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CRICKET | Page 2

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FORMULA 1 | Page 3

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SPORT



FOOTBALL

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Page 4

SPOTLIGHT

Sheikh Joaan concludes Central Asia tour to advance Olympic collaboration and support national priorities in sport

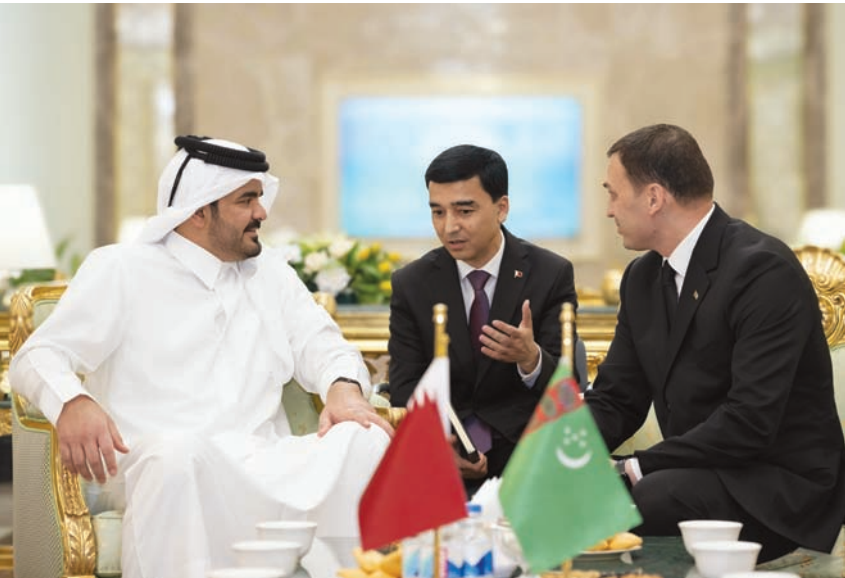
HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, Senior Vice-President and Vice-President for Asia of the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC), has concluded a regional tour of Central Asia aimed at deepening ANOC's engagement with National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and enhancing co-operation in the development of sport across the region. The visit reaffirmed ANOC's commitment to listening directly to NOCs and their national partners to better understand local priorities and to support their ambitions in close coordination with the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA).

The tour, which included official visits to Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, was conducted alongside Husain al-Musallam, President of World Aquatics and Director General of the OCA, and Dr Thani bin Abdulrahman al-Kuwari, Vice-President of the OCA.

The first stop was in Turkmenistan's capital, where Sheikh Joaan was greeted upon arrival at Ashgabat International Airport by Saparov Allaberdi Orazmammedovich, Chairman of the State Committee for Physical Culture and Sports of Turkmenistan, and Ata Akmammedov, Secretary-General of the National Olympic Committee of Turkmenistan.

The following day, Sheikh Joaan was received at the Presidential Palace by Serdar Berdimuhamedov, President of Turkmenistan and President of the National Olympic Committee of Turkmenistan, for a meeting also attended by senior representatives from the Turkmenistan NOC. Discussions focused on the country's sporting aspirations and areas where greater cooperation with ANOC and the OCA could further support Turkmenistan's Olympic development.

Upon arrival in the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, Sheikh Joaan was received by national and Olympic officials before being hosted for a dinner by Gulahmadzoda Zulfiqor Ahmad, Chairman of the Committee of Youth Affairs and Sports, along with Nazarov Dilshod, Vice President of the National Olympic Committee of



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani's visit to Central Asia reaffirmed Association of National Olympic Committees' commitment to listening directly to NOCs and their national partners to better understand local priorities and to support their ambitions in close co-ordination with the Olympic Council of Asia.

Tajikistan, and Abdullozoda Muhammadsho Mirzokhon, Secretary-General of the Tajikistan NOC.

The following day, he held a meeting with Rustami Emomali, Mayor of Dushanbe and Executive Board Member of the National Olympic Committee of the Republic of Tajikistan. Discussions focused on strengthening Tajikistan's engagement with the Olympic Movement, enhancing athlete development pathways, and exploring areas for collaboration with ANOC and the OCA in technical training, international promotion of traditional sports, and infrastructure development that positions Tajikistan as an emerging host nation for regional and international sporting events.

The final leg of the tour took place in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. Upon arrival at Nursultan Nazarbayev International Airport, Sheikh Joaan was received by Yerbol Myrzabosynov, Minister of Tourism and Sports; Golovkin, President of the Kazakhstan National Olympic Committee; and Nurlan Zhakupov, President of



the Kazakh Aquatics Federation. Later that day, he attended official meetings at the headquarters of the Kazakhstan National Olympic Committee, followed by a formal dinner with the same delegation.



coming Continental Athletes' Forum and the country's broader contributions to regional Olympic sport. Both sides reaffirmed their shared commitment to athlete-centred collaboration and sustainable sport development across the region.

Throughout the tour, Sheikh Joaan emphasised ANOC's role as a collaborative partner, committed to meaningful consultation with National Olympic Committees and to ensuring that its support is shaped by the voices, needs, and ambitions of the members it serves. The visit reinforced Central Asia's growing importance within the Olympic Movement and highlighted ANOC's commitment to strengthening the region's capacity through cooperation, solidarity, and tailored support. By fostering direct dialogue, the tour helped to identify shared goals, deepen relationships, and reaffirm ANOC's role as a trusted partner dedicated to empowering the Olympic community across Asia in close coordination with the OCA and national stakeholders.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Al Gharafa beat Al Arabi to get back to winning ways

Ahli come from two goals down to defeat Shahania; Wakrah edge Umm Salal 1-0 in a crucial match

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Gharafa secured a 3-1 victory over Al Arabi at Al Thumama Stadium in the Qatar Stars League yesterday. Al Gharafa's goals were scored by Yacine Brahimi, Jose-lu and Saif El-Din Fadlallah, while Abdullah Maarefi scored for Al Arabi.

Gharafa maintained its third place in the table with 40, while Al Arabi dropped to ninth place with 23 points. Al Gharafa was the better side at the start of the match, threatening Al Arabi's goal.

The first chance came for the Panthers when Brahimi penetrated the area before firing a powerful shot that was blocked by Al Arabi goalkeeper Mohamed Ibrahim in the 18th minute. Spaniard Joselu then attempted a cross, but his header went over the bar in the 22nd minute.

Ahmed Alaa led a swift counterattack for Al Arabi, passing to Abdullah Maarefi who dribbled past goalkeeper Khalifa Abubaker before firing home to give Arabi the lead in the 32nd minute.

Al Gharafa then tried to find the net against Al Arabi, leading a coordinated attack that saw Spaniard Joselu fire a powerful shot that was blocked by the goalkeeper before the ball returned to Yacine Brahimi, who placed it in the far corner with a brilliant shot, scoring the equaliser in the 45th minute.

Arabi appeared with a different face at



Al Gharafa's Yacine Brahimi attempts to control the ball during the Qatar Stars League match against Al Arabi at Al Thumama Stadium.

the beginning of the second half, throwing their offensive weight behind them in search of an opening goal. Wassim Kadari almost scored when he capitalised on a cross from the Spaniard Rodrigo, heading

it over the bar in the 59th minute.

Despite Arabi's improved attacking threat, Al Gharafa quickly regained control, imposing their advantage and searching for the lead through Joselu, who

tapped in Rabah Boussaf's cross in the 76th minute.

Al Gharafa extended their lead with a third goal after a counterattack, with Fadlallah surprising the goalkeeper who was advancing from his goal and firing the ball from a long distance into the net in the 81st minute.

Earlier, Al Ahli came from two goals down to defeat Al Shahania 3-2 at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium. Idrissa Doumbia scored a brace (76th minute and 90+2 minute) after Driss Fettohui had scored in the 69th minute as The Brigadiers moved closer to a top-four finish with their 35 points tally, while Al Shahania, who got both of their goals from Pelle van Amersfoort (30th and 50th minutes) remained on 23 points.

Erik Exposito missed the opportunity of hitting the net early for Al Ahli when his right-footed shot from 25 yards in the 11th minute went narrowly wide before Hamad Mansour had a near miss 10 minutes later.

Despite Al Ahli's repeated attempts, it was the hosts who had the luck of getting the opener in the 30th minute through Van Amersfoort, who finished off a brilliant move by Alhassan Koroma in the final third with a right-footed shot that caught goalkeeper Yazan Naim flat-footed.

Al Shahania doubled the lead five minutes into the second half with Van Amersfoort once again hitting the bull's eye from the centre of the box after impressive teamwork that ended with Francesco Antonucci laying the pass to the Dutch at-

tacking midfielder to score.

A third goal almost ensued three minutes later after Moameen Mutasem hijacked the ball in the centre circle before going on an overlapping run, which he unfortunately could not translate into a goal as his left-footed shot from the left side of the box missed to the left.

Al Ahli pulled one back from a set piece in the 69th minute through Fettohui, who perfectly curled in the resulting free-kick after a foul on Exposito by Mohammed Sayyar.

The game took on a more interesting tone after the goal as The Brigadiers went in search of the much-needed equaliser which they eventually got in the 76th minute through Doumbia, who only had to tap in from close range after some beautiful football wizardry from Draxler.

Al Ahli finally turned the game on its head in two minutes of added time as they went from two goals down to a one-goal lead with Doumbia getting his brace of the night, again from a Draxler assist, ensuring the match ended in the visitors' favour.

Meanwhile, a Farid Boulaya strike saw Al Wakrah edge Umm Salal 1-0 in a crucial match at the Grand Hamad Stadium. Algerian midfielder Boulaya struck from about 15 yards outside the box in the 19th minute of the match to dash the rivals' hopes.

The crucial win took Al Wakrah's points tally to seventh place with 24 points. The defeat, meanwhile, left Umm Salal stranded on 15 points, battling in the relegation zone with bottom-placed Al Khor.

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Marsh, Markram shine as Lucknow edge past Mumbai

Suryakumar Yadav’s 43-ball 67 and Pandya’s late blitz in vain

AFP
Lucknow, India

Openers Mitchell Marsh and Aiden Markram hit half-centuries to set up a tense 12-run victory for Lucknow Super Giants against IPL heavyweights Mumbai Indians yesterday.

Five-time champions Mumbai suffered an early blow when former skipper Rohit Sharma missed the match due to an injury to his knee during training.

Mumbai skipper Hardik Pandya claimed his maiden T20 five-wicket haul and then hit an unbeaten 28 off 16 balls but the effort went in vain as his team slipped to their third defeat in four matches.

Lucknow posted 203-8 as Marsh, who hit 60, and Markram, who made 53, put on 76 runs for the opening wicket after being invited to bat first at their home ground.

Bowlers combined to restrict Mumbai to 191-5 despite Suryakumar Yadav’s 43-ball 67 and Pandya’s late blitz as Lucknow bounced back from a loss for their second win in four matches.

Mumbai needed 29 off the last 12 balls when Shardul Thakur gave away just seven runs in the 19th over and fellow quick Avesh Khan kept his calm after being hit for a six on the first ball of the last over.

Mumbai’s impact substitute Tilak Varma made 25 off 23 balls before he retired out in the penultimate over.

Australia Marsh set up victory with an attacking 31-ball knock that set the tone for the hosts’ domination as he smashed nine fours and two sixes.

Marsh, who is playing in this IPL only as a batsman and registered his third half-century of this season, finally fell caught and bowled to rookie left-arm wrist spinner Vignesh Puthur.

West Indies left-hander Nicholas Pooran departed after his quick 12 as Pandya got his



Lucknow Super Giants’ Mitchell Marsh in action against Mumbai Indians during their IPL match in Lucknow, India, yesterday. (Reuters)

first and soon dismissed skipper Rishabh Pant for two.

Wicketkeeper-batsman Pant, who broke an IPL auction record when he went to Lucknow for a whopping \$3.21mn, has flopped with the bat with scores of 0, 15 and two in the earlier matches.

Markram stood firm and put together 51 runs with Ayush Badoni, who hit 30, to pull Lucknow through the middle phase before fellow South African David Miller joined the charge.

Pandya kept up his bowling form as he sent

back Markram but the left-handed Miller hit 27 off 14 balls to boost the total.

Pandya took two successive wickets in the 20th over of the match but a hat-trick was avoided after a wide ball and he finished with figures of 5-36 - a first five-wicket haul for an IPL captain.

BRIEF SCORES
Lucknow Super Giants 203 for 8 (Marsh 60, Markram 53, Hardik 5-36) **beat Mumbai Indians 191 for 5** (Suryakumar 67, Dhir 46, Rathi 1-21) **by 12 runs**

BASKETBALL

Qatar ranked fourth for 2025 FIBA Asian Cup



The FIBA Asia Regional Office has announced the rankings for the teams set to compete in the 31st edition of the FIBA Asia Cup, scheduled to take place in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, from August 5-17, 2025. This announcement precedes the tournament draw, which is planned for April 8, 2025, in Jeddah.

Qatar have been placed fourth among the 16 teams that have qualified for the Asian Cup finals, joining India, Guam, and Iraq in this ranking. Conversely, the host nation, Saudi Arabia, has secured the top position in the first seed, alongside Australia, Japan, and New Zealand.

The second seed comprises Iran, Lebanon, China, and the Philippines, while the third seed includes Jordan, South Korea, Syria, and Chinese Taipei. The 16 participating teams will be organised into four groups of four. The winners of each group will progress directly to the quarter-finals, while the teams finishing in second and third place will enter a knockout round.

The quarter-final victors will move on to the semifinals, culminating in a grand final to crown the Asian champion. The teams that do not advance will compete in a match for third place.

The 16 teams qualifying for this tournament were selected from the top teams in Asia and Oceania through a qualifying process that spanned three windows over a year and a half, utilising a home-and-away format. These teams also qualified for the FIBA Basketball World Cup qualifiers for the Asia-Oceania region.

Qatar have achieved its 11th qualification for the 31st Asian Cup finals, marking its return after an eight-year hiatus. In the joint Asian qualifiers for the 2025 AFC Asian Cup, which will also be held in Jeddah from August 5-17, and the 2027 FIFA World Cup, Qatar finished second in Group E with 10 points, just behind group leaders Iran, who secured 11 points.

Saudi Arabia automatically qualified for the tournament as the host nation, while Australia (the two-time defending champions), Japan, Jordan, Lebanon, New Zealand, and the Philippines earned their spots in Jeddah through their performances in the 2025 AFC Asian Cup qualifiers. The final roster of participating teams was finalised after Chinese Taipei, Guam, India, and Iraq emerged as the top four teams from the concluding qualifying round, which took place in two different cities.

In Group G, held in Taipei, Chinese Taipei and Guam led the standings, with Chinese Taipei winning both of its matches against Guam and Thailand, while Guam secured one victory against Thailand but lost to Chinese Taipei. Meanwhile, in Group H, hosted in the Kingdom of Bahrain, India and Iraq achieved similar success, qualifying with impressive results in the final qualifiers. Basketball enthusiasts throughout Asia are eagerly anticipating the commencement of this significant continental event, recognised as one of the premier FIBA tournaments in the region, particularly due to the participation of several strong teams, all vying for a place on the podium at Jeddah 2025.

GOLF

Ryder fires 63 to grab Texas Open lead

Reuters
San Antonio, Texas

Sam Ryder birdied six of his final seven holes to shoot a bogey-free, 9-under-par 63 and take the first-round lead at the Valero Texas Open on Thursday in San Antonio.

Ryder was tied for the lead with Keith Mitchell (64) when he stepped to the tee at the par-5, 613-yard 18th hole at TPC San Antonio’s Oaks Course. He stopped his third shot about a foot from the hole and tapped in for the go-ahead birdie.

Mitchell is alone in second, while Brian Harman is third after a 6-under 66. Jordan Spieth is tied with Carson Young at 5-under 67.

Ryder, 35, has never won on the PGA Tour and holds the No 154 ranking in the world. If he wins the tournament, he would earn an invitation to the Masters next week.

“I’ve been focused... I feel like my game’s been in a good place and I’ve been generally healthy so I feel like I know kind of my DNA as a player and I’ve been able to just kind of hone in on that,” Ryder said after posting his lowest-scoring round of the season. “The putter’s been good this year, I think that contributes to my consistency.”

However, Ryder was not 100 percent healthy entering the tournament. He revealed that he strained his upper back or neck during practice on Tuesday and had to skip the Wednesday pro-am.

“My tee time wasn’t until 12:40,” he said. “I got out here at 9:30, I wanted to make some swings and just kind of see where I was at. If I wasn’t going to be able to play, I wanted to let them know that in advance. My coach was here and I kind of was able to make some swings and I kind of was a little gun shy early, and as I built up the speed, I kind of got more confi-

dence and trust in what I was doing.”

Ryder led the field with 127 feet of made putts, including birdies from 15 feet away at No 1, nearly 22 feet at No 12 and 23 1/2 feet at No 16.

Mitchell’s round was also bogey-free and featured an eagle at the par-5 eighth, where his second shot rolled to about 3 feet from the pin.

“My game’s been trending,” Mitchel said. “I’d like to put some solid rounds together, hopefully it’s this week. I feel like my scores have been showing at least in the first couple rounds lately that my game’s where it needs to be and just going to try to stack ‘em all up this week.”

After an opening bogey, Spieth made two birdies on the front nine and four more on his way in, including one at the par-4 17th. After badly missing the fairway to the right and landing in a native area,

he pitched onto the green and sank a 12-foot birdie putt.

Spieth, a Texas native, won this event in 2021 and is looking for his first win on tour in almost three years. He has had a fine start to the season after recovering from off-season wrist surgery.

“It’s been a little bit of a mixed bag, but I’ve had way more (positive) days than I have in the last couple years, really since May of ‘23 when I first injured my wrist,” Spieth said.

Other notable players like Spieth who are tuning up for next week’s major include Englishman Tommy Fleetwood (68), Sam Burns and Tony Finau (69) and Patrick Cantlay, Keegan Bradley and Swede Ludvig Aberg (71). Rickie Fowler (75), Max Homa (76), Englishman Matt Fitzpatrick (76) and South Korea’s Tom Kim (77) are in danger of missing the 36-hole cut.

Defending champion Akshay Bhatia opened with a 74.



Sam Ryder watches his tee shot on the eleventh hole during the second round of the Valero Texas Open golf tournament. (Reuters)

REPORT: PGA TOUR REJECTS \$1.5BN OFFER FROM SAUDI INVESTMENT FUND

New York: It doesn’t look like the PGA Tour and Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund will be settling their differences any time soon.

ESPN sources confirmed that the PGA Tour has rejected the PIF’s recent offer to invest \$1.5bn into PGA Tour Enterprises. The investment offer came with the provision that the rival LIV Golf league would remain intact.

That reportedly does not work for the PGA Tour, which wants to have the world’s top golfers all competing on one circuit. The PGA Tour replied to the PIF’s offer in a letter on Monday, according to *The Guardian* of London.

“We will not do so in a way that diminishes the strength of our platform or the very real momentum we have with our fans and our partners,” PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan said at last month’s Players Championship. “So while we’ve removed some hurdles, others remain. But like our fans, we still share the same sense of urgency to get to a resolution.”

The two sides met at the White House on Feb 20. President Donald Trump said Thursday he is optimistic of an eventual merger between the PGA Tour and LIV Golf following a new report of a stalemate in negotiations to reunify the game.

Speaking on Air Force One as he travelled to Florida ahead of this weekend’s LIV Golf Miami event at

Trump National Doral, the US leader said he believed a merger was inevitable.

“Ultimately, hopefully the two tours are going to merge,” Trump told reporters. “That’ll be good. I’m involved in that, too, but hopefully we’re going to get the two tours to merge. You’ve got the PGA Tour, you’ve got the LIV tour. And I think having them merge would be a great thing.”

Trump, a keen golfer, has hosted two rounds of recent talks at the White House between leaders of the PGA Tour and the Saudi Arabia-financed LIV as the sport attempts to move on from the enmity which erupted after LIV’s entry in 2021.

Monahan said earlier this month that Trump’s intervention in ongoing negotiations had “significantly bolstered” hopes of reunifying the sport.

News of the deadlock comes ahead of the first major of the year at next week’s Masters at Augusta National, where 12 players from LIV Golf will tee off against top rivals from the PGA Tour.

Five-time major winner Brooks Koepka, one of the highest-profile players to defect to LIV Golf, admitted this week that he was disappointed that the Saudi-funded circuit had not progressed further in its four seasons. “I think we all hoped it would have been a little bit further along, and that’s no secret,” he said. “But they’re making progress and it seems to be going in the right direction.”

ANNOUNCEMENT

England fast bowler Stone set to miss most of India Test series

AFP
London

England fast bowler **Ollly Stone** will miss the majority of a five-match Test series against India after undergoing knee surgery which will rule him out for 14 weeks.

Stone played the last of his five Tests against Sri Lanka in September and had been hoping to push for further honours with Nottinghamshire this year.

But the latest in a long line of fitness issues mean he will be starting a long recovery period of more than three months as the county season got under way yesterday.

He joins fellow England quicks Mark Wood and Brydon Carse on the sidelines at the start of the domestic campaign.

“England and Nottinghamshire fast bowler Ollly Stone has been ruled out of all cricket for 14 weeks following scans and subsequent surgery this week, which confirmed a right knee injury,” the England and Wales Cricket Board said in a statement.

“Stone experienced increasing discomfort during Nottinghamshire’s pre-season tour of Abu Dhabi



last month. Further scans conducted this week revealed the need for surgery. He will now begin a period of rehabilitation, working closely with the medical teams at both the ECB and Nottinghamshire.”

England face Zimbabwe in a one-off Test from May 22 in preparation for the visit on India, with the five-Test series beginning on June 20.

Stone could be back in action by the time of the final two Tests but is more likely to return for the London Spirit in the Hundred, which begins on August 5.

FORMULA ONE

Crashes and fires as Piastri fastest in Japan practice

Two of the red flags were for trackside grass fires during a badly disrupted afternoon session

AFP
Suzuka, Japan

Oscar Piastri went fastest yesterday for a McLaren one-two in a chaotic second practice for the Japanese Grand Prix that was red-flagged four times.

Two of the red flags were for trackside grass fires during a badly disrupted afternoon session in which Australia's Piastri clocked a best lap of 1min 28.114sec.

He pipped teammate and championship leader Lando Norris by 0.049sec in dry but blustery conditions at Suzuka, where home hero Yuki Tsunoda showed promise on his Red Bull debut.

Piastri and Norris - who went quickest in first practice - have won one Grand Prix each in a dominant start to the season from McLaren.

Piastri, who won last time out in Shanghai, called it "a bit of an up-and-down day" after being 15th in first practice.

"But there's definitely been positives in there," he added.

"We've got a few things to tidy up for tomorrow."

Australian rookie Jack Doohan was lucky to walk away unhurt after badly damaging his Alpine in a heavy smash into the barriers.

There was further drama when Spaniard Fernando Alonso beached his Aston Martin in the gravel and two fires broke out on the grass around the track.

RB's Isack Hadjar was third fastest, 0.404sec behind Piastri, followed by Ferrari's Lewis Hamilton and RB's Liam Lawson.

Mercedes' George Russell was sixth, followed by Ferrari's Charles Leclerc and Red Bull's four-time world champion Max Verstappen.

His new teammate Tsunoda was a lowly 18th, 2.511sec behind



McLaren's Australian driver Oscar Piastri (also inset) drives during the second practice session of the Japanese Grand Prix at the Suzuka circuit, Mie prefecture, yesterday. (AFP)

Piastri, but without completing a representative lap on soft tyres. He was a promising sixth in the morning.

The Japanese driver said his closely watched first day in the Red Bull was "OK, but it could have been better".

"We didn't set a lap time in FP2 due to the number of stops in the session, you could maybe call the session a shambles for everyone," said Tsunoda.

"Overall it is OK and I'm happy to have confidence in the car."

High-speed crash

A highly eventful second practice was red-flagged about 10 minutes in when the 22-year-old Doohan spun off the track and smashed into the barriers at high speed.

The car was badly damaged, with one wheel flying off upon impact. Doohan quickly confirmed he was unhurt and climbed out of the cockpit unaided before being helped back to the pits.

"Following precautionary medical checks, we can confirm that Jack is ok. Now we're working hard to get the car ready for tomorrow," Alpine said on social media.

The session was halted for around 20 minutes and it restarted for only a matter of minutes before it was stopped again.

Alonso barrelled off the track and came to a halt deep into the gravel.

The Spaniard radioed to say that he was stuck and his car had to be lifted away before practice could continue.

The red flag came out a third time when sparks from the cars started a small fire on the grass surrounding the track.

There was just enough time for another stoppage with 10 seconds of the session remaining when sparks started another blaze.

The session marked an eventful first day behind the wheel of the Red Bull for Tsunoda in his home Grand Prix.

The 24-year-old was catapulted into a Red Bull seat last week when Lawson was axed just two races into the season. Norris went fastest in the first practice session ahead of Russell and Leclerc.

Qualifying for the Japanese Grand Prix, the third race of the season, is today. The race is tomorrow.

Albon says Thailand taking bid for F1 race 'very seriously'

Suzuka, Japan: British-Thai driver Alex Albon says that Thailand is taking its bid to host a Formula One race "very seriously" after meeting the prime minister and seeing the plans for himself. Thailand is among a number of countries eager to host the sport for the first time, with a race around the streets of the capital Bangkok mooted. F1 chief Stefano Domenicali met Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra last month and Albon paid her a visit before this weekend's Japanese Grand Prix. "We're trying to help get the Thai GP under way and seeing how we can help," Albon, who races for Williams and is Thailand's only F1 driver, told reporters at Suzuka.

Albon added: "It's moving along, obviously nothing's finalised but it's really good to see the commitment from Thailand. "They're taking it very seriously and I think as a product, they have a very strong product." Most of Formula One's 24-race schedule is confirmed for several years but gaps are set to open up and Domenicali has suggested that Thailand could be a contender to join the circuit. The London-born Albon declined to give any more details about what a race in Thailand would look like, but was impressed by what he saw.

"I've seen a generic look at what they're trying to do with it, and it looks good," he said. Formula One currently stages one race in Southeast Asia, in Singapore, which is regarded as the toughest race of the season

because of the intense heat and humidity.

Russell filling Hamilton's shoes, says Mercedes official

George Russell has "stepped up" for Mercedes and grown into a leadership role since Lewis Hamilton left for Ferrari, the team's engineering director said yesterday.

Russell is now the German team's senior driver after seven-time world champion Hamilton departed at the end of last season and was replaced by 18-year-old rookie Kimi Antonelli. Russell has responded with two third-placed finishes to start the season and Andrew Shovlin said the 27-year-old Briton was embracing his role as Antonelli's mentor.

"George is trying to give him the benefit of his experience," Shovlin said at the Japanese Grand Prix in Suzuka.

"George has stepped up into that role being the team's most experienced driver now.

"We always knew he was quick. In his own approach he has brought a confidence and a calmness this year that's working very well for us."

Antonelli has made a strong start to his F1 career, finishing fourth in Australia and sixth in China. "It's really pleasing to see how the two of them are working together and how George has stepped up into that role," said Shovlin. Russell is out of contract at the end of the season and Red Bull's four-time world champion Max Verstappen has been linked with a move to Mercedes.

TENNIS

Demand for more prize money at majors is about fair treatment: Navarro

Reuters
London

American Emma Navarro said she had put her name to a letter signed by the world's top tennis players calling for significant improvements in prize money at the four Grand Slams as a way to ensure players receive equal treatment.

French outlet *L'Equipe* reported late on Wednesday that the top 20 ATP and WTA players had sent the letter to the Australian Open, the French Open, Wimbledon and the US Open recently demanding a more equitable distribution of revenue.

While those at the top of the game are able to benefit from increased prize money, players at the lower levels often struggle due to a lack of steady sponsorship as well as expensive coaching, travel and accommodation.

"I talked a little bit to the other players about it and felt like it was a good idea to sign," the world number 11 told reporters at the Charleston Open. "I think there have been some sort of unfair pay ratios - I don't know the correct terminology - but in the past.

"I think it's a good cause to come together as players and make sure we're getting treated fairly."

French Open organisers confirmed to Reuters that they had received the letter, adding that the Roland Garros remains committed to working with players and stakeholders to develop tennis responsibly and collectively.

"We have responded by proposing a direct, open and constructive meeting at the Madrid Open, at Roland-Garros, or at any other suitable time," the statement said.



Emma Navarro of United States celebrates her win against Hailey Baptiste of United States during the Credit One Charleston Open at Credit One Stadium in Charleston, South Carolina. (AFP)

"Over the last five years, the tournament's prize money has increased by 25%, reaching €53.4mn (\$58.73mn) in 2024.

"Over the same period, Roland-Garros has also significantly increased (+50%) its investment in infrastructure and services (hotels, catering, etc.) dedicated to players."

The United States Tennis Association, which runs the US Open, also confirmed it had received the letter and said it "welcomes open and direct conversations with players," while noting that it was proud of its history of leadership on player compensation.

"This includes offering equal prize money to men and women for more than 50 years and awarding the largest purse in tennis history at the 2024 US Open," the USTA said in a statement to Reuters.

"As the national governing body of tennis in the US, we are also focused on ensuring that we can properly support and fund our mission of growing tennis to inspire healthier people and communities everywhere."

Reuters has also contacted the other three Grand Slams seeking comment.

In 2024, a record \$254mn in player compensation was awarded at the Grand Slams, up \$23mn from 2023, and the trend is set to continue with the Australian Open in January boosting its prize money by 11.56% from last year.

At Melbourne Park this year, the champions collected nearly \$2.2mn while players going out in the first round picked up around \$83,000.

World number eight Zheng Qinwen told reporters more money from the Grand Slams would

filter down to the lower ranks. "I think that's going to benefit all the players, not only the top players, especially those that work hard during the year and need to get paid from the Grand Slams and have to survive," she added.

Zheng said tennis should follow the example of the NBA, where players earn in aggregate around 50% of basketball-related income.

"That's really positive, because if you look at basketball, they all get paid 50-50. The players, we're working really hard, because I'm a tennis player I know how much I've worked to arrive here," added the Olympic champion.

Zheng said she was unsure if the Grand Slams would listen to the demands of the players.

"We try to do what we can, and then let's see what happens to us. But at least we're trying."

SPOTLIGHT

Five French players receive lengthy bans

Reuters
Paris

Five French players have received bans ranging from two years to life after they were found guilty of match-fixing, the International Tennis Integrity Agency said yesterday.

Yannick Thivant, Thomas Brechemier, Gabriel Petit, Thomas Setodji and Hugo Daubias are the players sanctioned, with the punishments linked to a criminal case heard in 2023 involving a match-fixing group in Belgium, the ITIA said.

"Collaboration between the ITIA and Belgian authorities led to a five-year custodial sentence for the leader of the syndicate, Grigor Sargsyan," the ITIA said in a media release. "Four of the cases were ruled on by an independent Anti-Corruption Hearing Officer (AHO), with the fifth resolved directly between the player and the ITIA."

Thivant was issued a lifetime ban and fined \$75,000 in addition to €37,400 (\$41,083.90) in restitu-

tion after the 38-year-old admitted to fixing 22 matches between 2017 and 2018, with the sanction taking effect on February 14.

Setodji, 29, has been suspended for 10 years and fined \$20,000, in addition to €5,500 (\$6,041.75) restitution, "after being found liable for fixing three matches in 2017 and failing to report a corrupt approach in 2018."

Brechemier was handed a seven years and six months suspension plus fined \$40,000, of which \$27,500 is suspended, after admitting to fixing 11 matches between 2017 and 2018.

Petit was issued a six years and six months suspension and fined \$35,000 after he failed to respond to the ITIA's charges. Daubias has been suspended for two years and fined \$15,000. Brechemier was the highest ranked player between the five with a career-high singles ranking of 399.

The ITIA said the five players are prohibited from playing, coaching or attending any tennis event authorised or sanctioned by the members of the ITIA or any national association during their suspensions.

FOCUS

ATP chief Calvelli to step down in June

AFP
Paris

Massimo Calvelli will step down from his role as chief executive of the ATP in June, the men's professional tennis governing body announced yesterday.

The Italian has been in the job since being appointed in January 2020. The ATP said chairman Andrea Gaudenzi would combine his current role with the post of CEO as the organisation looks for Calvelli's successor. "It's been a privilege to serve as CEO of the ATP over the past five years," Calvelli

said in an ATP statement. "I'm proud of the progress we've made together and deeply thankful to the team I've worked alongside."

The early part of his tenure was marked by an upheaval of the schedule due to Covid. "Calvelli played a pivotal role in guiding the organisation through the challenges of the global pandemic," the ATP said. Under Calvelli, the ATP also signed a multi-year partnership with the Saudi sovereign wealth fund in February 2024.

A tennis union co-founded by Novak Djokovic last month announced a series of legal actions aimed at the sport's governing bodies, including the ATP.

PREMIER LEAGUE

De Bruyne to leave Man City at end of the season

Midfielder has been instrumental in City's rise to become the dominant force

AFP

Manchester

Kevin De Bruyne was hailed by Pep Guardiola as one of the Premier League's all-time greats after the Belgian confirmed yesterday he will leave Manchester City at the end of the season. De Bruyne, 33, has won 14 major trophies since joining City from Wolfsburg in 2015, including six Premier League titles and the Champions League in 2023.

"Nothing about this is easy to write, but as football players, we all know this day eventually comes. That day is here - and you deserve to hear it from me first," De Bruyne said in a post on social media.

"Football led me to all of you - and to this city. Chasing my dream, not knowing this period would change my life. This City. This club. These people... gave me EVERYTHING. I had no choice but to give EVERYTHING back! And guess what - we won everything."

De Bruyne has been instrumental in City's rise to become the dominant force in English football. He was twice crowned players' player of the year in 2019/2020 and 2020/2021. The Belgium captain sits second in the Premier League's all-time standings for assists on 118 and has scored 106 goals in 413 appearances for City.

"He's one of the greatest we've ever seen," said City manager Guardiola. "His assists, his goals, his vision in the final third, it's so difficult to replace. What he's done here for the past decade has been outstanding."

De Bruyne's contract is due to expire at the end of June but it remains unclear whether he will continue to see out his days as a City player at the Club World Cup, which runs from June 14 until July 13. "Every story comes to an end, but this has definitely been the best chapter," De Bruyne added. "Let's enjoy these last moments together!"

De Bruyne has been linked with a move to the Saudi Pro League or Major League Soccer in the United States. The City captain's influence has diminished in recent seasons due to injury problems. He missed five months last term due to a hamstring tear.

This season he has made just 21 starts in City's 47 matches in all competitions despite the struggles of Guardiola's side to match the standards they have set over the past decade. City sit fifth in the Premier League, 22 points behind leaders Liverpool, and were comfortably beaten 6-3 on ag-



Kevin De Bruyne has won 14 major trophies since joining Manchester City from Wolfsburg in 2015, including six Premier League titles and the Champions League in 2023. (Reuters)

gregate by Real Madrid in the Champions League play-off round.

After breaking through at Genk in his homeland, De Bruyne's first experience of the Premier League did not go well as he was discarded by Chelsea after just nine appearances for the Blues. A move to Wolfsburg kickstarted his career as he was crowned German player of the season in 2014/15 as his side finished second to Bayern Munich in the Bundesliga.

City's £55mn (\$72mn) move to bring him to Manchester was questioned at the time given De Bruyne's struggles at Chelsea. But he quickly proved his critics wrong and became an integral part of the side that under

Guardiola enjoyed one of the most dominant stretches of success English football has ever seen.

City became the first English top-flight team to register 100 points in winning Guardiola's first title in 2017/18. A first ever domestic treble of Premier League, FA Cup and League Cup followed in 2018/19.

City then matched Manchester United's feat as the only English side to win the treble of Premier League, Champions League and FA Cup in 2022/23. They also became the first club to win four consecutive English top-flight titles last season. "We've won a lot of trophies and he's been involved in every single one," added Guardiola.

'Unique' De Bruyne one of the greats, says Guardiola

Manchester: Pep Guardiola said Kevin De Bruyne will be remembered as one of the greatest ever players in the Premier League after the Belgian announced he will leave Manchester City at the end of the season.

"He is one of the greatest midfielders ever to play in this country and for this club - there is no doubt," Guardiola said. "We've won a lot of trophies and he's been involved in every single one."

The City captain's influence has diminished in recent seasons due to injury problems. He missed five months last season due to a hamstring tear and has started just 21 of City's 47 matches in all competitions this season despite the struggles of Guardiola's side to match the standards they have set over the past decade.

But Guardiola hailed De Bruyne's consistency and durability during his peak years that allowed City to Hoover up silverware. "For his consistency, except the last year, year-and-a-half, due to injury problems. The consistency in important games and not important games, every three days being there all the time," added Guardiola. "His assists, goals, vision in final third is so difficult to replace. Everyone can make actions for assists, (it's) how many years and games that makes him unique."

Other greats of City's success since an Abu Dhabi-backed takeover in 2008 transformed the club's fortunes have already been immortalised. Statues of Vincent Kompany, David Silva and Sergio Aguero stand outside the Etihad and Guardiola expects De Bruyne to be recognised in the same fashion. "I would bet a lot of money that it is going to happen, that's for sure," said Guardiola. "He deserves to be in this level."

It remains unclear whether De Bruyne will depart at the end of the Premier League season or will continue to see out his days as a City player at the Club World Cup. De Bruyne's contract is due to expire at the end of June, while the Club World Cup runs from June 14 until July 13.

PSG coach Luis Enrique targets unbeaten season

Paris: Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique said the prospect of completing the Ligue 1 season undefeated provided extra motivation for his team as they stand on the brink of securing another French title. PSG are 21 points clear of nearest challengers Monaco with seven games remaining, meaning a draw at home to Angers today will be enough for them to be confirmed as champions already.

Luis Enrique's side remain unbeaten after 27 games and therefore on course to become the first in French top-flight history to complete the campaign without losing a single match. The likes of Arsene Wenger's Arsenal, Juventus, Celtic and, just last season, Bayer Leverkusen have all gone through domestic league campaigns without losing a game in the 21st century.

In France, Nantes have come the closest, going unbeaten through their first 32 matches of the 38-game season as they took the title in 1994/95.

"There are records which did not interest me until today, but from now on I don't think there is a better source of motivation for us than trying to remain unbeaten for the whole league season," the Spanish coach told reporters. "We are already virtually champions, and keeping this unbeaten run going will help us to be ready in the French Cup, the final of which takes place at the end of May, and in the Champions League if we manage to get to the semi-finals."

Even if PSG lose against Angers, they can still be confirmed as title winners today if Monaco lose at Brest later. The Parisians are on course to match last season's achievement of sweeping all the domestic honours after they beat second-tier Dunkerque 4-2 in the French Cup semi-finals in midweek. They will play top-flight strugglers Reims in the final on May 24. PSG will also face Aston Villa in the quarter-finals of the Champions League, with the first leg at the Parc des Princes on Wednesday.

The closest any French side has come to an unbeaten season remains Nantes, who went undefeated through their first 32 games before losing their only game on the way to winning the title in 1994/95. That was a 38-game season, while PSG will only play 34 matches in this campaign, with the league having recently been reduced from 20 clubs to 18.

LA LIGA

Real Madrid and Barcelona respect each other: Ancelotti

AFP

Madrid

Rivals Real Madrid and Barcelona, locked in a title battle in La Liga and set to face off in the Copa del Rey final, have "a lot of respect" for each other, says Los Blancos coach **Carlo Ancelotti**.

Madrid trail leaders Barcelona by three points in the Spanish top flight with nine matches remaining and reached the Copa del Rey final in midweek with a dramatic 5-4 aggregate victory over Real Sociedad. They will face Barca in the final on April 26 after the Catalans edged past Atletico Madrid.

"Barcelona is playing well, they're in good form," Ancelotti told reporters ahead of his team's game against Valencia at the weekend. "When you play a final, you have to respect all your opponents. I think there's a lot of respect for Barcelona because of their quality, and I think Barcelona also has a lot of respect for Real Madrid."

Real will also face Barca at the Olympic Stadium in a crucial league match in May, while both clubs are through to the Champions League quarter-finals. Ancelotti's men needed extra-time against Sociedad to secure a thrilling 4-4 semi-final, second-leg draw on Tuesday. The reigning La Liga champions on Saturday host a Valencia side who have put together a four-match unbeaten run to pull clear of the relegation zone.

"We have some doubts, obviously, due to the effort in extra-time," added Ancelotti. "We are aware that Valencia are doing very well. This is an important moment of the season."

Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois remains sidelined with a muscle injury while second-choice Andriy Lunin is also a



doubt to face Valencia. Ancelotti said he was confident Courtois will be fit to face Arsenal in the Champions League quarter-final first leg on Tuesday, but admitted 19-year-old third-choice Fran Gonzalez may make his senior debut this weekend.

"There is no concern, Courtois is much better and we think he can make it for Tuesday," said the 65-year-old Italian coach. "We have a doubt for tomorrow's game with Lunin, who has a minor injury, and if he's not fit I have total confidence in Fran."

When asked if he would leave the club should they win the treble of La Liga, Copa del Rey and Champions League titles, Ancelotti insisted: "I won't be the one asking to leave this club." Ancelotti's tax fraud trial ended earlier this week, with Spanish public prosecutors seeking he be jailed for four years and nine months for allegedly hiding income from the tax office.

MBAPPE AMONG THREE REAL MADRID PLAYERS FINED FOR 'INDECENT CONDUCT'

Kylian Mbappe was among three Real Madrid players fined by

UEFA for "violating basic rules of decent conduct" during their Champions League last 16, second leg win over Atletico Madrid. France forward Mbappe was fined 30,000 euros (\$33,000), with German defender Antonio Rudiger getting a 40,000-euro fine and midfielder Dani Ceballos 20,000 euros.

Brazilian forward Vinicius Junior was not punished after UEFA opened an investigation last week targeting the four players. Mbappe and Rudiger also received a suspended one-match European ban. This will not affect the first leg of the Champions League quarter-final against Arsenal next Tuesday.

UEFA did not detail the charges, but only mentioned the violation of article 11 of its disciplinary code - requiring "decent conduct" - following the match on March 12. Record 15-time champions and current holders Madrid beat their rivals on penalties at Atletico's Metropolitan stadium on March 12 after a 2-2 aggregate draw.

Real Madrid players provoked and teased Atletico fans while celebrating their qualification after the thrilling victory.

SPOTLIGHT

Arteta urges Arsenal to enjoy run-in despite injury woes

AFP

London

Mikel Arteta said Arsenal cannot be derailed by the loss of Gabriel Magalhaes for the rest of the season as they chase Premier League and Champions League glory.

The Brazilian centre-back added to Arteta's woes with a hamstring injury in Tuesday's 2-1 win over Fulham that will require surgery. Bukayo Saka came off the bench to score in his first appearance for over three months after suffering a similar injury in December.

Kai Havertz and Gabriel Jesus are already ruled out for the season, while defenders Riccardo Calafiori, Ben White and Jurrien Timber are all doubts for the Gunners' Champions League quarter-final against Real Madrid. "It was a tough one to digest because we just got Bukayo back and then we lost Gabi," said Arteta.

"But the team reacted like it has reacted all season. I'm really proud of that and we know that he's going to be out for a while, so we need to find different solutions and keep competing the way we have been all season. We've come so far and now we have the most important, beautiful part of the season. We have to react to those things, and that means that other players are going to have opportunities to play and the team has to find other ways. It is a big miss undoubtedly, but we have the resources to cope with that."

Saka struck just seven minutes into his comeback



Centre back Gabriel Magalhaes picked up hamstring injury in the first half of Arsenal's 2-1 home win over Fulham on Tuesday and will be out for the rest of the season after undergoing surgery. (Reuters)

against Fulham and Arteta suggested the England international could be handed a start in Saturday's trip to Everton to build up his fitness ahead of the visit of Madrid three days later. "He needs exposure and he's going to have exposure," added Arteta.

"He played against Fulham and he felt really well, he scored a goal and he wants more. It is clear in the last two days that he wants more, is demanding more, and that's a good sign. But the biggest game for us is Everton. And the best way to prepare for Real Madrid is to do what we have to do to beat Everton."

2014 World Cup winner Hummels to retire at season's end

Berlin: Roma defender Mats Hummels, who won the 2014 World Cup with Germany, is set to retire at the end of the season, he announced on social media.

In an emotional video, the 36-year-old referenced "a moment no footballer can avoid," adding "after more than 18 years of everything football has given me, I'm ending my career this summer".

Hummels came through Bayern Munich's juniors and made his debut for the club aged 18, before moving to Borussia Dortmund where he became a core part of Jurgen Klopp's

two-time title winners. Playing alongside fellow centre-back Jerome Boateng, Hummels played every minute of the 2014 World Cup final, where Germany beat Argentina 1-0 at Brazil's Maracana stadium to lift the title for the fourth time.

He later moved back to Bayern, where he won three more league titles. Hummels' return to Bayern, seen critically by some Dortmund fans, was in pursuit of a Champions League title but the defender never managed to break through in Europe's top competition. Hummels returned to Dortmund in 2019,

a year before Bayern beat Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League final to lift their sixth crown. The defender twice played in the showpiece Champions League final, in 2013 and 2024, both times in a losing effort with Dortmund and both times at Wembley. A 78-time Germany player, Hummels played 508 matches for Dortmund and a further 118 for Bayern. He moved to Serie A side Roma in 2024 and will retire having played one season for the club. Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann praised Hummels as "a benchmark at the international level".