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Page 4

BASKETBALL

Al Janoub opens new era with Qatar-China showdown

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Combining sporting legacy with sustainability, Al Janoub Arena will officially open its doors today when it hosts the highly-anticipated clash between Qatar and China in the Asian Qualifiers for the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027.

The game carries special significance as it marks the start of the final-year countdown to the FIBA Basketball World Cup, which Qatar will host for the first time.

It will also be a landmark sporting occasion for the arena, providing its first major test in a World Cup-style competitive environment and giving fans an opportunity to experience the atmosphere of the global event one year before the tournament gets under way.

Qatar continue their competitive journey alongside the country's preparations to host the World Cup. They finished second in Group D of the first phase of the Asian Qualifiers with 10 points, behind Lebanon, to secure their place in the second phase despite already qualifying automatically for the World Cup as hosts.

Qatar coach Hakan Demir yesterday named the 12-man squad for today's clash against China. The roster includes: Mostafa Fouda, Mike Lewis, Mahmoud Darwish, Abdullah Musa, Ndawi Elhaj Sidou, Abdullah Saad, Mohammed Hashem, Ousmane Dieng, Osama Arafa, Abdulrahman, Omar Saad, and Aladji Bobo Magassa.

Following the China game, Qatar will face Japan and South Korea in home-and-away games during the upcoming qualifying windows.

The event is attracting significant attention as it combines the opening of Al Janoub Basketball Arena with the Qatar-China clash, showcasing Qatar's commitment to building a sustainable sporting legacy while underlining its organisational capabilities and readiness to host major continental and international events.

Al Janoub Arena in Al Wakrah has evolved from a football legacy into a new home for basketball, continuing an extraordinary story that began when it hosted matches during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

The venue now returns in a new form following its redevelopment to host the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027, in a first-of-its-kind transformation. The arena features an iconic architectural design and has a capacity of 8,200 spectators for basketball competitions.

It also offers a comprehensive range of facilities and services designed to enhance the fan experience, including Sky Boxes, hospitality seating and Courtside Seats close to the playing court, as well as changing rooms and recovery facilities for teams.

For spectators, food and beverage outlets are distributed throughout the arena, providing comfort and convenience.



Following the game against China today, Qatar will face Japan and South Korea in home-and-away games during the upcoming qualifying windows.



Al Janoub Arena in Al Wakrah, which staged the FIFA World Cup 2022, is Qatar's new home for basketball and will also host the FIBA World Cup next year

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Gharafa look to maintain winning run against Shamal

In the other fixture today, Al Wakrah take on Al Rayyan

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Gharafa and Al Shamal will renew their rivalry when they meet at Khalifa International Stadium today, with both sides looking to make an early statement in the Qatar Stars League.

The second round comes after an exciting opening week, with Al Gharafa among the teams making a winning start. The Cheetahs defeated Al Shahaniya 2-1, with new signing Franck Magri scoring both goals, and will be aiming to build on that performance and maintain their place among the early leaders.

Seven-time champions Al Gharafa go into the game with three points, level with Al Sadd, Al Duhail and Al Rayyan, and coach Pedro Martins will be keen to see his side produce another disciplined performance.

"The victory gave the players a morale boost and great confidence, and we seek to continue winning," Martins said. "All the players are in good condition and there are no injuries."

Martins expects a difficult and open contest against Al Shamal and stressed the need for his players to remain focused and avoid mistakes.

Al Shamal, meanwhile, will be chasing their first victory of the season after opening their campaign with a 2-2 draw against Al Arabi.

The side coached by Spanishman David Prats finished strongly last season and will also have one eye on their upcoming AFC Champions League campaign. Prats knows his team will have to be at their best against an experienced Al Gharafa side.

"We are expecting a tough match against a formidable team like Al Gharafa, which will require a hard-fought effort from us to achieve the best possible result," Prats said.

"We are aware of Al Gharafa's strength and know that facing them will not be easy. It is almost the same core group of players they have fielded for the past two seasons, and they are also the reigning Amir Cup champions."

With both teams possessing quality in midfield and attack, the battle for possession could prove decisive. Al Gharafa will again look to Magri to provide the cutting edge, while Al Shamal will rely on the experience of Algerian striker Baghdad Bounedjah as they seek to move up from eighth place.



Al Gharafa coach Pedro Martins will be keen to see his side produce another disciplined performance.

In the other fixture today, Al Wakrah take on Al Rayyan at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium. Al Wakrah began the season with a 2-2 draw against Qatar SC and will be seeking their first win under Chilean coach Jose Luis Sierra. Al Rayyan, meanwhile, defeated Lusail 1-0 in their opening game and will be looking to make it two wins from two.

The match has added intrigue because Al Rayyan coach Vicente Moreno worked with Al Wakrah last season before taking charge of the Lions. "For me, playing against Al Wakrah is always a special match because Al Wakrah is like family to me," Moreno said. "But we need to win, especially if we want to win titles. We need to win every week."

Sierra believes Al Wakrah have what it takes to challenge Al Rayyan. "Regardless of the opponent, I think my team is in good shape," he said. "With this level of performance, I think we have a real chance of beating Al Rayyan."

Al Rayyan currently have three points, while Al Wakrah have one.

Defending champions Al Sadd will also be in action tomorrow when they visit Qatar SC at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium. Al Sadd opened their

title defence with a 3-1 victory over Al Ahli and currently lead the standings on goal difference. Qatar SC, meanwhile, are looking for their first victory after drawing 2-2 with Al Wakrah.

The second round will conclude on Saturday, when Al Duhail host Al Arabi at Al Bayt Stadium and Al Shahaniya face Al Sailiya at Lusail Stadium.

Al Duhail made a winning start by beating Al Sailiya 2-0, with Edmilson Junior scoring both goals, while Al Arabi will be looking for a response after their 2-2 draw with Al Shamal.

Both Al Shahaniya and Al Sailiya will be seeking their first points after suffering defeats in the opening round.

FIXTURES

Today: Al Gharafa vs Al Shamal at Khalifa Stadium | 5:15pm; Al Wakrah vs Al Rayyan at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium | 7:30pm
Tomorrow: Al Ahli vs Lusail at Al Thumama Stadium | 5:15pm; Qatar SC vs Al Sadd at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium | 7:30pm
Saturday: Al Duhail vs Al Arabi at Al Bayt Stadium | 5:15pm; Al Shahania vs Al Sailiya at Lusail Stadium | 7:30pm

SPOTLIGHT

Lusail face Al Ahli, seek first victory after difficult start

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Lusail and Al Ahli will look to bounce back from defeats in their opening matches when they meet at Al Thumama Stadium tomorrow in the Qatar Stars League.

Lusail, making their historic debut in the top flight, went down 1-0 to Al Rayyan despite putting up a commendable fight, while Al Ahli began their campaign with a 3-1 defeat against defending champions Al Sadd.

Lusail will draw confidence from their performance against Al Rayyan, particularly their improvement in the second half. Despite the narrow defeat, the newcomers showed they can compete at this level and will now look to turn that promise into points.

Spanish forward Rodrigo Moreno, Iranians Omid Ebrahimi and Ali Nemati, and Argentine Franco Russo are among the experienced professionals Lusail will rely on as they seek their first positive result.

Lusail assistant coach Ashkan Dejagah said his team had prepared well and would be ready both mentally and physically. "I believe the team performed well in the previous match against Al Rayyan, despite the 1-0 loss, especially against a strong team like

Al Rayyan," he said. "The results of the first round demonstrated the strength and close competition in the league, so we understand the importance of being fully prepared for a tough match against Al Ahli."

Dejagah also highlighted the importance of the supporters, saying their presence in the stands could provide the players with an extra boost.

Lusail player Ali Malallah said the team was determined to improve on its opening performance. "Lusail Club's start in the Doha Stars League wasn't what we hoped for, but we are constantly improving and developing, as was evident during the second half of the Al Rayyan match," he said. "We are looking forward to delivering a better performance in the upcoming Al Ahli match."

Under new Spanish coach Borja Jimenez, Al Ahli will be keen to avoid a second successive defeat and show the quality that has raised expectations around the team.

The Brigadiers can call on a number of experienced foreign players, including German Julian Draxler, Frenchman Benjamin Bourigeaud, Dutchman Michel Vlap and Moroccan Idriss Fetouhi.

With considerable attacking quality at their disposal, Al Ahli will aim to take the initiative and secure their first victory of the season.



Lusail Sports Club's assistant coach Ashkan Dejagah (left) and defender Ali Malallah at a press conference yesterday.

FOCUS

Australia ponder Lyon role amid pace push

Reuters
Melbourne

With **Nathan Lyon** almost as iconic in Australian cricket as the baggy green cap worn by the nation's test players, selectors face a delicate task in managing a proud spinner whose role may be curtailed amid changing priorities.

Australia's second-highest test wicket-taker of all time was an automatic selection for over a decade but his place is under pressure as conditions tempt selectors to go with an all-pace assault in upcoming series against South Africa and New Zealand.

Having missed the last two Ashes tests with injury over the home summer, Lyon was recalled for the Bangladesh series, returning as a foil for the vaunted pace unit of Mitchell Starc, Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood in Darwin.

But after taking 1-125 in the opening defeat and being out-bowled by spin-bowling all-rounder Mehidy Hasan Miraz, his place for the second match was far

from assured. Captain Cummins said Scott Boland and an all-pace attack were initially under consideration for Mackay but the condition of the pitch worked in Lyon's favour.

Lyon took 3-25, including two tail-end wickets, in Bangladesh's second innings but it was ultimately nothing more than a cameo role.

He was scarcely needed as Bangladesh were bowled out for 64 in the first innings before crumbling for 95 in the second.

"I guess the quicks were getting the job done and we probably saw less overs from Nathan this test match, on probably a wicket that suited a little bit as well with that bounce and spin," said wicket-keeper Alex Carey.

"Nathan's a high-class bowler, has been for a number of years."

Turning 39 in November, Lyon remains convinced he belongs in the side and that he has lost none of the art and guile that brought him 571 wickets in 143 tests.

A hamstring injury derailed Lyon's Ashes but he would be the last to agree that his workload should be carefully managed, or

that Australia can afford to go without a specialist spinner.

Pity the selector that makes such a suggestion.

After being dropped for the Gabba test during the Ashes, his first omission in 13 years of home tests, a furious Lyon described his mood as "absolutely filthy" in a TV interview.

"I'm not the first player to miss a test match and I won't be the last," he said. "But I'm obviously pretty gutted because I know the role that I can play, and especially at a venue like this."

More difficult conversations may loom for the October tour of South Africa, where pace is expected to dominate and Boland, who took 20 wickets during the Ashes, awaits another chance.

In all-rounders Cameron Green and Beau Webster, Australia have bowlers to share the workload, while Travis Head offers handy part-time spin.

"You could easily say Nathan can play every test match, (if) it just lines up well," said Carey

"But I think for the selectors to be really flexible on different surfaces is great options for us."



COLOMBO TEST

India close in on win despite Sri Lanka fightback on Day 4

'We lost too many wickets in the last session. We need to bat well tomorrow'

AFP
Colombo

India are closing in on a big win in Colombo after Sri Lanka slumped to 229-6 at stumps on day four of the second Test, having been made to follow-on yesterday.

Sri Lanka lead by just 16 runs with four wickets in hand and going into the fifth and final day the tourists will be looking to complete a 2-0 series sweep.

Sonal Dinusha, who batted superbly for a hundred in the first innings, was unbeaten on seven with Keshara Nuwantha (three) for company when rain forced play to end early.

Sri Lanka, who resumed the day on 265-8 in response to India's 503-9 declared, were bowled out for 290 and asked to bat again.

"We wanted to insert the follow-on knowing very well that there is lot of rain around," India's spin bowling coach Sairaj Bahutule said on the team's decision to enforce the follow-on.

"We knew that it was going to be tough on the bowlers, but everyone felt that we should put them in again. Great to see the character shown by the bowlers, stay patient and create those opportunities.

"This is a young spin attack that we have. There's nerves as some of them haven't played lot of Test cricket. But they were prepared to learn."

Dinusha, who made 103 in the first innings, said, "We need to get



India's Manav Suthar celebrates with captain Shubman Gill (left) after taking the wicket of Sri Lanka's Pasindu Sooriyabandara during the fourth day of the second Test in Colombo yesterday. (AFP)

as many runs as possible. We lost too many wickets in the last session and we need to bat well tomorrow."

The hosts lost both their openers early before Kamindu Mendis and Pasindu Sooriyabandara (92) gave Sri Lanka hope with a 115-run stand for the third wicket.

Sooriyabandara, who had made 80 in the first innings, once again played spin superbly with clever footwork, while Mendis took on the fast bowlers in his 55.

But India persisted with the short ball against Mendis, keep-

ing three fielders on the boundary and the plan paid off. Mendis took on Mohammed Siraj and perished, with captain Shubman Gill running in from square leg to complete a stunning catch.

The spinners got back into action and three wickets fell for just nine runs as India regained control.

Sooriyabandara missed out on a hundred when he charged Manav Suthar.

The left-arm spinner cleverly fired the ball wide, leaving the batter stranded as Rishabh Pant

whipped off the bails. Sooriyabandara hit 10 fours and one six in his 173-ball stay.

After a long day on the field, India's bowlers seemed tired, but Sri Lanka's batters lacked the patience and threw away their wickets as the visitors got back the momentum.

BRIEF SCORES: Sri Lanka 290 (Dinusha 103, Sooriyabandara 80, Prasad 3-52, Suthar 3-85) **and 229 for 6** (f/o) (Sooriyabandara 92, Kamindu 55, Suthar 2-81) **lead India 503 for 9 dec by 16 runs.**

SPOTLIGHT

Babar 90% fit to lead Pakistan in Lord's Test against England

AFP
London

Pakistan captain **Babar Azam** has said he is "90 percent fit" as he returns to lead his country in the second Test against England at Lord's.

Azam missed last week's series opener at Headingley because of a finger injury, with the tourists thrashed by an innings and 103 runs in his absence as England went 1-0 up in a three-match campaign.

The 31-year-old Azam was hit on the glove while batting during a warm-up match, compounding a finger injury initially sustained during Pakistan's recent tour of the West Indies.

But he has been back batting in the nets during the past 48 hours and the experienced batsman is now set to strengthen a Pakistan side dismissed for just 171 and 135 in Leeds when the second Test gets underway today.

"I've had a couple of practice sessions again and I'm 90 percent fit for the match tomorrow," Azam told a pre-match press conference at Lord's yesterday.

"Always when you lead the Pakistan team, especially at this ground, it is an honour for

me and I will do my best. If it is on the field as captain or when I'm batting, I will just play my game."

He added: "I think we were not playing up to our mark (in the first Test) but credit to England for the way they are playing. After that we sat to discuss our mistakes and now we are looking forward to the match, believing in ourselves and we will try to play good cricket."

Azam was Pakistan's top run-scorer in the West Indies, with 193 runs during a drawn two-Test series.

He has also enjoyed success in England, with three fifties in six innings while averaging 65.75. Azam Awais may make way if Azam returns at number four, with one of Shan Masood or Abdullah Shafique moving up the order to open.

Pakistan could also make changes to their bowling line-up as well this week, with 20-year-old Ubaid Shah able to provide extra speed to an attack lacking in sheer pace in Leeds.

That would leave Khurram Shahzad and Mohammad Ali vying for one place, with Mohammad Abbas the most reliable of Pakistan's pacemen at Headingley and left-arm spinner Ali Usman fresh from his maiden five-wicket haul in Test cricket.



BOTTOMLINE

Root has left England in no doubt over conduct standards: Tongue

AFP
London

England captain Joe Root has laid down the law over the standards of behaviour he expects from his side as they deal with yet another off-field embarrassment, according to fast bowler **Josh Tongue**.

Brydon Carse was dropped from the squad for the second Test against Pakistan at Lord's starting today.

The 31-year-old was referred to the Cricket Regulator after videos on social media appeared to show the seamer being led away by police in handcuffs following an incident at a nightclub in Derby last weekend.

England thrashed Pakistan by an innings and 103 runs in Root's first match back in charge at Headingley last week.

But a visibly annoyed Root declared himself "hacked off" Tuesday with the latest alcohol-fuelled incident involving an England cricketer, even though Carse was an unused squad member in Leeds.

Root revealed he had led his players in "robust" conversations, with Tongue telling reporters at Lord's yesterday: "We had a chat before training yesterday as Joe said. It was a very good conversation and he made it clear what he expects from us."

The 28-year-old paceman, who took eight wickets at Headingley, added: "I think we've just got to make sure we're as professional as we can be... Playing for England is obviously a privilege."

Carse's brief arrest was the latest in a series of drink-related controversies that have dogged England during the past 10 months.

Limited-overs captain Harry

Brook was involved in an altercation with a nightclub bouncer in Wellington the evening before a one-day international in New Zealand.

Videos also circulated of opener Ben Duckett appearing drunk on a night out during England's 4-1 Ashes series loss in Australia.

And in June both former captain Ben Stokes and Gus Atkinson were stood down from the second Test against New Zealand following an incident at a London nightclub which came after they broke a curfew.

Stokes announced his shock retirement from international cricket during the third Test a few days later, paving the way for Root to return for a second spell as Test captain.

Tongue, who was out with Brook in Wellington, has become an England regular with 65 wickets in just 13 Tests at an average of 27.38.

"I just tried to move on from that

(Wellington) situation really," he said.

"Things have been happening off the field, but I've been personally trying to sort of forget about it and try and play as best cricket as I can for England."

Tongue has yet to be involved in a side that have won a Test series, with England's last such victory against New Zealand in December 2024.

They have since drawn at home to India, been thrashed in Australia and lost at home to New Zealand in the final chapter of the Bazball era.

But victory at Lord's would leave England an unassailable 2-0 up in a three-match campaign against Pakistan.

"It'd be amazing to win a series," said Tongue. "We've just got to focus, make sure we play our best cricket, just be nice and relaxed out there and hopefully we get over the line."



England's Josh Tongue took eight wickets during an innings and 103-run win over Pakistan in the first Test at Headingley.

QOC holds awareness workshop for athletes ahead of Asian Games



The Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) held an awareness workshop for Qatari athletes set to participate in the 20th Asian Games Aichi-Nagoya 2026, which will be held in Japan from September 19 to October 4, as part of ongoing preparations for Team Qatar's participation in the continental sporting event. The workshop covered a range of organisational and awareness-related topics. Team Qatar's administrative delegation provided key information about the Games and outlined the main instructions and regulations issued by the Olympic Council of Asia. The workshop also saw the launch of the Mirqab Platform, which is designed to provide sports federations with easy access to the latest updates and information related to their participation in the Games. The Qatar Anti-Doping Agency delivered an awareness presentation on anti-doping regulations and the key requirements athletes must observe. Meanwhile, Team Qatar's media delegation conducted a workshop on dealing with the media during the Games, the importance of athletes maintaining a positive media presence, and the effective and responsible use of digital platforms to promote a positive image of Qatari sport.

Moll wins pole vault at Zurich DL

American Hana Moll cleared a personal best of 4.90m to win the women's pole vault at the Zurich Diamond League, held as a city event in the main train station yesterday. Former junior world champion Moll, who finished equal sixth with her twin Amanda at last year's Tokyo world championships, was the sole vaulter to clear 4.90m. She broke local hearts by pushing Switzerland's two-time European champion Angelica Moser, also a two-time world indoor bronze medalist, into second with a best of 4.85m. Fans packed in tightly around a raised runway in the heart of Zurich Hauptbahnhof were treated to almost two hours of keen competition. Lea Bachmann no-marked with her first three efforts, meaning an early Swiss casualty. The field of 10 was further whittled down when American Emily Grove, New Zealander Eliza McCartney and France's Marie-Julie Bonnin all failed at 4.75m.

FORMULA 1

Mercedes granted engine upgrades, none for Red Bull

FIA has confirmed findings from the first two periods of performance review

Reuters
London

Mercedes will be allowed engine upgrades, despite leading both Formula One championships by a considerable margin, after the governing FIA concluded that Red Bull - fourth overall and without a win in 2026 - had the strongest power unit.

The FIA published findings of its Additional Development and Upgrade Opportunities (ADUO) mechanism yesterday and said Mercedes could make one additional engine homologation in 2026 and another in 2027, with corresponding cost cap and dyno testing increases.

ADUO grants Formula One power unit manufacturers additional upgrades if the performance of their internal combustion engine (ICE) falls at least 2% below the sport's best-performing one across defined review periods.

The first review period ended after the Canadian Grand Prix in May and the second one after the Hungarian Grand Prix in late July.

The sport has entered a new engine era this season and ADUO is designed to prevent one manufacturer from establishing a significant advantage without rivals being able to respond.

Mercedes were found to be in the 2-4% window for the first period while Audi, Ferrari and Honda were above 4% and granted two additional homologations in 2026 and two next year.

Mercedes provide four teams with engines, Ferrari three and Audi and Honda one each.

Red Bull were not mentioned, confirming their engine - also



Mercedes' Italian driver Kimi Antonelli drives during the second practice session at the Red Bull Ring race track in Spielberg, Austria on June 26, 2026. (AFP)

used by sister team Racing Bulls - was considered the benchmark despite this season being their first with their own in-house power unit in partnership with Ford.

After 12 rounds, Mercedes lead Ferrari by 87 points with Red Bull 239 points off the lead. Champions McLaren, third overall and winners of the last two races, also use Mercedes engines.

The ADUO ratings had already leaked out after the first period, causing controversy given Mercedes' dominance in winning the first six races of the season including five in a row for championship leader Kimi Antonelli.

Red Bull had sought clarification in June, concerned that more competitive rivals were being given a development advantage.

"We were all a little bit surprised with that news," Red Bull's four-time world champion Max Verstappen said at the time. No

additional homologations were granted for the second period.

Nikolas Tombazis, the FIA's single-seater director, said the analysis had been "thorough and exhaustive" and the governing body was confident in the findings.

"This is the first year of ADUO so naturally there are areas which we may evolve over time, in discussion with all the PU Manufacturers," he added.

Judges will take weeks to rule on Monaco GP appeal

Appeal court judges will take two to three weeks to decide the final results of June's Monaco Grand Prix after a hearing, Formula One's governing body said.

The FIA's international court of appeal met behind closed doors in Paris in a case that will determine whether third place stays with Alpine's Pierre Gasly or goes to Red

Bull's Isack Hadjar, with knock-on effects for others immediately behind. Gasly finished third on track on June 7 but was demoted to seventh when two five-second penalties for pit-lane speeding were applied post-race, with fellow Frenchman Hadjar promoted to third and spraying the champagne.

That decision was overturned after a right to review on June 12, stewards accepting Renault-owned Alpine's evidence that there had been a timekeeping error. Hadjar then handed the trophy back to Gasly before his team and McLaren appealed on June 16.

As well as Hadjar dropping down, in a race won by Mercedes' championship leader Kimi Antonelli with Ferrari's Lewis Hamilton second, McLaren's Oscar Piastri moved down to fifth, with Liam Lawson sixth and Arvid Lindblad seventh for Red Bull-owned Racing Bulls.

CYCLING

Brennan blasts to Vuelta stage five win, Pogacar holds lead

AFP
Roquetes, Spain

Matthew Brennan powered to victory in stage five of the Vuelta a Espana on Wednesday, comfortably holding off Jordi Meeus in a bunch sprint finish to claim his second stage win of the race.

General classification leader Tadej Pogacar, the overwhelming favourite to win the race, stayed in the red jersey and maintained his solid overall lead.

On Tuesday, Slovenian UAE Team Emirates rider Pogacar produced a sensational 50-kilometre solo effort to stun his rivals and take control of La Vuelta.

Pogacar, aiming for a Grand Tour grand slam, holds a 3min 21sec lead on compatriot and four-time Vuelta winner Primož Roglič, in second place.

"You can see throughout the day everyone just went full, I'm very thankful to finish it off again," said Visma-Lease a bike's Brennan, who also won stage two.

"Last corner I lost my wheel a bit but glad I could stay safe," added the 21-year-old. "Glad we could finish with our arms in the air."

After starting in Monaco and

heading to France and Andorra, the race finally entered Spain with a 173.3km run from Falset - south west of Barcelona - to Roquetes, with a profile inviting the sprint finish.

A small group got up the road near the start of the stage and established a gap of more than two minutes.

However, on a windy day the pace was high and the peloton caught the breakaway with nearly 100km remaining.

Brennan was given a perfect lead-out from his high-calibre Visma team-mates Wout van Aert and Christophe Laporte.

Belgian cyclist Meeus was on Brennan's wheel but did not come close to threatening the Briton.

"When you have Matthew Brennan there in a group like that, it's the best card to play," said Van Aert.

"It comes close," he added with a grin, when asked if helping guide Brennan to victory was a good as winning a stage himself.

Italian rider Vincenzo Albanese completed the stage five podium ahead of compatriot Alessandro Romele.

Thursday's stage six runs 177.5km from Alcossebre to Castello with four categorised climbs, including a dirt road in the final ascent.

Wawrinka gets last-minute wildcard to US Open

Switzerland's Stan Wawrinka has been granted a last-minute wildcard to compete in US Open singles next week, organizers announced Wednesday, following controversy over the 2016 champion's omission. The US Tennis Association announced Wawrinka, a three-time singles Grand Slam winner, would replace Patrick Kypson. Kypson was originally awarded the spot, but withdrew with injury, the USTA said. "I'm incredibly excited to accept the wild card for the 2026 US Open and look forward to competing in front of the fans in New York once

again," Wawrinka said in a USTA press release. The omission of Wawrinka, 41, from the original list of wildcards has been a bubbling controversy within tennis since the USTA announced its picks last week. Wawrinka, who has said he will retire after this season, opened the 2026 Grand Slam campaign solidly, winning two rounds at the Australian Open before losing in four sets to Taylor Fritz, a top US player. Wawrinka lost in the first round of both the French Open and Wimbledon and has struggled to amass main tour wins in recent months.

TENNIS

Williams-Alcaraz fall in US Open mixed quarter-finals

AFP
New York

The dream team of Serena Williams and Carlos Alcaraz made a winning start but could not progress to the final stages of US Open's mixed doubles tournament.

Williams, often considered the best women's tennis player in history and Spain's seven-time Grand Slam singles champion Alcaraz fell to Belinda Bencic of Switzerland and Flavio Cobolli of Italy, 5-4, 4-1.

The result means Bencic and Cobolli will advance to finale of the unorthodox competition, when the semi-finals and finals will be played back-to-back. "We felt their aura for sure," Bencic told a television interviewer afterward. "It was an honor to play."

"Playing Serena and Carlos on

Arthur Ashe is not easy," Cobolli said. "So now maybe we take a beer."

Williams and Alcaraz had shown strong form earlier defeating the British-New Zealand pair of Lloyd Glasspool and Emma Rutliffe. But Cobolli, who is having a breakout season in singles as the French Open runner-up and Bencic, an Olympic Gold medalist with singles wins over Williams, proved too much. Williams was making her competitive return to Arthur Ashe Stadium since her 2022 retirement, paired with Spain's Alcaraz, himself back after a lengthy injury layoff.

The pair, dressed in coordinated purple and black jersey-type outfits, smiled as they bantered and joked on changeovers. The audience, which roared their arrival in Tuesday's first round, was a bit more subdued in the second match.

Earlier Tuesday, another high-wattage pairing, former world number one Novak Djokovic and four-time Grand Slam champion Aryna Sabalenka also were sent packing, losing to Czech Katerina Siniakova and Britain's Henry Patten in three sets. The US Open mixed doubles format features a blend of doubles specialists and star singles players pairing up, sometimes with a bit an experimental mindset. The event, in its second year, will have a new winner after defending champions Andrea Pavassori and Sara Errani, both doubles specialists, lost to the Russian pair of Mirra Andreeva and Andrey Rublev 1-4, 4-1, 11-9.

The Czech pairing of Karolina Muchova and Jakub Mensik, both highly ranked singles players, realized quickly they had to adjust when they faced Kristina Mladenovic of France and Marcelo Arevalo of El Salvador, both of whom have

won Grand Slam doubles titles. "They keep us more on our toes," Muchova said after a quarterfinal win put the pair in the semifinals. "They see the court I would say a little bit different."

One first-time team that scored unexpected success was the husband-and-wife pairing of France's Gael Monfils and Ukraine's Elina Svitolina.

They won two matches in the shortened format, including a tightly contested quarterfinal win over Siniakova and Patten 5-4, 4-5 and 10-8 in the decisive tie-break. "We had zero expectations," Svitolina said after the match.

The pair only learned late that they had been granted a wildcard and had joked about not winning a game. Monfils, who will retire after this season, said it is still too early for talk about winning the title, but "we will have great images for our memory."



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz and USA's Serena Williams confer during the US Open mixed doubles match in New York. (AFP)

LA LIGA

Barcelona holding out hope of signing Alvarez

Atletico Madrid rule out selling striker to rivals Barca, citing club dignity

AFP

Barcelona

Barcelona remain hopeful of signing Julian Alvarez before the transfer window closes, club president Joan Laporta said, but Atletico Madrid continue to resist attempts to prise away the Argentina forward.

Barca coach Hansi Flick acknowledged that the club could end the summer without signing a new striker if their pursuit of Alvarez ultimately fails.

The Catalan giants have made Alvarez their prime target, with Spanish media reporting Laporta's stance is effectively "Alvarez or nobody" as Barca seek to strengthen their attack following the departures of Robert Lewandowski and Ferran Torres.

Atletico, however, have repeatedly stated the 2022 World Cup winner is not for sale. Asked by AFP for comment, an Atletico source said the club had made their position clear already on multiple occasions.

Alvarez, 26, missed Atletico training on Wednesday due to illness, days after being jeered by some of his own supporters during Sunday's 2-2 La Liga draw against Villarreal. Barcelona's interest in Alvarez has been public for months, and the player said during the World Cup that he would like to leave.

In July, Laporta revealed that Barca had submitted a bid for the striker and said the offer would remain on the table even after Atletico informed them the player was not available. Speaking again, Laporta reiterated that Barcelona have not abandoned hope of reaching an agreement with Atletico.

"It seems that the player wants to come to Barca, and therefore we continue to hold on to our hope, our intention – always with the utmost respect for Atletico Madrid – of being able to sign the player," Laporta said in a video published by the club.

Laporta also said Barcelona had received "information" indicating Atletico had held discussions with other clubs about a possible sale, strengthening the club's belief that a transfer could still happen.

Arsenal have been linked with Alvarez

in recent days, while Real Madrid made an approach earlier in the summer, although it was not considered a serious attempt to secure the striker's signature.

"We would like to reach an understanding with Atletico Madrid – we maintain our proposal, our offer to Atletico Madrid," Laporta said. "Hopefully there will be an understanding between the two clubs, between all of us, so that if they sell the player Barca will be the ones that can acquire the services of Julian Alvarez."

Flick avoided discussing the player directly when asked about Barcelona's interest but admitted the club's plans must balance short-term ambitions with long-term stability.

"I don't want to speak about Julian. I only want to (speak) about the situation of the club. We made some really good, good transfers now in this market," Flick told reporters ahead of Thursday's match against Athletic Bilbao.

"Our goal is clear, but in the end also the club has to think about the future. Not only the present now. Of course as a coach I will say 'OK, give me the best you can have, and more and more and more; maybe it works or maybe not. I have total confidence with the quality we have now."

The only recognised centre-forward in Barca's squad is Egyptian teenager Hamza Abdelkarim, who impressed in pre-season but has yet to make his official debut.

Barcelona began their La Liga campaign with winger Raphinha leading the line in a 5-0 victory over Elche, and Flick admitted alternative solutions may be needed if Alvarez does not arrive. Midfielders Fermin Lopez and Dani Olmo, as well as new arrivals Anthony Gordon and Karim Adeyemi could be used in a false nine role. "Of course we have to manage something, we have to maybe find solutions for some situations and some games, but the quality we have now is huge," said Flick.

"For me the club is doing a great job. Deco is doing a great job. We're looking at the future, not just for this moment but we're looking at the next three, four, five years. I think the club is stabilised and this is what we all want."



Atletico Madrid forward Julian Alvarez has come under fire from fans amid reports linking him with a move to Barcelona. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Bouaddi joins Man City for PL teenage record £85.6mn



AFP

London

Morocco midfielder **Ayyoub Bouaddi** has become the most expensive teenager in Premier League history after joining Manchester City from Lille in a five-year deal the French club said was worth 100mn euros (£85.6mn, \$117mn).

The fee for Bouaddi surpasses Manchester United's £58.9mn deal for Leny Yoro, also signed from Lille, in 2024. City moved for Bouaddi after selling Spain's World Cup-winning captain Rodri to Barcelona and Tijjani Reijnders to Al Qadsiah, with Nico Gonzalez joining Newcastle.

The 18-year-old rising star was one of the standout players at the recent World Cup, helping Morocco reach the quarter-finals before they were beaten by France.

Bouaddi will join England's Elliot Anderson, whose £116mn (\$154mn) move to City from Nottingham Forest was announced in June during the World Cup, in a revamped midfield.

He made 96 appearances for Lille after breaking into their first team at the age of 16. "This is a very special day for me and my family," Bouaddi told City's website. Manchester City are, for me, the best club in the world. It's a dream to be here and be able to call myself a City player. I have spent

most of my life working hard to become the best player I can be and reach the top of the game.

"I've watched City for many years, and I love their style of play. City always try and play quality football and they have shown they are winners - this club feels like it's built to win."

He added: "The squad is world class and Enzo (Maresca) is a top manager. I have plenty of improving to do, I am only 18. I am happy with the progress I have made so far, but I also know I can improve so much. This is undoubtedly the best place for me to do that. This club demands trophies and I will give everything to make sure we are challenging for every title."

Maresca made central midfield a key area for new signings after replacing Pep Guardiola as City manager at the end of last season.

"We have watched him very, very closely and throughout that process we have become increasingly convinced he is a huge talent who will thrive at City," Hugo Viana, the club's director of football, said of Bouaddi.

Chelsea midfielder Enzo Fernandez is also understood to remain of interest to City, but the Blues set a recent deadline for bids for the £120 million-rated Argentine that passed without a deal being done. City were thrashed 3-0 by Arsenal in the Community Shield, but they started their Premier League season with a 2-1 win at home to Bournemouth on Sunday.

UEFA 'likely' to drop threat to boycott FIFA tournaments

Paris: UEFA is "likely" to withdraw its threat to boycott FIFA tournaments as the two conditions it was seeking from world football's governing body following president Gianni Infantino's failed attempt to sell off stakes in the World Cup have been met, a source told *AFP*.

Infantino, 56, has come under increasing pressure to step down as president over his now-abandoned plan to secure private investment in FIFA tournaments, including the World Cup. UEFA, led by their president Aleksander Ceferin, had described the proposal in scathing terms, labelling it a "shady, opaque backroom deal".

Despite Infantino withdrawing the plan only days after its launch, UEFA had said they were still not content and their threat to boycott FIFA events remained in place.

They said their demand that the plan be shelved had been met, but that they had not received assurances "that such attempts to disfigure the game in this way will never be made again".

However, with UEFA's national associations meeting in Monaco today ahead of the draws for the Champions League and other club competitions, it appears that European football's governing body is happy the second one has been settled satisfactorily. "Yes it is likely," the source told *AFP*, regarding the possibility of dropping the boycott threat.

"I think the reassurance we sought has been received so it fulfils the second of the two criteria we set."

A second source told *AFP* that the boycott threat - which had been seen as pivotal in forcing Infantino's humiliating U-turn - had to be dealt with urgently given that the Under-20 Women's World Cup is being held in Poland from September 5 to 27. That is of particular importance given the potential for it to undermine UEFA's united front in wanting Infantino to quit.

Infantino is seeking a fourth and final term when FIFA holds its presidential election in the Moroccan capital Rabat next March. Previously, he was likely to be unopposed, but since the private financing scandal, a raft of member associations have withdrawn their support for him.

Italy became the latest to do so. The deadline for candidates to declare is November 18. Ceferin has confirmed that he will not stand, while CONCACAF president Victor Montagliani is regarded as the likeliest challenger. "It is 10 days until the start of the Under-20 Women's World Cup," said the second source. "It is complicated to maintain a unanimous position among the 55 (UEFA members) in these circumstances. In fact, there is a real risk of splitting the anti-Infantino bloc."

A third source questioned whether the boycott threat was that effective. "The initial boycott threats were not sufficient to force Infantino to leave," the third source said.

Of the upcoming tournament in Poland, the same source added: "It is not just about sparing the host country, but also because major European nations like France, England and Spain have already more or less confirmed they are taking part."

FOCUS

Celtic count the cost after failing to qualify for Champions League

AFP

Glasgow

Scottish champions Celtic face a second successive season without Champions League football, a blow which will not only have serious financial consequences, manager Martin O'Neill admitted, but could also deter players from signing for them.

Having gone out to unheralded Kazakh side Kairat Almaty in last year's play-offs, Celtic suffered an even greater humiliation on Tuesday, squandering a four-goal aggregate lead against Austrian champions LASK to lose 5-1 on the night and 5-4 overall. Their failure to reach the league phase will cost them an estimated £40mn (\$55mn), even with the consolation of competing in the second-tier Europa League.

O'Neill, who in his second full-time spell at the historic club, had guided them to the title on the final day of the season with a dramatic win over rivals Hearts, said missing out was costly in every respect.

"The qualification for the Champions League is major, it's major in every aspect,"

said the 74-year-old Northern Irishman. "Financially, for prestige, but we have to pick ourselves up. That's my responsibility again to do that. I think I said last week that if you could qualify for the Champions League there would be players wanting to come on that basis. That's not going to be the case."

O'Neill, who won the European Cup twice as a player with Nottingham Forest, admitted the squad needed strengthening as the performance had underlined their weaknesses. "We know that we are a million miles from the finished article," said O'Neill, who in his first spell took Celtic to the 2003 UEFA Cup final. "That's absolutely true. I think we thought that anyway."

O'Neill, who missed the start of the domestic season because he underwent a procedure in hospital for a "couple of ailments rolled into one", was more diplomatic in his analysis than club captain Callum McGregor.

The 33-year-old midfielder, who has spent his entire career at Celtic aside from a loan spell early on at English side Notts County, did not hold back. "We got what



Celtic's failure to reach the Champions League phase will cost them an estimated £40mn, even with the consolation of competing in the second-tier Europa League. (AFP)

we deserved," he said. "We were passive all night. We looked scared to go and win the

game. I didn't think we were that good in the first leg either. We scored at good times

and got away with it. We have to suck it up. We apologise to our supporters and the club because there's no way we should lose that game."

Although O'Neill said he assumed full "responsibility" for the cataclysmic performance, McGregor believed the blame lay elsewhere. "It's as much on the players as everyone else. You can't look for excuses elsewhere," he said.

"You'll now see what people are made of. When you play like that you can't have any excuses whatsoever. "When you go 1-0 up in the game and it still doesn't settle you, that is on us."

McGregor said the character of the players would be tested now. "You fall at a big hurdle and these questions are going to be asked. You can't lose by that margin then look for excuses elsewhere," he said. "You have to bounce back, you have to show a reaction and that's what Celtic are all about."

The players' first opportunity to rebound comes on Saturday when the Premiership table-toppers – they have six points after two matches – host Falkirk, who have just one point.