaled Mohamad Alahmad, delivered a stunning pillar-to-post performance, narrowly holding off the strong challenge of Naseeb Zakhir to se-

cure victory by just a neck. Jockey Fayos Martin Borja expertly guided her to this hard-fought success.

RESULTS
39th Al Rayyan Race Meeting - Msheireb Cup
WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1 - Msheireb Cup - Purebred Arabian Handicap 85-105 (Class 2)
Al Zwair, Jean de Mieulle, Pierre Charles Boudot
2 - Thoroughbred Fillies And Mares Plate (Class 2)
Kerindia, Zuhair Mohsen, Pierre Charles Boudot
7 - Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate (Class 6)



Jockey Pierre Charles Boudot guided Al Zwair to the Msheireb Cup win.



Jockey Fayos Martin Borja guided Ezzat Nafs to the Al Mafjar Cup win.

Shagran Alseej, Jassim Hamad al-Atteya, Marco Casamento
8 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate (Class 6)
Grace Secret, Mohamed Khaled Elahmed, Fayos Martin Borja



CRICKET

Pooran powers Lucknow to win over Hyderabad

Shardul Thakur finishes with his best IPL figures of 4 for 34



Lucknow Super Giants' Nicholas Pooran plays a shot during the Indian Premier League match against Sunrisers Hyderabad at the Rajiv Gandhi International Stadium in Hyderabad yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Hyderabad, India

Nicholas Pooran slammed 70 off 26 balls as Lucknow Super Giants easily chased down a target of 191 to beat Sunrisers Hyderabad yesterday for their first win of the new IPL season.

Pooran's power-packed innings featured six fours and six sixes, as the West Indies batter ruthlessly took the attack to the opposition on a flat Hyderabad pitch.

Lucknow, captained by the most expensive player in the IPL, India's Rishabh Pant, lost Aiden Markram early before Mitchell Marsh (52) and Pooran put on 116 for the second wicket in barely seven overs together.

Pooran eventually fell lbw to Australia captain Pat Cummins, leaving his team on 120-2 in the ninth over.

Pant walked in with Lucknow well positioned but made a scratchy run-a-ball 15 before miscuing a full toss from Harshal Patel, following Marsh back after he was removed earlier by his international teammate Cummins.

Lucknow also lost Ayush Badoni cheaply but Abdul Samad hit an unbeaten 22 off eight deliveries to help them cruise to victory with 23 balls remaining.

Lucknow had won the toss and restricted Hyderabad to 190-9 despite a brisk 47 at the top of the order from Travis Head.

Shardul Thakur, who wasn't initially picked up by any franchise and only received a call-up from Lucknow as an injury replacement, finished with his best IPL figures.

Thakur took 4-34 and landed a key double blow by dismissing opener Abhishek Sharma (6) and Ishan Kishan (0) with successive balls in the third over.

Head steadied the innings after Hyderabad slipped to 15-2 before a searing Prince Yadav delivery rearranged his stumps.

Several Hyderabad batters made starts but couldn't go on, with Nitish Kumar Reddy contributing 32 and Aniket Verma blasting a quick 36 after Heinrich Klaasen (17) was run out in bizarre fashion at the non-striker's end.

As Yadav attempted to take a low return catch offered by Reddy, he deflected the ball onto the stumps with Klaasen out of his crease.

Cummins dispatched three of the four balls he faced over the rope in a whirlwind knock of 18, but it came in vain as Hyderabad suffered their first loss.

BRIEF SCORES
Lucknow Super Giants 193 for 5 (Pooran 70, Marsh 52, Cummins 2-29) beat Sunrisers Hyderabad 190 for 9 (Head 47, Verma 36, Shardul 4-34) by five wickets

SPOTLIGHT

Khan the batting hero as Fireox Unit Cricket Club win QCA Ramadan Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

A blazing 60-run knock from Faisal Khan led Fireox Unit Cricket Club to a commanding 9-wicket triumph over Al Asnad in the final of the Qatar Cricket Association (QCA) organised T10 Ramadan Cup 2025 played under lights at the West End Park International Cricket Stadium.

QCA Secretary-General Khalid Saleh al-Rumaihi honoured the winners, runners-up and best players with their prizes in presence of Tournament Director Christopher Raja.

Fireox Unit CC remained unbeaten throughout the tournament and their delighted captain Muhammed Waqqas Alvi, while speaking at the presentation, thanked QCA for a wonderful tournament and all members of the organising committee for their efforts.



Daniel Archer of Hilti named the Best All-Rounder

On his team's fabulous Cup win, he said: "We have franchises globally and we have a full team supporting us behind our performances and we are proud of having won this tournament in Doha."

Fireox Unit CC chased down a target of 124 runs in just 7.3 overs. Faisal, who opened the batting

with Saqlain Arshad, led the charge toning seven sixes and three fours in his 21-ball essay. Arshad played the anchor role remaining unbeaten on 36 (17balls; 6x4s, 1x6), while Abdul Manan was not out on 28 (8balls; 4x4s, 2x6s).

Batting first, Al Asnad lost opener Rafaqat Ullah for nought in the very first over but Umer Ahmad along with number three batter Shafaullah Khan steered the ship. While Ahmad made 47 (16balls; 3x4s, 5x6s); Khan made unbeaten 35 (23balls; 2x4s, 2x6s). Asif Ali contributed 26 runs (18balls; 4x4s).

The total of 123 for 4 was however not enough as Fireox Unit CC unleashed their might registering their sixth successive win of the tournament to lift the cup.

Faisal Khan was named the Player of the Final and the Tournament while Sadiq Khan, also of Fireox Unit CC was awarded the Best Bowler prize. Daniel Archer of Hilti CC was named as the Best All-rounder. A total of 14 teams,

divided into two groups took part in the tournament. The QCA T10 Ramadan Cup 2025 was sponsored by Aabir, Powerzone Gym, Al Rayyan, and Naseem Healthcare.

BRIEF SCORES: **Al Asnad 123-4 (Umer Ahmad 47, Shafaullah Khan 35 n.o., Asif Ali 26) lost to Fireox Unit CC 126-1 in 7.3 overs (Faisal Khan 60, Saqlain Arshad 36 n.o., Abdul Manan 28 n.o.) by 9 wickets.**

KOLKATA SPINNER MOEEN DOMINATES ROYALS BATTERS BY THINKING LIKE ONE

Kolkata: Kolkata Knight Riders all-rounder Moeen Ali said he dominated Rajasthan Royals batters by thinking like one after helping his side to their first victory of the new Indian Premier League (IPL) season on Wednesday. Sunil Narine's illness opened the door for Moeen to make his Kolkata debut and the Englishman grabbed his chance with both hands, claiming 2-23 in his four tidy overs. Trinidadian Narine was the most valuable player when Kolkata won the IPL title last year, and is the fran-

chise's most successful bowler, but Moeen proved a more-than-adequate replacement. After removing Rajasthan opener Yashasvi Jaiswal he returned to bowl Nitish Rana from around the wicket with a classical off-spinner's delivery that spun past the bat to hit the top of the middle stump. "That ball was a nice ball," Moeen said after three-time champions Kolkata won by eight wickets. "I don't have the skill as other bowlers but my job is to contain as much as I

can. I think my skill is that I think like a batter. So a lot of the time I'm trying to think what they think and it works in my favour." Moeen managed only five with the bat but his opening partner Quinton de Kock led Kolkata's successful chase with an unbeaten 97 to help the defending champions bounce back from the defeat by Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the season opener. Moeen, who retired from England duty last year, continues to impress in franchise cricket and the 37-year-old

is keen to act as a productive spin partner for Varun Chakravarthy. "I'm used to bowling with somebody who is better than me and has more mystery than me, so my job there is to bowl as tight as I can and hopefully that builds pressure for that person to then get wickets," he said of Chakravarthy. "Retired from international cricket, yeah, but I still play a lot of leagues and I still try to stay on top of my game because I still want to play for as long as I can and do well."

CYCLING

Roglic claims Tour of Catalonia points lead with stage four win



Team Bora's Primoz Roglic celebrates winning the 4th stage of the 2025 Volta a Catalunya cycling tour of Catalonia, a 188.7km race between Sant Vicenc de Castellet and Montserrat, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Barcelona

Veteran Slovenian Primoz Roglic fought his way into the lead at the Tour of Catalonia yesterday as he claimed stage four of the race by beating Juan Ayuso in a sprint finish.

UAE Team Emirates' Ayuso had edged Roglic on Wednesday to take the leader's jersey but four time Vuelta a Espana winner Roglic, 35, came out on top at the summit finish in Montserrat in a show of strength to earn his first victory of the season.

Both riders, favourites in the absence of reigning champion Tadej

Pogacar, are tied for time at the top of the general classification, with Enric Mas third, 20 seconds behind.

Roglic of Red Bull-Bora-Hansgrohe completed the mountainous 188.7-kilometre run from Sant Vicenc de Castellet to the stunning Montserrat monastery in just over four hours 24 minutes.

"I had something left at the end, so luckily I won," said Roglic.

"(It's) definitely not (over, there are) hard days to come, for the moment I'm going well, we are in a good position, and we will see."

"We go day by day and we will see by the end."

Stage five of the seven-day race takes riders 172 kilometres from Pauls to Amposta.

FOCUS

Cycling Grand Tours set for expanded format

AFP
Paris

The Giro d'Italia, Tour de France and Vuelta a Espana will all issue an extra wildcard team invitation in 2025, with the initiative due to be rubber stamped March 31.

The total number of riders will shift from 176 under the 22-team model to 184.

All 18 top-tier World Tour teams take part in the Grand Tours, with extra invites given to teams from the second-tier Pro Tour.

The Professional Cycling Council announced it had approved a motion on the matter on Monday.

"All the families represented within the CCP today, and the proposal was accepted by the majority of its members."



jointly submitted the request that the number of teams participating in the men's Grand Tours be increased to 23 starting this year," the UCI said in a statement.

"This request was studied by the CCP today, and the proposal was accepted by the majority of its members."

Khan the batting hero as Fireox Unit Cricket Club win QCA Ramadan Cup



Daniel Archer of Hilti named the Best All-Rounder

On his team's fabulous Cup win, he said: "We have franchises globally and we have a full team supporting us behind our performances and we are proud of having won this tournament in Doha."

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KKR's Vaibhav Arora celebrates with Moeen Ali (right) during their IPL match after taking the wicket of Rajasthan Royals in Guwahati on Wednesday. (Reuters)

MOTOGP

Brothers in arms as Marc eyes Texas win



Alex Marquez (left) and his older brother Marc.

AFP
Austin

Marc and Alex Marquez, who have turned the 2025 MotoGP world championship into a family monopoly, aim to extend their domination at the Grand Prix of the Americas in Texas this weekend.

Six-time elite class world champion Marc, on a factory Ducati, has a perfect four wins this season after romping to victory in the sprint races and Sunday showpiece in Thailand and Argentina.

Younger brother Alex, on a satellite Ducati, has been second on all four occasions.

Marc Marquez, at 32 and four years older than Alex, is also chasing a seventh world elite class title in this 22-race season.

That would take him level with Italian icon Valentino Rossi who retired with seven in 2021 and just

one behind the all-time mark of eight held by Giacomo Agostini.

"We're coming to Austin on the heels of two near-perfect weekends," said Marc Marquez.

"Austin is a track where I've always been fast."

He added: "It's a physically demanding circuit, but I've won a lot there."

Marquez has already won seven times at Austin's Circuit of the Americas, sweeping six in a row between 2013 and 2018 and again in 2021.

The younger Marquez is comfortably enjoying his best season in MotoGP where he led in Thailand and pushed his sibling hard in Argentina.

He has led more laps than Marc has on the two Sundays of racing so far.

"It was another great Sunday (in Argentina), maybe the first one in which I really thought I could win," said Gresini Racing's Alex, who is 16 points off the lead.

"I knew where I was faster and where I was losing to Marc, but it didn't go as planned and we know we gave our best."

"Four second-place finishes in the first four races are easier said than done and never in my wildest dreams I would have imagined that."

Bagnaia playing catch-up

In contrast to the Marquez brothers' early season dominance, it has been a darker time for two-time MotoGP world champion Francesco Bagnaia, who is Marc Marquez's teammate at the factory Ducati team.

The 28-year-old Italian has yet to mount a challenge on the track and currently sits third in the championship, already 31 points behind the leader.

Bagnaia was third in both events in Thailand before a third in the Argentine sprint was followed by a fourth-place finish in the main race.

The Turin native has also never won the Grand Prix of the Americas showpiece since its debut at the Austin circuit in 2013.

"In 2023, I won the sprint race, but last year I struggled more," admitted Bagnaia.

Reigning world champion Jorge Martin of Spain will be absent again this weekend.

Injured during the off-season, he has yet to compete in the championship this year after switching to Aprilia.

His return to Qatar in mid-April is still uncertain, which is a significant handicap for the Italian team, it has emerged.

KTM, for their part, are also having a difficult start to the season.

None of their riders have yet managed to reach the podium and 20-year-old Pedro Acosta, considered one of MotoGP's brightest prospects, has just a sixth-place sprint finish in Thailand to show for his efforts.

TENNIS

Fils upsets Zverev, Dimitrov reaches Miami semi-finals

'He is one of the best tennis players in the world. I'm really happy'



Arthur Fils of France reacts after winning a point against Alexander Zverev of Germany on day nine of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. Fils won 6-3, 6-4 to reach the quarter-finals. (Reuters)

AFP
Miami Gardens

France's Arthur Fils upset top-seed Alexander Zverev with an outstanding display earning him a 3-6, 6-3, 6-4 win over the German in the fourth round of the Miami Open.

The 20-year-old Frenchman will face 19-year-old Czech Jakub Mersik in the quarter-finals with both players chasing their first Masters 1000 semi-final spot.

Rallying from a set down, Fils showed great determination to fight his way back and go 4-1 up in the second set.

Zverev responded to take a 3-1 lead early in the third but again Fils refused to let the match slip from his grasp.

Fils, using his athleticism and his powerful forehand, broke back to 3-2 and then when Zverev went long on a return took a 4-3 lead.

Zverev held when serving to stay in the game at 5-4 down but Fils kept his composure to serve out for one of the biggest wins of his career.

The victory was all the more impressive given that Fils later revealed he was suffering from back pain.

"I was feeling not great in the rallies. I've had a little problem in my back since I was young, so sometimes it hurts me a little bit," explained Fils. "I had to find a rhythm, (be) more aggressive and come into the court to play my game and not let him play, because when you let him play he is one of the best tennis players in



Jessica Pegula of the US returns a shot to Emma Raducanu of Great Britain during the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida. (AFP)

the world. I'm really happy about the way I did it," he added.

The fourth round contest was postponed to Wednesday after rain on Tuesday forced a change to the schedule.

Fils had also reached the quarter-finals at Indian Wells earlier this month and he becomes the first Frenchman to make the last eight in both legs of the 'Sunshine Double' since Gael Monfils in 2016.

In the opening quarter-final, Bulgarian Grigor Dimitrov battled back from a set down to beat Argentine Francisco Cerundolo 6-7 (6/8), 6-4, 7-6 (7/3) in a riveting duel.

After Cerundolo edged the first, the 33-year-old Dimitrov found his rhythm and was relent-

less in forcing Cerundolo to work on the baseline for every point.

Cerundolo was 6-5 up in the third set and had one match point but Dimitrov showed his grit again and was able to hold and force the contest to a tie-break.

Dimitrov raced out to a 3-0 lead and never looked in danger as he ran out the winner to book his place in the semi-finals where he will face the winner of the clash between Novak Djokovic and American Sebastian Korda.

An exhausted Dimitrov needed medical attention at the conclusion of the match, skipping the on-court interview.

Pegula edges Raducanu
Jessica Pegula of the US outlasted Britain's Emma Raducanu to win

6-4, 6-7 (3/7), 6-2. Raducanu was 5-3 up and serving for the set in the second but was broken and then had a lengthy medical time-out where she appeared to be being treated for over-heating.

She returned and won the tie-break but struggled to regain her momentum in the third set where Pegula broke early and never lost control. The American hit 48 winners in the match.

"It was tough," said Pegula, "I played a good first set then she started moving the ball really well and serving good. I just wanted to come out in the third, really, strong and quick and kind of jump on her," she said.

"I want to make it to that final so bad, so I will give it another shot tomorrow," she added.

SCHEFFLER, MCILROY FOCUS ON HOUSTON WHILE PREPARING FOR MASTERS



Scottie Scheffler of the United States reacts on the seventh hole prior to the Texas Children's Houston Open 2025 at Memorial Park Golf Course in Houston, Texas. (AFP)

Houston: Top-ranked Scottie Scheffler and world number two Rory McIlroy play their final tuneups for the Masters at this week's PGA Houston Open, seeking a title while preparing for Augusta National.

McIlroy, who won the Players

two weeks ago after taking the Pebble Beach crown last month,

is making his first Houston trip in 11 years and playing the course

for the first time.

"It has been a great start for the season for me and I want to continue it," McIlroy said.

But the 35-year-old from Northern Ireland visited Augusta National this week to start preparations for the Masters, the only major title he needs to complete a career Grand Slam.

"I use those trips just to refamiliarise myself with the place, clubs off tees, looking to see if they changed any greens," McIlroy said. "There are four greens that are new this year that they've redone. You have a look at those and see if there's any new hole positions they give you, stuff like that."

"Honestly for me, it's nice to play a practice round without people around and it sort of takes the pressure off the start of the (Masters) week for me."

His time in Houston, however, is about competing and trying to add another title to his season before his quest for a green jacket resumes.

"I just want to get a card in my hand and shoot scores and hopefully get myself in contention and try to win another golf tournament," McIlroy said. "It's not as if I'm playing here this week and thinking about two weeks' time. I'm here, I'm in the present, I'm trying to do my best this week and trying to win this golf tournament."

Repeated shotmaking under tournament pressure is on McIlroy's mind.

"I want to keep playing well, I think every round you play where you see good things you're filling up that confidence

bucket a little bit, so I want to see that," he said. "It was great to get a win a couple weeks ago but I still feel I could have played a lot better. I tried to poke holes in a lot of my game last week and think about things I could do better, and there were definitely things that I could work on. "It's a good opportunity to go out and see if some of the work I did at home and I'm continuing to do here... is all going in the right direction."

Scheffler feeling good

Scheffler was the runner-up in Houston last year, a season in which he won nine titles including Olympic gold and his second Masters title. But Scheffler missed the first month of this season with a hand injury and is only now getting back to normal form. "Feeling pretty good. Excited about the stuff we're working on right now and game feels like it's in a good spot. Definitely excited to get the season going this week," he said.

He finds Houston's Memorial Park course a worthy place to prepare for the challenge of winning a third Masters in four seasons.

"With it being ryegrass in the fairways now I think definitely improves the prep for the Masters, it's a similar grass to what we see at Augusta," Scheffler said. "It's also a big golf course. You've got to hit it far out here, so there's definitely some similarities and good preparation between here and Augusta."

Like McIlroy, however, Scheffler is concentrating on winning this week before trying for another major win.

"I try to focus as much as I can on the tournament at hand," he said.

"I think in the back of your mind at all times the majors are always kind of there... so when you're here with the Masters being only two weeks away, it's very easy for us to look ahead. But I'm trying to do my best to focus on this week."



Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland hits his tee shot on the 12th hole during the first round of the Texas Children's Houston Open 2025.

FOOTBALL

Alexander-Arnold's choice between dream Real move or lasting Liverpool legacy

Alexander-Arnold is already the club's vice-captain and would be the natural heir to Virgil van Dijk

AFP
Liverpool

Trent Alexander-Arnold's proposed move from Liverpool to Real Madrid has split opinion on whether a local hero can leave Merseyside without a lasting stain on his legacy.

Alexander-Arnold joined the Reds 20 years ago as a six-year-old and has gone on to win a clean sweep of Premier League, Champions League, FA Cup, League Cup, UEFA Super Cup and Club World Cup titles.

His status is reflected in a mural that stands just metres from the club's Anfield stadium, emblazoned with the quote: "I'm just a normal lad from Liverpool whose dream has just come true."

However, how he will be remembered for years to come in his home city will for many be dictated by the decision he takes in the coming weeks over his future.

Alexander-Arnold's contract expires at the end of the season, meaning Madrid do not have to pay a transfer fee for a player who has smashed Premier League records when it comes to a creative output from a right-back.

Here, AFP Sport looks at the key considerations facing the 26-year-old ahead of a career-defining call.

Liverpool like to taunt their Premier League rivals with their six European Cups, making them by a distance the most successful English club in the competition's history. Madrid though are in a league of their own with 15 European Cup or Champions League



Alexander-Arnold's Liverpool contract expires at the end of the season. (AFP)

triumphs, including six in the past 11 years.

On top of the lifestyle benefits that a switch to the Spanish sunshine offers, Alexander-Arnold would be lining up each week alongside his close friend and England colleague Jude Bellingham, among a cast of stars also including Kylian Mbappe and

Vinicius Junior. The spotlight at the state-of-the-art, newly refurbished Santiago Bernabeu could also offer Alexander-Arnold the chance to fulfil his dream of becoming the first full-back to win the Ballon d'Or.

"I believe I can (win it)," Alexander-Arnold told Sky Sports earlier this season. "It's only the morning

after you retire that you're able to look in the mirror and say, 'I gave it everything I got.'

"It doesn't matter how many trophies you win, or how many medals you've got. It matters what you give to the game and if you reach your full potential."

By running his contract down, Alexander-Arnold is in a strong

position to make millions from a signing-on bonus in lieu of Madrid having to pay a huge transfer fee. And he can argue there is little more to be gained by staying at Anfield. Liverpool are 12 points clear at the top of the Premier League, meaning by the time his current deal expires, Alexander-Arnold should be a two-time Eng-

lish champion to go with six other major trophies.

"His legacy, I hope, is one of an outstanding homegrown footballer who's done incredibly well for this club," Steve McManaman, who himself made the move from Liverpool to Real Madrid on a free transfer back in 1999, told the BBC.

McManaman won two Champions Leagues and two La Liga titles in his four years in the Spanish capital and yet is being used as the counter argument encouraging Alexander-Arnold to stay.

"It's about his legacy at Liverpool and how he is seen. Do you want to be seen like (Steven) Gerrard or McManaman?" former Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher, himself a one-club legend, said of Alexander-Arnold's choice.

"He (McManaman) went to Real Madrid and won cups but he is not adored. If (Alexander-Arnold) stays, he will be remembered as one of the best to play for the club and not far behind Gerrard."

Alexander-Arnold is already the club's vice-captain and would be the natural heir to Virgil van Dijk.

In contrast to the era of Gerrard, McManaman and Michael Owen, who swapped Liverpool for Madrid in 2004, he is part of a side regularly competing at the top of the Premier League and Champions League.

Should he stay, Alexander-Arnold could be front and centre of trophy lifts in years to come as a local lad turned legend.

But Liverpool are just the latest club to learn that the magnetism of Madrid is hard to resist.

SPOTLIGHT

African stars Salah, Hakimi eyeing 2026 World Cup

AFP
Johannesburg

African football icons Mohamed Salah and Achraf Hakimi appear set to feature at the 2026 World Cup as Egypt and Morocco have built commanding leads in their qualifying groups.

However, reigning CAF Footballer of the Year Ademola Lookman and his fellow Nigerian Victor Osimhen are facing a struggle to be involved in the 48-nation global showpiece. Inspired by Paris Saint-Germain full-back Hakimi, Morocco boast a nine-point Group E advantage over Niger, the biggest lead among the nine groups. Liverpool star Salah has scored six goals in six qualifiers, helping Egypt to top Group A by five points from Burkina Faso. With four rounds of matches remaining, in September and October, only dramatic collapses can stop Egypt and Morocco being among the guaranteed nine African qualifiers for the tournament in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

The nine group winners are assured of places, and the winners of a mini tournament involving the four best-ranked runners-up will seek a finals place via inter-continental play-offs. Nigeria lie fourth in Group C having won only one of six matches. AFP Sport analyses each group as the struggle to qualify intensifies.

Group A: Salah and Mahmoud Trezeguet have contributed 11 of 14 goals as Egypt look set to qualify for a third time. They were invited to the 1934 World Cup, then won places at the 1990 and 2018 tournaments. Egypt have been less successful in qualifiers for the global tournament than the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON), which they have



Mohamed Salah and (Below) Achraf Hakimi



won a record seven times.

Group B: Leaders the Democratic Republic of Congo, second-placed Senegal and Sudan are engaged in a three-way fight for top spot with just one point separating them. The Congolese have still to host their two rivals. Meanwhile, it could disadvantage Sudan, representing a country ravaged by civil war,

that three of their four fixtures are away.

Group C: South Africa could see a five-point lead shrink to just one point if they are punished by FIFA for fielding ineligible Tebogo Mokoena in a matchday five win over Lesotho last week. While South Africa face the possibility of the 2-0 victory being changed to a 3-0 loss, they believe Lesotho did not meet the 24-hour post-match deadline for lodging an official protest.

Group D: Cape Verde are one point ahead of Cameroon, who must visit Praia in September. If the surprise package known as the Blue Sharks can win in Mauritius, then triumph at home to eight-time World Cup qualifiers Cameroon, they will be poised for a historic first appearance.

Group E: It is a question of when rather than if Morocco secure qualification, with the representatives of the north African kingdom possessing too much class for rivals Niger, Tanzania and Zambia. Should the suspension of Congo over government interference change to disqualification, Morocco need one point from two matches. If Congo are reinstated, Morocco need four points from three.

Group F: Just one point divides African champions Ivory Coast and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang-inspired Gabon in the struggle to finish first, with a September showdown to come in Franceville. Whichever country finishes second is likely to get another chance to qualify by being among the four best-ranked runners-up.

Group G: Algeria have dominated under Bosnian coach Vladimir Petkovic apart from one blip, a home loss to Guinea. Mozambique are the best of the rest so far and contenders for one of four play-offs places.

Group H: It is hard to imagine Tunisia not staying on top and qualifying for a seventh time, but fourth-placed Equatorial Guinea are the centre of attention. With FIFA reversing a ban of star forward Emilio Nsue, the Equatoguineans want the six points forfeited after wins over Namibia and Liberia restored, which would catapult them to second.

Group I: Ghana have recovered from a shock failure to reach the 2025 AFCON by winning five qualifiers and establishing a three-point lead over Comoros. Top seeds Mali improved dramatically when Belgian coach Tom Saintfiet took charge, but were surprisingly held by Central African Republic this week, leaving them six points off the pace.

Qatar's Shahin claims bronze medal in Asian Wrestling Championship



Amman: Qatar's Shahin Mohammed claimed a bronze medal in the 82kg Greco-Roman category at the Asian Wrestling Championships, currently taking place in Amman, Jordan. The championship features more than 370 male and female athletes from 39 countries. Shahin secured the bronze after a thrilling third-place match against Uzbekistan's Rasulov, which ended 6-5 in favour of the Qatari wrestler, thanks to a decisive point in the closing seconds of the bout. He had earlier reached the semi-finals, where he faced Iran's Mohammad Nangoni and narrowly missed out on a place in the final. Despite the loss, Shahin showed great resilience and determination to bounce back and deliver a strong performance in the bronze medal match.

REAL MADRID PLAYERS FACE UEFA INQUIRY AFTER ATLETICO MATCH

UEFA has opened an investigation into a possible breach of disciplinary regulations by several Real Madrid players at the end of their recent Champions League match at Atletico Madrid, European soccer's governing body said yesterday. The inquiry centres on allegations of improper conduct by Antonio Ruediger, Kylian Mbappe, Dani Ceballos and Vinicius Jr, UEFA said. Real progressed to the Champions League quarter-finals on March 12 after a penalty shootout and celebrated in front of the crowd. While UEFA did not detail the incidents under review, Spanish media reported that Atletico filed a complaint over the behaviour of Real's players during their celebrations. Video footage showed several Real players dancing and making gestures towards the Atletico supporters, who responded by throwing objects from the stands. Reuters has contacted Real for comment. UEFA said it would provide more information in due course.