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CRICKET | Page 2

Starc bags five as Delhi beat Hyderabad in IPL



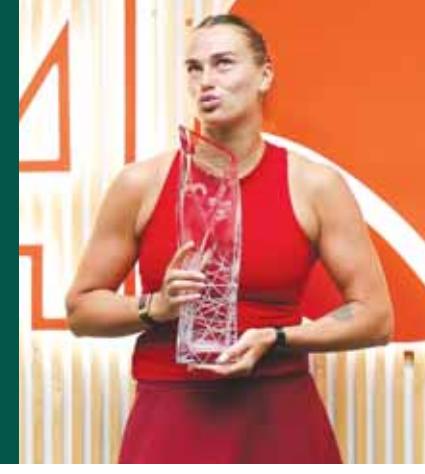
FOOTBALL | Page 4

Dortmund beat Mainz to keep Champions League hopes alive



Monday, March 31, 2025
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GULF TIMES SPORT



TENNIS

Powerful Sabalenka subdues Pegula to claim Miami Open crown

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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Tight finish on the cards as arch-rivals eye title glory

With only three more matches remaining, Al Duhail is one point ahead of defending champions Al Sadd

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Title contenders Al Duhail and defending champions Al Sadd both won their respective Qatar Stars League (QSL) games on Saturday in style to ignite a tight race to finish in the 2024-25 edition of Qatar's top flight domestic football championship.

While Al Duhail beat Al Gharafa 2-0, Al Sadd blanked Al Wakrah 3-0 to garner three more match points each. That took Al Duhail's tally to 44 points while Al Sadd reached 43 points. Now, with only three more matches remaining in the 12-team, 22-week league championship, the one-point margin as slender as it may seem, could also be quite difficult for Al Sadd to overcome unless Al Duhail slip down the rung somewhere along the way.

The Wolves have won the league title a record 17 times since the tournament's inception in 1963-64 while Red Knights have held on to the famous Falcon Shield 8 times. Both Al Sadd and Al Duhail are more than eager to lay their hands on the shield yet again, and are clearly the only two sides in-volved in the dash to the top.

It's a fascinating contest where both teams have to wage their own battles while keeping an eye on the other's progress. Al Duhail now have their games against Al Shamal (April 4), Al Arabi (April 11), and Al Khor (April 18). Al Sadd play Al Rayyan (April 4), Al Khor (April 11), and Al Ahli in their final tie on April 18.

Al Sadd have won their last six successive games including one against Al Duhail 2-0 whereas for the latter it was the only recent loss in their otherwise good winning streak.

Overall, both Al Duhail and Al



Al Duhail players celebrate their 2-0 victory over Al Gharafa on Saturday.

Sadd have won 14 games each. But while Al Duhail have lost only three matches, Al Sadd suffered reversals in four games. Al Duhail had two drawn games to Al Sadd's one.

All that however would not count for much now with the next three matches holding the key to being eventual champions of the season.

Form and fitness will be key for the domestic giants with no margin for error in the crucial and final stage of the league. Al Sadd's mercurial star Akram Afif, who scored twice from the spot against Al Wakrah in their last match, leads the goal-scoring for his side. The

skipper has so far scored 15 goals – the same as that of his teammate Spaniard Rafa Mujica. The Wolves would hope for these two to keep firing on all cylinders in the remaining matches.

For Al Duhail, Kenyan striker Michael Olunga leads the scoring chart with a tally of 11 goals, followed by Almoez Ali with 8 goals so far. Al Duhail just like their title rivals have a strong attacking force and would also aim to keep up their winning run.

The overall goal-scoring chart is led by Bagdad Bounedjah of Al Shamal with 17 goals with Al Rayyan's Roger Guedes being the next best with 16.

Al Sadd's coach Felix Sanchez is well aware of the battles ahead. Prior to the Al Wakrah clash, he had said: "We must focus on ourselves and strive to earn the three points as this is the only option if we want to reach the top of the league."

Al Duhail's coach Christophe Galtier was more sceptical and said: "I am not focused on the remaining matches. We are currently focused on the match against Al Gharafa. We are preparing for this match with clear objectives, and that is the most important thing at the moment."

But Galtier surely knows that with Al Sadd on their heels, Al Duhail



Al Sadd's Akram Afif celebrates after scoring a goal against Al Wakrah.

have to ensure that they now have to stay ahead at all times.

The other race is for teams to finish in the top four. Al Arabi coach Pablo Amo, while putting things into perspective, had said: "We are now at an important stage of the season and are fully aware that points become more important as the rounds progress, so we must maintain our high focus and give our best in every match. There is no room for mistakes or relaxation, because any point could significantly impact our position in the standings."

It's an exciting fight to the finish line and the fans would feast on each and every remaining match of the Ooredoo Stars League. And, for the die-hard Al Duhail and Al Sadd fans there would be many heart-stopping moments if not for the heartbreak.

The race is well and truly on!

FREESTYLE DRIFT CHAMPIONSHIP

Abdullah al-Qahtani emerges as third round champion

By Sport Reporter
Doha

Abdullah al-Qahtani emerged winner in the third round of the Freestyle Drifting Championship, which commenced after a break of over three and a half months under the generous sponsorship of HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani, Chairman of Qatar Racing Club (QRC).

Registration and technical inspections saw widespread participation from the freestyle champions, with over 50 competitors joining, although the organising committee had set a maximum number of 40 participants for this round.

However, in the interest of fostering strong competition, all were allowed to register. It is worth noting that the organising committee had established several criteria and conditions that all competitors must meet, including vehicle-related requirements such as the installation of a roll cage, securing the car battery properly, among other points.

There were also requirements for the competitors themselves, focusing on safety elements such as sportswear, helmets, and ef-



Winners of the third round of the Freestyle Drifting Championship pose with General Director of the QRC

fective seatbelts. An informational meeting for competitors with the organisers and the judging committee took place before the competition began, during which

several important technical aspects were clarified before the race started. According to the competition structure, each participant is given one opportunity to enter

the track and perform five manoeuvres: drifting, reverse driving, knot move, and reverse spin.

These are to be completed within a total time of four min-



Action from the third round of the Freestyle Drifting Championship.

utes. The quicker the competitor completes these manoeuvres, the more points they earn. Additionally, there is a specific scoring for style, based on how the competitor performs the overall show and the specific manoeuvres. The competition, which lasted for over four hours, resulted in al-Qahtani winning first place, marking his second consecutive victory and his third podium appearance, having previously finished third in the opening round. Mohammed al-Muhammadi repeated his results from the past two rounds by finishing in second place. The third

place in this round went to Mohammed al-Farhan, marking his first podium finish of the season.

Abdulrahman al-Shammari finished in fourth place, ahead of the opening round winner, Rashid al-Banna, who concluded the competition in fifth place. At the end of the competition, Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani, General Director of QRC, awarded the top three winners on the podium, thus concluding the third round of the championship and marking the beginning of preparations for the fourth round, scheduled to take place on April 24 and 25.



CRICKET

Starc bags five as Delhi edge past Hyderabad in IPL

DELHI CAPITALS POST THEIR SECOND SUCCESSIVE VICTORY



Delhi Capitals' Mitchell Starc celebrates after taking the wicket of Sunrisers Hyderabad's Nitish Kumar Reddy during their IPL match at the YS Rajasekhara Reddy cricket stadium in Visakhapatnam yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Visakhapatnam, India

Australia's Mitchell Starc claimed his first five-wicket haul in T20 cricket to help Delhi Capitals down Sunrisers Hyderabad for their second straight win in the Indian Premier League yesterday.

Starc, a left-arm quick, returned figures of 5-35 as Delhi bowled out Hyderabad for 163 in 18.4 overs in their second home at Visakhapatnam.

South African veteran Faf du Plessis then smashed 50 off 27 balls and put on 81 runs for the first wicket with Australian batter Jake Fraser-McGurk, who hit

38, as Delhi achieved their target with four overs and seven wickets to spare.

Hyderabad's innings started badly as Abhishek Sharma was run out early for one when he was involved in a mix-up with fellow opener Travis Head.

Starc then struck twice in one over to send back Ishan Kishan and Nitish Reddy and then got fellow Australian Head caught behind for 22 as Hyderabad slipped to 37-4 in 4.1 overs.

Indian batter Aniket Verma, who top-scored with 74, and South African wicketkeeper-batsman Heinrich Klaasen then put on an attacking stand of 77 in an attempt to hit back.

Klaasen fell on 32 off 19 balls to Mohit Sharma, but Aniket kept

up the charge in an eye-catching 41-ball knock laced with five fours and six sixes.

Fraser-McGurk ended Aniket's blitz with a stunning catch at deep mid-wicket when he timed his jump to pluck a travelling ball out of the air and hand spinner Kuldeep Yadav a prized wicket.

Kuldeep, a left-arm wrist spinner, claimed figures of 3-22 before Starc completed his five to wrap up the Hyderabad innings.

In reply, Du Plessis came out firing as he smashed India fast bowler Mohammed Shami for a six and three fours in a 15-run third over to set up the chase.

Du Plessis fell after his 50 to Indian leg-spinner Zeeshan Ansari who took a beating at the hands of Fraser-McGurk but hit back

with his second wicket in the same over. Ansari later bowled KL Rahul round his legs before Abhishek Porel, on 34, and Tristan Stubbs, on 21, steered the team home in an unbeaten stand of 51.

Delhi, under new skipper Axar Patel, have rebuilt the team in their hunt for a first IPL title and brought in England great Kevin Pietersen as mentor. Hyderabad, winners in 2016 under David Warner, have two losses and one victory in three outings this season.

BRIEF SCORES
Delhi Capitals 166 for 3 (du Plessis 50, Fraser-McGurk 38, Porel 34*, Ansari 3-42) beat Sunrisers Hyderabad 163 (Aniket 74, Starc 5-35, Kuldeep 3-22) by 7 wickets

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BRIEF SCORES

Rajasthan Royals

MOTORSPORT

Bagnaia wins USA MotoGP after Marc crash

AFP
Austin

Francesco Bagnaia hailed a "fantastic" win in an eventful Grand Prix of the Americas yesterday to end crash-victim Marc Marquez's perfect start to the MotoGP season.

Six-time elite class world champion Marquez was set fair to make it six wins out of six in Texas after romping to victories in the sprints and main races in Thailand, Argentina and Saturday's sprint in Austin. But a crash on lap nine did it for the Spanish superstar, gifting victory to his Ducati factory teammate. Alex Marquez, on a Ducati satellite bike, took second for the sixth time to move one point clear of his older brother

in the riders' standings. Fabio Di Giannantonio, on another Ducati satellite machine, came in third at the Circuit of the Americas. Under a wide-brimmed Texan hat Bagnaia beamed: "I'm super happy I have lost my voice. I screamed out loud during (the last) lap."

The 2022 and 2023 world champion, winning for the first time this year, added: "It's a fantastic feeling to be back on the top step of the podium after a difficult period." New championship leader Alex Marquez commented: "This is something very great. I'm super happy, have to keep going now."

Di Giannantonio meanwhile said he was going to toast his first podium since 2023 with "200 beers". Bagnaia supplied Ducati with their 20th consecutive grand prix success, just two shy of Hon-

da's historic benchmark of 22.

There was chaos before lights out with riders on the grid, their bikes equipped with wet tyres, all set for the start. But then, with the changeable overcast conditions drying, pole-sitter Marc Marquez dramatically ran back to the pits to swap to a bike with slicks, triggering a domino effect as his grid rivals copied his example.

As he had not sat on his bike Marquez did not break any rules, only causing mayhem, and a delayed start with a race reduced by one lap to 19 laps.

There was one last twist to the pre-race drama, when Maverick Vinales, last year's winner, had to wheel his KTM bike off the grid with an issue to start from the pits.

Marquez got away to a flyer when they were eventually let go

to lead from Alex Marquez with Bagnaia up from sixth to third.

Marquez senior quickly stamped his authority on the race with more than a one second cushion over the chasing pack.

Bagnaia moved up to second after eight laps, albeit over two seconds behind the rider who lists the Circuit of the Americas (COTA) as one of his favourite tracks.

Then the race was turned on its head when Marquez crashed on lap nine, slithering off his bike after touching a kerb. He rejoined in 18th place with 10 laps remaining, only to call it a day a couple of laps later. One frustrated bystander at COTA was world champion Jorge Martin who has missed the opening three rounds after breaking his right hand and foot in pre-season testing crash in Malaysia.



Ducati Lenovo Team celebrate after Francesco Bagnaia of Italy won the Grand Prix of the Americas at Circuit of The Americas. (Imagn Images)

TENNIS

Powerful Sabalenka subdues Pegula to claim Miami Open

BELARUSIAN CLAIMS HER EIGHTH WTA 1000 TITLE

Reuters
Miami

Top-ranked Aryna Sabalenka overwhelmed American Jessica Pegula 7-5 6-2 to win the Miami Open on Saturday, relying on her usual playbook and powerful forehand to win an eighth WTA 1000 title.

Sabalenka, who was runner-up in Indian Wells earlier this month and at January's Australian Open, refused to accept the consolation trophy this time as she closed it out with a superb backhand shot down the line and thrust her hands in the air.

Fourth seed Pegula had been hungry for revenge since losing to Sabalenka in her maiden Grand Slam final in New York last year but the 31-year-old could not match the Belarusian's raw power as she lost momentum after a promising start.

"Thank you everyone for supporting me every day - I enjoyed playing in front of you every day," Sabalenka told the crowd, after years of struggling at the tournament where she had previously never advanced beyond the quarter-finals.

The rivals traded breaks three times in the first set before Sabalenka clinched the critical break with inspired play in the final game, sending a 90-mile-per-hour winner down the line before forcing Pegula into a forehand error on set point.

The American was at her best when she forced the 26-year-old Belarusian to sprint back and forth on the baseline in the opening game of the second set and broke with a backhand winner.

But Sabalenka quickly subdued Pegula with her power, levelling it in the second game.

Pegula saved three break points in the fourth but boiled over with frustration, thrusting her racket to the court, after allowing Sabalenka



Aryna Sabalenka poses with the Butch Buchholz trophy after winning the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium.

Sabalenka defeated Jessica Pegula 7-5 6-2 in the final. (Reuters)

a fourth break point chance that the Belarusian converted with another winner. Sabalenka converted yet another break to clinch the match and underline her claim to be the world's greatest competitor.

It was the third final in a row where Sabalenka beat Pegula, winning in Cincinnati last year before the Flushing finale, and their career head-to-head now stands 7-2 to the Belarusian.

"Three finals - really don't want to like you right now," Pegula said joking during her trophy ceremony. "But you're the best in the world for a reason."

Sabalenka was apologetic in her trophy ceremony after a rain-dented Saturday saw the home hope denied.

"Thank you that the rain stopped - it felt like Miami was crying that I won this tournament," said the world number one, who lives in South Florida.

Sabalenka never dropped a set en route to the podium, beating

former winner Danielle Collins in the round of 16 before overcoming Olympic champion Zheng Qinwen in the quarter-finals and sixth seed Jasmine Paolini in the semis.

The Belarusian had juice waiting for her at the Tennis Channel desk after she clinched the win, a sweet reward after winning 12 of her last 14 matches against players in the top 10.

"With the juice, with the trophy - feel super special," she said smiling.

GOLF

Lee fires impressive 63 to grab 4-stroke Houston Open lead

AFP
Houston

Australian Min Woo Lee birdied seven of the first 14 holes in firing a seven-under par 63 to seize a four-stroke lead after the third round of the PGA Houston Open.

The 26-year-old from Perth finished one off the Memorial Park course record to stand on 17-under 193, a 54-hole tournament record.

"Just some solid golf," Lee said. "Been playing really good the last few days. Just keep my head down."

Argentina's Alejandro Tosti shot 65 to grab second on 197 with top-ranked Scottie Scheffler, fellow American Ryan Gerard and New Zealand's Ryan Fox on 198.

"I've learned from past experiences and obviously playing with Scottie the past few years, in the final group in a couple tournaments," Lee said.

Lee, with his first 54-hole lead in a PGA event, seeks his first PGA title after three wins on the European Tour.

"Hopefully tomorrow is another good day," Lee said.

"Similar golf (to win). Just got to play pretty steady off the tee. A couple shaky drives at the end

but kind of regrouped and made it happen."

"Just keeping my head down and one shot at a time." While Lee, Fox, Tosti and Gerard each seek a breakthrough first PGA triumph, Scheffler won nine titles worldwide last year, including his second Masters and Paris Olympic gold, and matched the course record with a 62 on Friday.

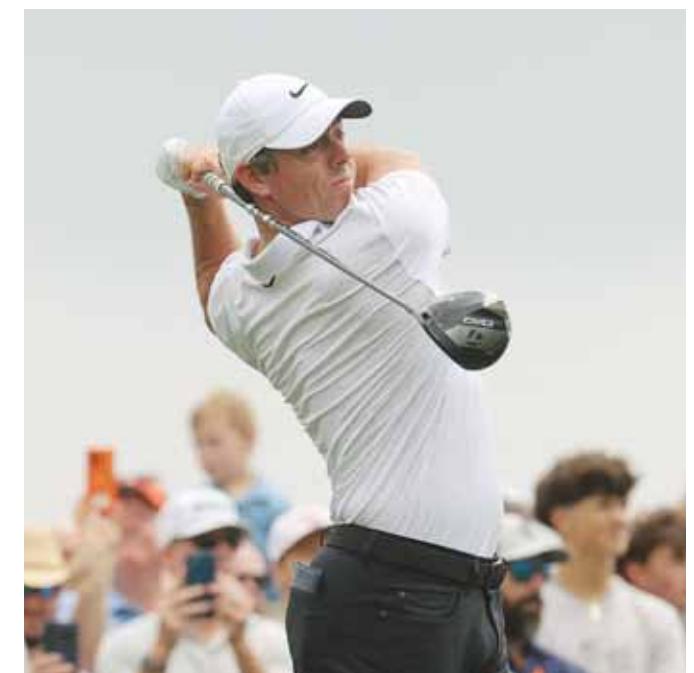
Scheffler was bogey-free for the week until he followed a birdie at the par-5 third with a bogey after missing the green with his approach at the fourth.

Scheffler birdied the par-5 eighth and answered a bogey at 13 with a birdie at the par-5 16th but the 36-hole leader only managed a 69. World number two Rory McIlroy, who birdied three of the last four holes Friday to make the cut, fired a 65 to reach 201, eight strokes adrift.

The Northern Ireland star, who would complete a career Grand Slam by winning next month's Masters, began on the back nine and holed out an eagle chip from just inside 54 feet at the par-5 eighth to highlight a bogey-free round.

"I played OK," McIlroy said.

"It was nice to get out there and play decent. Certainly didn't have my best, but shot a decent round and hopefully another good one tomorrow."



Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland hits his tee shot on the fourth hole during the final round of the Texas Children's Houston Open 2025 at Memorial Park Golf Course in Houston, Texas. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Chacarra tops Indian Open for first DP World Tour win

AFP
New Delhi

Spain's Eugenio Chacarra overcame a rocky start to clinch the Hero Indian Open by two strokes yesterday for his maiden DP World Tour title.

Chacarra, 25, came into the final round as overnight leader but slipped after carding a double bogey on the first and a bogey at the third round at the DLF Golf and Country Club near New Delhi.

But a burst of birdies at the sixth, ninth, 11th, 12th and 14th holes saw bounce back to open up a four-shot lead. Chacarra finished on four under par, two shots clear of Japan's Keita Nakajima, who

won the title last year, in second place. Joost Luiten of the Netherlands was another stroke back in third.

"Man it was a tough day," Chacarra said after the win. "We knew it was going to be a long day, going to be a lot of pressure and I didn't have the start that I really wanted."

Chacarra survived a late scare on the 17th hole when he found himself near the long grass after his second shot but escaped with a bogey.

He closed his round with a par for a comfortable win in the end as he raised his hands to a cheering crowd. Chacarra was playing on a tournament invitation this week.

"It means everything, I stayed patient," he said. "I know when I

play my best, I'm one of the best players in the world. I already proved that a million times."

"I surround myself with good guys, have a good team. They trust me. My family probably didn't sleep tonight. It's just awesome. It is going to need to sink in, but really proud and I'm just, just happy."

Italy's Andrea Pavan made Sunday a memorable day with a hole-in-one at the par-three 12th from 189 yards.

Eugenio Lopez Chacarra of Spain poses for a photograph holding the trophy after winning the DP World Tour of the Hero Indian Open golf tournament in Gurgaon yesterday. (AFP)



BUNDESLIGA

Dortmund beat Mainz to keep hopes alive

AFP

Berlin

Maximilian Beier scored twice as Borussia Dortmund won 3-1 at home to Mainz in the Bundesliga yesterday, keeping their slim hopes of European qualification alive.

Champions League finalists last season, Dortmund had lost four of their past six games to sink to 12th before the match.

Dortmund were without injured striker Serhou Guirassy but Beier filled the void as he gave the hosts the lead after 32 minutes, finishing off a goal he initiated.

The 22-year-old Germany forward gathered the ball in midfield, shed a defender and found Julian Brandt who whipped in a cross and Beier threaded the ball to Karim Adeyemi, who returned the favour, giving him a simple tap-in.

Emre Can doubled Dortmund's lead just four minutes later, heading in a Nico Schlotterbeck corner.

Schlotterbeck supplied Dortmund's third as well in the 72nd minute, floating in a superb ball

which allowed Beier to head home, before Mainz pulled one back through Paul Nebel.

Dortmund manager Niko Kovac said there was "nothing more beautiful than winning in football" but added his side's work was only just getting started.

"We won today but with seven games left, we've got plenty more to do," Kovac told DAZN.

The win was Dortmund's first victory over Mainz in four attempts, including the infamous 2-2 draw against the same opponents on the final day of the 2022-23 season which cost them the title.

Dortmund now sit 10th, four points behind the European places and seven points back from Mainz, who are in fourth.

Despite the loss, Mainz are two points clear of fifth-placed Borussia Moenchengladbach and are in with an excellent chance of a first-ever Champions League appearance.

Union Berlin won 2-1 at Freiburg, denting their opponents' Champions League hopes while taking a major step towards maintaining their own status as a

top-flight team next season.

Freiburg took the lead with 29 minutes played when Lucas Hoeller hammered in a Vincenzo Grifo cross.

The visitors hit back just one minute later, captain Rani Khedira firing in following an Andrej Ilic assist.

Ilic then got on the scoresheet three minutes into the second half, heading a Tim Skarke cross into the top corner.

The loss, just Freiburg's third home defeat of the season, leaves them in seventh, three points off the top four. Freiburg have also never played in the Champions League.

The win took Union, who needed a final-day victory last season at home against Freiburg to avoid dropping into the second division, to 30 points, eight clear of the relegation playoff spot.

Union's recent form looks to have lifted the club out of the relegation mire.

In the past three weeks, Union have beaten top-four hopefuls Eintracht Frankfurt and Freiburg, while holding league leaders Bayern Munich to a draw at home.



Dortmund's Maximilian Beier (centre) celebrates with team-mates after scoring a goal against Mainz 05 in Dortmund yesterday. (AFP)

FOCUS

Marmoush fires Man City into FA Cup semi-finals

Rashford double against Preston fires Aston Villa into semi-finals

AFP

Bournemouth

Manchester City came from behind to reach the FA Cup semi-finals for a record seventh consecutive season with a 2-1 win over Bournemouth yesterday, but victory came at a cost as Erling Haaland hobbled off injured.

Haaland had seen a first-half penalty saved before Evanson put the Cherries in front.

The Norwegian made amends by equalising four minutes into the second period before being forced off with an ankle injury. His replacement, Omar Marmoush, took just two minutes to score the winner from a second assist by the impressive Nico O'Reilly as City booked a semi-final clash against Nottingham Forest.

"Seven times in a row reaching semi-finals in the FA Cup...this is outstanding. This generation of players, they have done this," said City boss Pep Guardiola.

City have been a shadow of the side that won four consecutive Premier League titles this season and Guardiola said prior to the game that even FA Cup glory would not save a miserable season.

The English champions' collapse in the Premier League began at Bournemouth back in November with a 2-1 defeat that kicked off a run of six defeats in eight games. But Guardiola hailed the difference in attitude in his side between then and now.

"We came here (in November) with the flip flops on against a team that if you don't compete, it is impossible," added Guardiola.

"In football you have to run. People say about my teams 'how good they play' but no, it is how much we run, how much we fight and for many games this season it didn't happen."



Manchester City's Omar Marmoush celebrates after scoring their second goal against Bournemouth during the FA Cup quarter-final in Bournemouth yesterday. (Reuters)

Haaland should have punished a makeshift Cherries defence missing the suspended Dean Huijsen and Milos Kerkez with a hat-trick before half-time. He headed wide his first chance from Matheus Nunes' driven cross.

A Tyler Adams handball then gifted City the chance to take the lead from the penalty spot. But for the third time in his last six spot-kicks, Haaland failed to find the net as Kepa Arrizabalaga made a fine save. That miss seemed to be still in Haaland's mind when he dinked over Kepa and over the bar with just the Spanish goalkeeper to beat moments later. City were then hit with a sucker punch by Bournemouth on 21 minutes. Nunes, deputising in an unfamiliar right-back role, gave the ball away to David Brooks, whose cross was turned across goal by Justin Kluivert and bundled in from point-blank range by Evanson.

Guardiola responded by introducing 20-year-old midfielder O'Reilly as a makeshift left-back.

O'Reilly made an instant impact with a rampaging run down the

left and inch-perfect cross as this time Haaland did not miss for his 30th goal of the season.

Moments later he was forced off in concerning scenes for Guardiola with City still involved in a battle just to qualify for next season's Champions League in their last nine Premier League games. But City's January transfer window move for Marmoush is already looking a shrewd deal.

The Egyptian has now scored six times in 11 appearances since a £59 million (\$76 million) transfer from Eintracht Frankfurt. If Kepa was a Bournemouth hero in the first-half, he was at fault for the winner as Marmoush's effort slipped through his grasp from O'Reilly's pass.

"First half we played very well but second half the game was definitely for them," said Bournemouth boss Andoni Iraola.

"We couldn't keep the same intensity second half, we were a lot more passive and lacking in energy, especially up front."

Meanwhile Marcus Rashford's first goals for Aston Villa inspired

a 3-0 win against Preston that sent his side into the FA Cup semi-finals for the first time in 10 years.

Rashford struck twice in the second half at Deepdale to end Preston's stubborn resistance before Jacob Ramsey wrapped up Villa's long-awaited return to the last four. Revitalised since joining Villa on loan from Manchester United during the January transfer window, Rashford is beginning to show the form that made him one of England's brightest stars prior to his steep decline over the last two years. Amid concerns over his attitude and off-field behaviour, Rashford was deemed expendable by United manager Ruben Amorim, after also clashing with former Old Trafford boss Erik ten Hag.

The 27-year-old hadn't scored since netting for United against Everton on December 1. Deployed in the central striker's role that often seemed to dent his confidence at United, Rashford was too dynamic for second-tier Preston to handle in the latest sign that his career might not be destined to end in disappointment after all.

"I know a lot of people are talking about my age but... I want to play more years at the top level," said the Poland international.

"I feel very good physically, I think looking at the stats there's no difference now to a few years ago."

Girona beat Barcelona twice last season but have struggled to hit those heights again and sit 13th. "They were superior," admitted Girona coach Michel Sanchez. "There's a difference between the teams and that's the truth... Barcelona dream of titles every year."

Flick rotated some of his usual suspects with the Copa del Rey semi-final clash against Atletico Madrid in mind.

Barca were below their free-flowing best in the first half despite dominating, occasionally threatening through the dynamic running of teenage star Lamine Yamal and frantic energy of Fermin Lopez.

Barcelona wanted a penalty when Fermin was brought down by Yaser Asprilla on the edge of the box and a free-kick was given. A VAR review showed the contact was inside the area but the referee decided Lopez fouled

Asprilla as they came together, much to Barcelona's chagrin.

Paulo Gazzaniga produced a sensational save with his fingers to push out a Ronald Araujo header but Barca found a way through before half-time.

Yamal's dangerous free-kick aimed at Eric Garcia was deflected into his own net by Krejci at the near post.

Girona had produced very little of note in the first half but were back level eight minutes into the second through Danjuma. Daley Blind played the Dutch striker through and he beat Wojciech Szczesny with a clinical low finish.

However, Barcelona were swiftly back in front as La Liga's top goalscorer Lewandowski notched his 24th of the campaign. Lopez nodded the ball across the six-yard box and Lewandowski contorted his body to reach it and flick it between Gazzaniga's legs.

The forward secured Barcelona's victory with his 25th, slotting home after substitute Frenkie de Jong pushed forward into space and fed him.

There was time for Torres to add a fourth after Gerard Martin found him and for the brilliant Yamal to bend a strike against the crossbar.

This was remarkably the 20th time this season Flick's side have scored four goals or more from 45 games, with a potential treble in their sights.

"This is what I love about my team, they always want to score goals, it's always like that," Flick told reporters.

"This is the mentality and the attitude of the team and it's good, I think everyone loves it, you love it, the fans love it, the club loves it, and everyone is happy at the moment."



Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski celebrates scoring his team's second goal against Girona yesterday. (AFP)

INTER SIX POINTS CLEAR IN SERIE A AFTER SQUEEZING PAST UDINESE

Inter Milan continued their march towards a second straight Serie A title with a tense 2-1 win over Udinese which moved the reigning champions six points clear at the top of the league. Goals in the opening half an hour from Marko Arnautovic and Davide Frattesi were just enough to give Inter their third straight win ahead of the first of two Milan derbies in the Italian Cup semi-finals on Wednesday.

Inter have a huge month coming up as

Simone Inzaghi's side also face a titanic Champions League quarter-final with Bayern Munich and tricky fixtures with fourth-placed Bologna and Roma which could be

crucial to their title defence. Inzaghi's team now await the result of closest challengers Napoli's clash with AC Milan later on Sunday after all but ending Atalanta's already slim title hopes.

Atalanta are nine points behind Inter in third place after slumping to a 1-0 defeat at Fiorentina without registering a single shot on target.

Inzaghi will be happy to have seen second-string players step up given his team's upcoming commitments, with Arnautovic and Frattesi giving Inter a fully-deserved two-goal lead at half-time by sweeping home Federico Dimarco crosses in the

12th and 29th minutes. Arnautovic was playing in place of injured captain Lautaro Martinez and Frattesi for his Italy teammate Nicolo Barella. And both delivered against 10th-placed Udinese, who were nowhere for most of the match but made Inter sweat after Oumar Solet's rocket halved the deficit in the 71st minute.

Inter also had goalkeeper Yann Sommer to thank that a seemingly certain three points didn't turn into one with two superb saves from Lorenzo Lucca and Solet. Sommer crashed into the post in the 74th minute when he pulled off an incredible stop to deny Lucca from scoring from a

free header, before charging down Solet in the first minute of stoppage time.

Moise Kean continued his excellent season with the only goal of Fiorentina's win over Atalanta on the stroke of half-time in Florence, pushing the hosts to within a point of the European places.

Italy striker Kean, who scored twice for his country against Germany a week ago, inflicted a first league away defeat for Atalanta since August when he confidently netted his 16th league goal of the season after robbing Atalanta defender Isak Hien on the halfway line. Last year's Europa League winners Atalanta, who looked

like title candidates following an 11-match winning streak between October and December, have fallen away since the turn of the year. Gian Piero Gasperini's team have won just four league matches in 2025, all of them away from home, and are now only two points ahead of Bologna.

"We lacked the dynamism and energy to give Fiorentina any difficulty... we just have to put it behind us and look ahead," said Gasperini.

Cagliari strengthened their bid to avoid relegation by thumping rock-bottom Monza 3-0 and moving six points clear of the drop zone.