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GULF TIMES

SPORT

Sheikh Joaan awards Qatar shooting team skeet gold

Nagoya, Japan: HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Olympic Council of Asia, presented Qatar's national shooting team with the gold medal after their victory in the men's team skeet event at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games. Rashid Saleh al-Athba, Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and Ali Ahmed al-Ishaq secured Qatar's first gold medal at the Games, finishing ahead of Kuwait, who took silver, and India, who claimed bronze. Al-Athba then added another gold in the individual skeet competition, setting a new Asian record in the process with 34 shots on target out of 36. China's Lyu Jianlin, a Paris 2024 mixed team bronze medallist, took silver with 33 hits, while Chinese Taipei's Lee Meng-Yuan claimed bronze with 29. The two gold medals were a major boost for Qatar's shooting team and took the country's medal tally at the Games to four, comprising two golds, one silver and one bronze. Qatar's karate team had earlier won a silver and bronze each.



Sheikh Joaan attends Saudi National Day celebration



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Olympic Council of Asia, attended a celebration hosted by the Saudi delegation at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games to mark Saudi Arabia's National Day. The celebration featured a range of programmes, including a documentary highlighting the history of the unification of Saudi Arabia.

FOCUS

A golden double to remember for star shooter al-Athba

Al-Athba hit 34 targets, missing only two to set an Asian record

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Rashid Saleh al-Athba hailed a memorable day for Qatar after winning individual men's skeet gold with an Asian record just few hours before he had teamed up with Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and Ali Ahmed al-Ishaq to secure the team title at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games in Nagoya, Japan.

Al-Athba hit 34 targets in the individual final at the Aichi Prefectural General Shooting Gallery, missing only two to set an Asian record. China's Lyu Jianlin took silver with 33 hits, while Chinese Taipei's Lee Meng-Yuan won bronze with 29.

Earlier, al-Athba, al-Attiyah and al-Ishaq had given Qatar its first gold medal of the Games by topping the men's team standings with 353 points. Kuwait finished second with 348, while India took bronze with 346.

"It is a major achievement that I am very proud of," al-Athba said after completing the double. "We succeeded in winning the team gold alongside Nasser al-Attiyah and Ali al-Ishaq, and I also managed to secure the individual gold. I hope we continue to achieve success in the upcoming competitions."



Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah won his third Asian Games gold following triumphs in 2002 and 2010, and his sixth medal at the Games overall. He also won skeet bronze at the 2012 London Olympics.



He said the demanding conditions and high level of competition made the achievement even more satisfying. "The level of competition was very high. The Asian Games are considered one of the toughest tournaments, especially given the atmosphere and conditions surrounding the events," al-Athba said. "However we managed to handle them well and achieved the result we aspired to."

Al-Athba said the shooters knew they had to maintain their concentration throughout the competition. "We were aware of the fierce competition, so we gave it our all and maintained intense focus," he said. "We promise to keep giving our best and striving to win another medal in the mixed team event. We hope to succeed in bringing joy to the Qatari people with a new medal."

TEAM GOLD GIVES ME A BIG BOOST, SAYS AL-ATTIYAH

Al-Attiyah was delighted to contribute to Qatar's team gold and praised Al-Athba for his individual success. Al-Attiyah completed a unique double when he captured shooting gold at the Asian Games in the same year that he won the Dakar Rally. It was the 55-year-old's third Asian Games gold following triumphs in 2002 and 2010, and his sixth medal at the Games overall. He also won skeet bronze at the 2012 London Olympics.

Al-Attiyah added it to his collection of driving accolades, which includes six Dakar Rally titles. He secured the latest one earlier this year alongside Belgian co-driver Fabian Lurquin. At the wheel of a Dacia, he only had to avoid a final day slip-up to top the podium after bringing his career tally of stage wins to 50 the previous day.

The experienced shooter said his return to competition had given him renewed confidence. "My absence from competitions over the past period had an impact, but two months ago, I underwent trials alongside the other shooters and achieved the best results. This gave me a significant boost to return to competition," he said.

Al-Attiyah finished fifth in the individual event and said he was still working towards his best form ahead of the World Shooting Championship in Doha, which will serve as a qualifier for the Los Angeles 2028 Olympic Games.

Qatar's Rashid Saleh al-Athba celebrates after winning the men's skeet gold at the Aichi Prefectural General Shooting Gallery in Toyota, Japan. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar 3x3 basketball team reaches quarters

By Sports Reporter
Nagoya, Japan

Qatar's 3x3 basketball team reached the quarter-finals of the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games after beating Bahrain 21-15 yesterday. The victory was Qatar's third straight in the group stage after wins over Indonesia and Chinese Taipei. Qatar will face the winner of today's match between Mongolia and Singapore in the quarter-finals.

AL-TAMIMI ADVANCES TO ROUND OF 16

Qatar's Abdullah al-Tamimi advanced to the men's singles round of 16 after a convincing 3-0 victory over Mongolia's Yesun Otgonchimeg yesterday. Al-Tamimi dominated from the start, winning 11-3, 11-2, 11-2 to begin his campaign in impressive fashion.

He faces Japan's Ryunosuke Tsukue in the last 16 today as he bids to go further in the competition. Al-Tamimi won bronze medal at the Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games. Meanwhile, Qatar's Salem al-Malki exited the singles competition after losing 3-0 to South Korea's Na Joo-young.

TAMER FINISHES SIXTH IN 200M FREESTYLE

Qatar swimmer Ali Tamer finished sixth in the men's 200m freestyle final. Tamer qualified for the final after placing fourth in the heats in 1:48.66 secs. He improved his time in the final, clocking 1:48.00.

Swimming action continues today, with Qatar athletes competing in the 50m butterfly and 4x100m relay. Saeed al-Din will also compete in the 800m freestyle final.

QATAR 2 BEAT SRI LANKA TO MAINTAIN WINNING RUN

Qatar's second beach volleyball pair continued its winning start in Group D with a 2-1 victory over Sri Lanka yesterday. Mousa al-Khair and Mohamed Ihab followed their

MEDAL TALLY					
R	COUNTRY	G	S	B	T
1	China	48	20	10	78
2	Japan	15	25	27	67
3	South Korea	8	8	25	41
4	Kazakhstan	7	4	8	19
5	Thailand	5	3	4	12
6	Hong Kong	3	6	7	16
7	Iran	3	3	2	8
8	Malaysia	3	1	5	9
9	North Korea	2	1	3	6
10	Kuwait	2	1	2	5
11	QATAR	2	1	1	4



Qatar's Abdullah al-Tamimi advanced to the round of 16 after a convincing 3-0 victory over Mongolia's Yesun Otgonchimeg.

opening-round win over South Korea with another impressive performance to claim their second straight victory. The result keeps Qatar 2 on course for a place in the knockout stages. Meanwhile, Qatar 1, comprising Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan, will face Oman in Group A on Sunday.



Qatar beat Bahrain 21-15 in the 3x3 basketball.

SPOTLIGHT

Hesson eyes India clash at Asian Games



AFP
Karachi

Pakistan head coach **Mike Hesson** admitted yesterday that his team has some catching up to do if they are to challenge arch-rivals India at the Asian Games.

India's men have won back-to-back World Cups and are also defending champions at the Asian Games.

Since Hesson took over in May last year Pakistan lost to India three times in the Asia Cup 2025 and once in this year's Twenty20 World Cup.

"India are the benchmark in terms of white ball cricket at the moment and our challenge is to catch up to that," said Hesson in

Karachi ahead of the team's departure. The men's cricket at the Asian Games in Japan starts today.

Pakistan and India have never met at the Games but are likely to face off in the semi-finals on October 1 in Nagoya.

"We are certainly preparing as best we can and if we get an opportunity to play (India) we will certainly put them under pressure like we did in the final of the Asia Cup," Hesson said of last year's final in Dubai.

Pakistan will first meet the winners of Pool B - comprising Hong Kong, Oman and Malaysia - in the quarter-final on September 28.

Hesson said Pakistan need to start well.

"There is a lot of cricket to be played between now and being able to play in the semi-final for

both sides (Pakistan and India), so we are not getting too far ahead of ourselves," Hesson said.

Hesson launched a passionate defence of white-ball sides when he was asked about Pakistan's recent performances.

"The Test team are struggling and we are all well aware of it," he said. "But the win percentage of the T20I team in the last 15 months has been third or the fourth best. We have lost to India on multiple occasions and that is the benchmark of all the Pakistani teams, we understand that. But to suggest that the T20 side is at a low (is not correct).

"We were eighth in the world in T20 cricket when I came in and now have gone up to fifth. We have gone up 30 points, which has happened only by winning series. We

have won not only in Pakistan, but in Dubai and America etc. We have won a lot of series over the last 15 months in T20 cricket so I think it is not fair to put all three formats together.

"So, we are struggling in Test cricket and in one-day cricket we are developing heading into the World Cup and we have certainly improved our performance in the last 12 months, but we are by no means a finished product."

Pakistan have never won a medal in the Asian Games cricket, losing the bronze medal match in 2010 and 2023 while they did not compete in 2014.

While India has sent a full-strength team for the Asian Games, Pakistan's side is a combination of youth and experience, captained by opener Sahibzada Farhan.

PREVIEW

Bavuma expects South Africa fast bowlers to step up

Proteas face Australia in the first of three ODIs in Durban today

Reuters
Durban

South Africa must find a way to get the best out of their depleted fast bowling attack when they host Australia in a three-match one-day international series starting in Durban today, according to captain Temba Bavuma.

Bavuma said a fearsome pack of fast bowlers for touring teams to contend with is in South African cricket's "DNA", but they have had to cast the net wide for this series. Kagiso Rabada, Lungi Ngidi, Kwena Maphaka and Ottnell Baartman were all ruled out with hamstring injuries, while Nandre Burger has a bad back.

It has left an inexperienced seam bowling line-up to take on Australia, with Lizaad Williams, the Jansen twins, Marco and Duan, Gerald Coetzee, Corbin Bosch and Ngobani Mokoena having played only 72 ODIs between them.

"I think we're going to have to make the most of the bowling resources that we have from the seam department. There are options there. I think it's just how smartly we approach managing the loads of our fast bowlers," Bavuma told reporters yesterday.

"We want teams, when they come here, to know that they're going to have to deal with our fast bowlers. That's part of our DNA."

South Africa have only played three ODIs in 2026 when a depleted squad swept Namibia 3-0 in a series this month.

But as they prepare to host the 2027 World Cup a year from now, this is a crucial season for the team in the 50-over format.

"It's been a while since this ODI team has come together," Bavuma said. "I think there's a strong desire to look after our ODI record of late and ensure that we're putting our best foot forward out there on the field. "From a team perspective, we generally



South Africa captain Temba Bavuma (left) and Australian skipper Mitch Marsh during a photoshoot ahead of the three-match ODI series between the two countries.

know who those core players are (for the World Cup). I don't think we will move away too much from that," he added. "We'll see new faces coming in, but probably that England series (in January 2027) will be closer to what we think we will have for the World Cup."

Bavuma was speaking after

South Africa were dealt another blow ahead of the three-match One Day International home series against Australia after fast bowler Maphaka withdrew with a hamstring injury.

Lizaad Williams has been called into the squad as a replacement for Maphaka. South Africa

are also without seamers Ottnell Baartman (hamstring) and Nandre Burger (back), as their seam attack is decimated.

The first match in the series will be played in Durban today, before further fixtures in Johannesburg on Sunday and Potchefstroom on September 30.

COMMENT

Starc wary of 'unknown' conditions on Australia tour of South Africa



Pace ace Mitchell Starc says he is ready to adapt to any kind of playing conditions when Australia take on South Africa in a three-match Test series starting next month.

Reuters
Durban

Australia pace spearhead Mitchell Starc said an unusually timed tour of South Africa presents an element of the unknown for both teams, with rain and unfamiliar early-season conditions likely to shape the series.

South Africa host Australia in a three-match one-day series starting today before the teams meet in a three-Test series next month, Australia's first test tour of the country in eight years.

With the Tests scheduled for October, when rain is often a major factor in parts of South Africa, Starc said conditions could differ significantly from those traditionally associated with the country.

"There's an element of the unknown," Starc told reporters yesterday. "It's part of Test cricket and you just adapt to what's in front of you."

The 36-year-old, who took nine wickets in Australia's last Test at Durban, said recent wet weather could produce a different surface from the dry conditions that traditionally aid reverse swing.

"It's quite muggy and humid," Starc said.

"There has been talk about the rain before we got over here. It's probably not that typical dry part of the season just yet.

"It could be interesting to see what the weather does over the next couple of days and then for the game as well."

Starc also praised fast bowler

Nathan Ellis, who impressed during Australia's one-day series in Zimbabwe while several senior quicks were rested.

Ellis helped lead the attack in the absence of Starc, Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood and strengthened his case for a regular place in Australia's one-day side.

"He is really pushing his case as a lock as a pick in the one-day team, and no doubt he'll look to perform in these three as well," he said.

The first Test of the three-match series begins in Durban on October 9.

PAT CUMMINS LIKELY TO MISS FIRST ODI

Australia ODI captain Pat Cummins is likely to miss the opening match of the three-game series against South Africa in Durban today, as Australia prioritises managing its key Test pacers ahead of the crucial red-ball series to follow.

Cummins arrived in South Africa later than opening bowler Starc, pointing toward a staggered workload for Australia's premier quicks.

Having already flagged that he might play as few as a single ODI during the tour, Cummins could be restricted to the second match in Johannesburg, allowing Starc and Josh Hazlewood to feature in the first and third fixtures.

This management strategy aims to keep the frontline attack fresh and avoid back-to-back appearances with tight travel turnarounds during a seven-day window.

BOWLING COACH NOFFKE SET TO LEAVE PCB JOB

LAHORE: Former Australia all-rounder Ashley Noffke will leave his position as the Pakistan bowling coach after the Asian Games 2026 in Japan and will take over as the head coach of the Netherlands men's team for two years, *cricinfo.com* reported yesterday.

Noffke's original contract with Pakistan was until June 2027 but he becomes their most recent support staff member to depart after Shane McDermott left as fielding coach in July this year to join the Afghanistan set-up. Before that, Pakistan's white-ball batting coach Hanif Malik and their long-serving physiotherapist Cliffe Deacon had left in May after the ODI series against Australia.

Noffke ends his stint with Paki-

stan after spending less than 18 months as he had joined them in May 2025 before the T20I series against Bangladesh, the report added. He will succeed Ryan Cook to lead the Netherlands support staff after signing a contract that will run until the end of 2028. The major ICC assignments for him in this period will be to try and qualify for the 2027 ODI World Cup and the 2028 T20 World Cup.

"I'm looking forward to working with the Dutch men's team, which has become a fixture at the T20 World Cups," Noffke said. "This is a talented, motivated group, and my goal is to help continue that development and move the programme forward."

FOCUS

Milne returns to NZ squad for India T20 series

Reuters
Auckland

New Zealand speedster **Adam Milne** will return to the Black Cap's T20 squad for next month's home series against India after more than a year out of international cricket, coach Rob Walter said yesterday.

India's tour of New Zealand will include five T20s, five ODIs and two Test matches, with the opening T20 set for Christchurch on October 22.

Thirteen of the 16-strong squad were part of the New Zealand side that finished runners-up to India at the T20 World Cup in March.

"We've got a near full-strength squad that covers all bases and I'm excited to see how we compete against the current T20 world champions," Black Caps coach Walter said.



Milne, 34, last played for New Zealand more than a year ago and has amassed 56 international caps. He missed the World Cup due to injury, as did off-spin all-rounder Michael Bracewell who also returns to the squad.

Walter confirmed Rachin Ravindra will miss the series due to an injury suffered during a promotional shoot last week, but it is hoped he might return for the ODI series.

T20 specialists Tim Seifert and Finn Allen were named in the squad, as Walter said he sought to pick the strongest team possible.

"Our priority is winning games and putting the best team on the park, but we also have to keep in mind the volume of cricket in the coming months," he said. "We're very fortunate with the depth that we've got to call upon, so we'll look to use all 16 squad members throughout the series as we manage workloads."

New Zealand: Mitchell Santner (capt), Finn Allen, Michael Bracewell, Mark Chapman, Devon Conway, Jacob Duffy, Lockie Ferguson, Zak Foulkes, Matt Henry, Bevon Jacobs, Kyle Jamieson, Adam Milne, Daryl Mitchell, Glenn Phillips, Tim Seifert, Nathan Smith.

FOOTBALL

‘New one’ Klopp promises fresh Germany approach

‘When Klopp calls, you have to go. He’s one of the best coaches in the world and he brings a really positive energy’

AFP
Berlin

Germany coach Jurgen Klopp has promised to bring a “new approach” to the country’s flagging fortunes, as the four-time world champions begin their latest tilt at a maiden Nations League title.

On Monday, just days out from his side’s opening match away against the Netherlands in Amsterdam today, Klopp recorded a video appealing to Germany fans at home and abroad.

Speaking English, the former Liverpool manager introduced himself as “the new one” in charge and thanked fans who “support us from all over the world”.

The “new one” quip was a tip of the hat to the “normal one” quote from his Liverpool unveiling which became intimately entwined with his nine-year Anfield stint.

Now back in the dugout for the first time since leaving Merseyside in 2024, Klopp has promised a “new approach” as he hopes to return the fallen giants to the summit of the game.

“We will try everything to make our new approach visible. I expect more immediately,” Klopp said Thursday.

“It might get a bit wild, but I’ll take that; it just has to be lively.”

After the trip to Amsterdam, Klopp will make his Germany home debut in Augsburg on September 27 against Greece, before hosting Serbia four days later and then concluding his opening taste of international football in Thessaloniki the following Sunday.

Klopp’s consistent success at Mainz, Borussia Dortmund and Liverpool have given him a degree of standing shared by nobody else in modern German football.

Plenty of high-profile coaches have taken the Germany job, but few have been given so much control or so much scope to shake up the status quo.

His first step - naming a 44-



German coach Jurgen Klopp during a training session yesterday.

man squad including 16 uncapped players which will be split into two match-day groups, while leaving out fan favourite Deniz Undav - showed a willingness to think differently.

Freiburg right-back Philipp Treu is one of those new call-ups. Not previously on the radar for German selection, the 25-year-old has never played under Klopp

but summed up the attitude of many of those players who have been transformed by the coach over the years.

“You feel like you’d walk through fire for him,” Treu said Tuesday, adding Klopp “is an incredible guy”.

Another newcomer, Eintracht Frankfurt striker Younes Ebounatlib, was courted by Afri-

can champions and 2022 World Cup semi-finalists Morocco.

The Frankfurt-born forward opened up on his decision to choose Germany, while summing up Klopp’s appeal.

“When Klopp calls, you have to go. He’s one of the best coaches in the world and he brings a really positive energy,” he said.

Semi-final regulars at major tournaments for more than a decade, Germany have won just one knockout game at the World Cup or Euros since 2016.

Klopp’s task of breathing life into Germany’s flagging fortunes is a mammoth one, but the 59-year-old is no stranger to resuscitating fallen giants. Dortmund had only just beaten bankruptcy when Klopp took over. Inside five years, Klopp’s Dortmund had won two league titles and played in a Champions League final.

At Liverpool, Klopp took a side who had made the Champions League just once in the past five seasons to three finals, winning one. And most important of all, he brought the league title back to Anfield for the first time in the Premier League era.

With a fractured media made up of former players eager to criticise the German FA (DFB), Klopp has set about uniting the country towards a common cause.

At his squad announcement, Klopp handed out sponsor hats in German flag colours with the message “one of 83 million”.

Klopp has also contacted members of the DFB All-Stars - former players with at least one cap - asking for support, saying “we are all the national team”.

Former player turned influential commentator Lothar Matthaeus was clearly won over by Klopp’s charm offensive, writing in his Sky Germany column that “everything will be better” with Klopp in the main job.

“That wasn’t always the case in recent years, but trust is important,” the former Ballon d’Or winner wrote.

Dutch look to Xavi to restore traditional ethos

Dutch footballing philosophy has had a marked impact on the all-conquering success of Spain recently, but now that the Netherlands are looking to bolster their own fortunes they have turned to a Spanish World Cup winner for inspiration.

Former Barcelona midfielder and coach **Xavi Hernandez** has become the first foreigner in charge of the Dutch national team since the 1978 World Cup.

Xavi, who as a player won the World Cup in 2010 and two European Championships, debuts as coach today when the Dutch host Germany in Amsterdam and will have three more Nations League matches in the three-week international window.

The Netherlands have turned to him for a change in perspective after spells under Ronald Koeman and Louis van Gaal sparked much disquiet over the team’s tactics and playing philosophy. Both coaches were accused of abandoning traditional Dutch values around ball possession and attacking football and employing counter-attacks as their primary weapon.

Although Van Gaal took the team to the 2022 World Cup quarter-finals and Koeman the semis of Euro 2024, elimination in the round of 32 at this year’s World Cup was a major disappointment.

“It is about how we in the Netherlands want to play football,” said former international Nigel de Jong, who, as technical director at the Dutch football association, recruited Xavi.

“That means playing dominantly and being attractive in a good way while doing so. Dominant does not always mean playing attacking football; we also want to be dominant defensively. By conceding fewer goals, we want to try to win matches.”

Although the 46-year-old Xavi is a relatively inexperienced coach, the Dutch feel that as a player, he had much of what their side misses, in terms of technique, discipline and creativity. He also showed during his coaching tenure at Barcelona, where he won La Liga in his first season in charge, the ideas the Dutch supporters want to see from their team.

“After the first meeting, I immediately felt like going out onto the pitch. New ideas and a new way of playing football. I think it is also good for the group,” said midfielder Tijjani Reijnders. Xavi, who has a four-year contract, told a press conference yesterday he felt the players had bought into his game model and philosophy, which he has described as revolving around possession, position, pressing, perception, and passion.

“You need possession to win the match,” he said. “You need the right positions. When you lose the ball, you have to press. And you need perception to see what is happening around you and understand the game. But without passion, you cannot play football.”

But he was also clear that winning remains the end goal. “I think there is definitely potential in this squad,” Xavi said.



FOCUS

Ronaldo eyes 1,000-goal ‘icing on the cake’ as Portugal begin new era

Reuters
Oeiras, Portugal

Cristiano Ronaldo walked into a packed room, claimed to be nervous, then did what he has done for more than two decades: taking centre stage, swatting away critics and insisting the final whistle is not yet in sight.

The 41-year-old Portugal captain, speaking on Wednesday at the Portugal Football Summit main stage before today’s UEFA Nations League match against Wales, said he still had plenty to offer his country as Jorge Jesus prepares for his first game as national team coach.

Jesus replaced Roberto Martinez after Portugal’s disappointing World Cup campaign ended in the round of 16 against eventual champions Spain.

Ronaldo, now on 979 career goals - 833 for clubs and 146 for Portugal - is 21 short of the 1,000-goal landmark he has openly targeted. Asked whether winning the Nations League or reaching four figures mattered more, he grinned and chose both.

“One goal is to achieve both - reaching 1,000 goals and the national team trying to win this Nations League,” Ronaldo said at the Portugal Football Summit at the



Portuguese FA headquarters outside Lisbon. “It’s a new era with manager Jorge Jesus, whom we all know well; I just hope things go well for him.”

Ronaldo said reaching 1,000 in Portugal colours would be “the icing on the cake”.

“Scoring my 1,000th goal for the national team would be the culmination of something - a beautiful story,” he said. “It wouldn’t be the end of it, but it would be a beautiful story.”

Ronaldo insisted, however, that he was not consumed by the chase.

“I’ve already admitted that I want to get there, and I will get there,” he said. “An obsession? No ... The rest is about enjoying it, enjoying every day.”

Ronaldo acknowledged he had considered his international future after Portugal’s World Cup exit, but said talks with the Portu-

guese FA and Jesus convinced him to continue.

“They count on me. I still believe that I’m able to help the national team,” he said. “The most important point is to be able, inside the pitch, to score goals and help the team to win games. If the manager doesn’t count on me, I can leave today - no problem at all... When I feel that I’m not doing anything here, that I’m not contributing on the pitch, not scoring goals, creating a bad atmosphere, or that they don’t want me here, I’ll be the first to pack my bags.”

Pressed on retirement, Ronaldo refused to draw a clear line under his career. “I learnt something from my late 30s onwards, which is to live in the moment, don’t think about tomorrow,” he said.

“Is it possible? Yes. Highly likely? Yes. But will it happen? No, I don’t know.”

Ronaldo also bristled at criticism, saying media outlets had been trying to “kill” him for years.

“That’s not going to happen under any circumstances - not even with a shotgun,” he said. “And even so, I still manage to dodge the bullet.” Ronaldo may be 21 goals from four figures and perhaps closer to the exit than he cares to admit, but for now he remains exactly where he likes to be: in Portugal’s shirt, in front of the cameras, and dodging bullets with a smile.

FORMULA 1

Shorter races a good compromise, says world champion Norris

Reuters
Baku

McLaren’s reigning world champion **Lando Norris** yesterday described Formula One’s move to shorten races next year as a good, short-term compromise that would improve the racing action.

The governing FIA’s Formula One commission on Monday agreed to reduce the standard Grand Prix distance from 305 km to 290 km from 2027, cutting races by two or three laps. The move is aimed at ensuring drivers make it to the end of races without running out of fuel, with the fuel flow rate set to increase next year.

“It’s a good compromise that we need to make to make our sport better and rely more on driving rather than who can look after our battery the best,” Briton Norris told reporters.

“I think in a few years’ time when all engine manufacturers are on board with having more fuel again and having bigger tanks and all of that, then it’s something we can go back to, the longer races and the races that we’ve always had in Formula One,” added the 26-year-old.

The fuel flow rate permitted by the rules will increase by 5% next season, as part of a rebalancing of the split between combustion engine and electric power to 58-42 from the current 53-47.

It will increase again by 13% in 2028, with the combustion engine-electric power split rising to 60-40. The move is aimed at allowing for more flat-out driving and less energy management after widespread complaints about the racing having become more artificial.

Red Bull’s four-times champion Max Verstappen, a vocal critic of the sport’s current hybrid rules, said shortening the



race distance would be worth it if it made the racing better. “I mean I would run 50% less if it would give me a nicer engine to drive,” joked the Dutchman.

“But, I don’t think it’s a big problem. If we have to shorten it a little bit for the fuel consumption but for overall a better racing experience then I think everyone will take it.”

Ferrari rival and seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton, however, opposed the move. “This is supposed to be the sport which is the most physically and mentally demanding and there are some (races) that are so hot and you are on the edge,” said the 41-year-old.

“But that is where you want to see athletes, right on the edge of performance...”

Hadjar extends Red Bull contract for 2027 season

Frenchman Isack Hadjar will continue to partner Max Verstappen at Red Bull for the 2027 Formula One season, the team announced yesterday.

The 21-year-old has impressed in his debut season at the team after being promoted following a

strong rookie campaign with its junior outfit Racing Bulls in 2025.

Hadjar has missed the last three races with a wrist injury, but still sits eighth in the drivers’ standings with 71 points.

He posted a run of seven consecutive top-six finishes, including a podium in Monaco, before being sidelined.

Hadjar will return to action this weekend at the Azerbaijan Grand Prix.

“It’s good to come back in these conditions, for sure,” he told reporters in Baku. “I’m really looking forward to drive again... the last time I touched the steering wheel was in Budapest so it’s been a very, very long time.”

“It is definitely a challenging track to come back to, but I’m excited and it’s also good to have it (contract extension) announced now. So, everything is great.”

Hadjar said he did not know how long his new Red Bull deal was for, preferring to leave the details to the team around him.

“I let my people do the talking for me. I do it on the track and that’s about it,” added Hadjar, before saying “I actually don’t know” the length of the contract.

ENGLAND STILL HAVE ‘SCAR’ FROM WORLD CUP SEMI-FINAL LOSS: SAKA

Bukayo Saka believes the England squad still have a “scar in us” following their agonising World Cup semi-final defeat.

England begin their Nations League campaign against world champions Spain at Wembley on September 26 just nine weeks after they conceded two late goals in a painful last-four loss to Lionel Messi’s Argentina in Atlanta. Saka scored a hat-trick as England beat France 6-4 to finish third at

the World Cup. But the 25-year-old Arsenal winger made it clear that the pain of failing to win England’s first major men’s international football title since a 1966 World Cup triumph on home soil ran deep.

“Obviously, there’s still a scar in us,” Saka told the BBC on Wednesday. “When you believed, and everyone was so united and so confident we could do it, not just us, but the whole country.

“We’re trying to draw a line under it now and focus on the new international season and what we have coming up now. You try to move on as soon as possible, but you know, a scar is a scar (and) decides to heal when it heals itself. “But like I said, we’ve come here to a new international season, and we’ve got four massive, difficult group games to try to qualify us in the Nations League, which we’re fully focused on.”

FOOTBALL

Qatar begin Gulf Cup bid against Bahrain

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar coach Julen Lopetegui says his team is ready to give its best as they begin their Gulf Cup campaign against defending champions Bahrain in Jeddah today.

Qatar face Bahrain at Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Sports City Stadium in their Group B opener, with the UAE and Yemen completing the group.

Lopetegui said preparations had gone smoothly and his players were focused on making a strong start to their bid for a first Gulf Cup title since 2014.

“The Gulf Cup is an important tournament with a special significance for the people of the region. We have prepared well and are ready to compete,” Lopetegui said at a press conference.

“All the teams in the group have the opportunity to qualify for the semi-finals and then compete for the title. The matches will be difficult because the teams are close in level and have developed remarkably in recent years. That makes the tournament highly competitive,” the Spaniard added.

Lopetegui acknowledged Bahrain’s recent advantage in their meetings but said past results would have no bearing on today’s contest. “I am not thinking about the Asian Cup at the moment. Our focus is on the Gulf Cup and making a strong appearance in this tournament,” he said.

“In recent encounters, Qatar have only won once against Bahrain. History stays in history. We are in the present and want to change these numbers.”

The Qatar coach also praised Bahrain coach Dragan Talajic and his team. “Bahrain have Dragan, who is doing a good job, and they



Qatar coach Julen Lopetegui and player Mahmoud Abunada address a press conference in Jeddah yesterday.

have good quality and a lot of strength. We know that, and that is why we are here to do our best,” Lopetegui said. “The World Cup is in the past. We are starting a new story.”

Qatar goalkeeper Mahmoud Abunada said the team was determined to progress as far as possible.

“There is no doubt that the Gulf Cup is an important tournament

with its own special characteristics. It usually witnesses strong competition between the teams, with everyone aiming to compete for the title and perform at their best,” he said. “This edition is ex-

pected to witness strong competition. We want to go as far as possible in the tournament, but we will take the matches step by step and focus on ourselves.”

Bahrain coach Talajic said his side would give everything to defend the title they won in Kuwait in the previous edition.

“This tournament is the World Cup for the Gulf countries. We are playing against our brothers. It is a very difficult tournament,” Talajic said.

“We respect all the participating teams, and everyone has the same opportunities from the start. Whoever wants to become a champion must prove it on the field.”

Talajic said Bahrain would seek to build on their success in Kuwait.

“In the last edition in Kuwait, we did a great job and we want to do the same things. I believe in all the players and I respect all the teams.”

ASIAN GAMES

Yu wins third gold as North Korea weightlifters roar

LIFTER RI CLAIMS NORTH KOREA'S FIRST GOLD WITH WORLD RECORDS



Gold medalist China's Yu Zidi (right) and silver medalist Ke Wenxi pose as they celebrate during the women's 400m individual medley swimming victory ceremony in Tokyo yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Nagoya, Japan

China's 13-year-old swimming prodigy Yu Zidi sealed a hat-trick of Asian Games titles yesterday, as North Korea won their first two golds thanks to their powerhouse women weightlifters.

Towards the end of the fourth full day of action in Aichi-Nagoya, China were easily top of the medals table with 47 golds. Second were the hosts Japan on 15, with South Korea third with eight. The schoolgirl Yu will be remembered as one of the faces of the Games after her eye-popping exploits in the pool. If she maintains her current trajectory the teenager will be a major medal threat at the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics. Yu, who turns 14 next month, powered to a dominant victory in the women's 400m individual medley in a Games-record 4min 28.56sec.

It gave her a clean sweep from her three individual events, following victories in the 200m butterfly and 200m individual medley, also in Games-record times.

It was a reflection of China's dominance in the pool this week, winning 21 of the 28 golds so far.

But for all her success, Yu says there is still room for improvement. “I gained a lot from these Asian Games but there were also some regrets,” she said after the



North Korean weightlifter Ri Song Gum celebrates after winning first gold of the Asian Games by setting three world records in the women's 49kg class yesterday.

race. The teenager stood in wide-eyed amazement when a reporter suggested she had made it look easy. “Definitely not,” she replied.

North Korean weightlifter Ri Song Gum gave her country their first gold of the Games, and in style, setting three world records in the women's 49kg class. Kang Hyon Gyeong made it a golden double for North Korea's women weightlifters by winning the 53kg class in equally dominant fashion.

Ri, who stands a mere 140cm (4ft 7ins) tall, joined an elite club of four weightlifters who have won three Asian Games golds.

The 28-year-old was emotional as her country's anthem was played at the medal ceremony. Ri's exceptional achievement was cheered to the rafters in a lively atmosphere, made all the more raucous by a large number of Japanese North Korean fans waving flags.

Ri hauled 94kg above her head

in the opening snatch discipline, one kilogram more than the previous world standard of 93kg. She then smashed the clean and jerk world mark of 115kg twice by hoisting 116kg and then 121kg. Her total of 215kg also obliterated the world mark by 7kg. “The reason I got this gold is for the feelings of my home country, the people had huge expectations for me,” Ri told reporters. “I wanted to lift my country up on these two small shoulders.”

FOCUS

China's men claim gymnastics gold

Reuters
Nagoya, Japan

Zhang Boheng produced another masterful display at the Asian Games gymnastics yesterday to help China avenge their Olympic defeat to Japan in a clash of global heavyweights for the men's team gold.

The 26-year-old Hunan native came up clutch with a clean high bar routine on the final rotation to keep the continental gold in Chinese hands for a third time in succession.

It was the second time Zhang had turned the tables on Japan at the Aichi-Nagoya Games, having edged injury-hampered Shinnosuke Oka for the all-around gold, two years after taking silver behind him at the Paris Olympics.

“Looking back now, I would not call Paris a regret. It was one stage in my gymnastics career,” Zhang told reporters.

“I learned a great deal there and took a great deal from it, and I used it to work on my shortcomings, right up to taking this gold medal today.”

The linchpin of a star-studded team, Zhang combined with Zou Jingyuan, Lan Xingyu, Sun Wei and Tian Hao for a score of 259.095, just over a point clear of Japan, who settled for silver for a third consecutive time.

Taiwan were delighted with a second successive bronze but were never in the running, finishing 15 points behind China.

Japan's silver came with regret for talisman Oka, who needed painkilling injections on his back to compete.

Though Japan trailed as they entered the final rotation, the door opened for Oka when China's Sun Wei had a messy high bar routine.

He needed only a clean effort

to help Japan snatch the gold but the triple Olympic champion fell flat on his back after a botched catch, drawing gasps from the crowd at the Nagoya General Gymnasium.

He rose to complete the routine, but his score of 12.966 all but took Japan out of contention.

Oka also posted low scores in the pommel horse and rings, having lowered the difficulty of his routines in a bid to preserve his back for the upcoming world championships in Rotterdam.

“It is a very frustrating result, and I feel the frustration of not having been able to do my own routines fully,” he said.

“Physically, I am still not back, because I had not been able to train.”

Oka's Olympic champion teammate Daiki Hashimoto battled hard to carry the team on his back and had home fans roaring in the terraces with his pommel horse and vault efforts.

But China also had a vital cameo from parallel bars specialist Zou, who struck a key blow in the penultimate rotation.

The back-to-back Olympic champion went for broke with the highest difficulty exercise in the field, and his score of 15.40 was nearly a point higher than Oka's next-best effort (14.566), giving China a vital edge.

Later in the evening session, China's women completed a sweep of the team golds, extending their unbeaten reign in Asian Games competition dating back to Tehran 1974 with a tight win over Japan's strong team.

Du Siyi, Ke Qinqin, Zhang Qingying, Zhang Yihan and Qiu Qiyuan delivered the gold with a score of 166.462, barely a point clear of the hosts.

North Korea edged out South Korea for the bronze.



Gold medalist China's Zhang Boheng (centre), silver medalist Japan's Shinnosuke Oka (left) and bronze medalist Japan's Daiki Hashimoto pose on the podium during the victory ceremony of the men's individual all-around artistic gymnastics during the Asian Games in Nagoya yesterday. (AFP)

Shengji, Liujiang claim walk golds

Asian Games athletics began with the men's and women's half-marathon race walks yesterday. China's Shi Shengji won the men's and compatriot Yang Liujiang triumphed in the women's.

“My name means ‘power’, so here I walked with power,” said Yang. Asked about her country winning both the men's and women's disciplines, she replied: “I think it's normal for us to sweep the (gold) medals.”

In badminton, world number one An Se-young won her match but South Korea lost 3-1 to Japan in the women's team event semi-finals. An, the reigning world and Olympic champion, was not best pleased by her father in the crowd. “Parents usually cannot bear to watch their own children compete, but my dad seems to watch perfectly happily, which is a bit much,” she said. “I am out there running myself into the ground and he is just cheering away in comfort.”