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HORSE RACING

HH The Amir Trophy elevated to international Group 1 status

By Sports Reporter
Paris

In a landmark decision underscoring the international prestige of Qatari horse racing, the International Federation of Horseracing Authorities (IFHA) has adopted the decision of the International Grading and Race Planning Advisory Committee (IRPAC) to promote the HH The Amir Trophy from Group 2 to Group 1 status.

Announced during the International Conference of Horseracing Authorities in Paris on Monday 5 October 2026, the upgrade elevates the premier Thoroughbred contest of the prestigious HH The Amir Sword Festival and the pinnacle of Qatar's annual racing calendar.

The decision rewards the continuous evolution of the festival and the sustained efforts of Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC) leadership to secure the global recognition the event warrants, driven by exceptional fields and top-tier domestic and international runners.

Qatar was represented at the conference by QREC Chairman Hamad bin Abdulrahman al-Attiyah, Deputy CEO Ahmed AmanAlla al-Sheebani, Head of International Affairs Patricia Musial and Chief Steward Philip Dingwall.

The announcement comes less than 24 hours after the conclusion of the Qatar Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe weekend, a show-



HH The Amir Sword Festival is pinnacle of Qatar's annual horse racing calendar.

piece fixture sponsored by Qatar for nearly two decades and established among the most prestigious events in world racing.

MAJOR INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

The decision marks a major international endorsement of the standing achieved by Qatari racing, particularly the elite contests staged during the annual HH The Amir Sword Festival. It reflects the rigorous implementation of global racing standards at QREC's Al Rayyan racecourse. The upgrade is set to further boost international participation, attracting top-tier international owners, trainers and jockeys eager to target a prestigious Group 1 prize of global stature.

The elevated contest will feature at the HH The Amir Sword Festival at Al Rayyan next February. The IFHA's decisions, which reflect the stature and prominence of Qatari racing, extended beyond the flagship HH The Amir Trophy for Thoroughbreds. IRPAC also approved Group 3 status for the Irish Thoroughbred Marketing Cup

- previously Listed - alongside Listed status for both the Dukhan Sprint and the Al Rayyan Mile. This widespread recognition marks another landmark chapter, cementing the high international standing of the HH The Amir Sword Festival and Qatari horse racing as a whole.

The DMM Dream Club Co Ltd-owned Deep Monster claimed the Group 2 HH The Amir Trophy for Thoroughbreds at last season's festival.

Carrying Japanese hopes in the 2,400-metre showpiece, the eight-year-old produced a powerful performance, tracking the leaders from third before launching a resolute challenge on the run-in to prevail by a neck under Tom Marquand for trainer Yasutoshi Ikee.

That victory sealed the final Group 2 renewal of the contest. From next February's HH The Amir Sword Festival onwards, the event will take its place at Group 1 level, setting the stage for a historic running with an expected surge in international participation from leading overseas owners, trainers and jockeys.

SPOTLIGHT

QOC Secretary-General says Qatar set new benchmark at Asiad

Qatar won 18 medals, improving on its 14-medal haul from Hangzhou 2022

By Sports Reporter
Nagoya, Japan

Qatar's 18-medal haul at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games reflected the country's progress across a wider range of sports and provided an important step in preparations for Doha 2030, Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) Secretary-General Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain said yesterday.

He described Qatar's participation as positive, stressing that the objective went beyond the medal tally and included preparing athletes and national teams for future competitions, particularly the next Asian Games, which Doha will host in 2030.

"The participation was not solely aimed at achieving results or contending for medals. It was part of a strategic plan to prepare our national teams for upcoming events, foremost among them Doha 2030," al-Buenain said.

Qatar improved on its 14-medal haul at Hangzhou 2022, winning six gold, six silver and six bronze medals across 10 sports in Aichi-Nagoya.

Rashed Nawaf and Mashari Nawaf made history by winning Qatar's first Asian Games padel gold, while Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan retained their beach volleyball title for a third successive Games. Bassem Hemeida won gold in the 400m hurdles, while shooting produced two gold medals through Rashed Saleh al-Athba's individual skeet triumph and the men's team title. Faleh al-Ajami then capped Qatar's campaign with individual show jumping gold, while Bassem Mohamed added bronze.

Ouisal Ikhlef also made history by becoming the first Qatari female weightlifter to win an Asian Games medal. Qatar also won medals in handball and 3x3 basketball, underlining the breadth of its success.

Al-Buenain said the return of sports such as karate, wrestling and weightlifting to the podium, together with the emergence of padel, were encouraging signs of progress.

"Qatar successfully won medals across 10 different sports, securing a total of 18 medals. These results mark a milestone not seen since the 2010



Qatar Olympic Committee Secretary-General Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain.

Asian Games," al-Buenain said.

He said the results reflected a deliberate approach of combining experienced athletes with emerging young talent and giving them exposure to major competitions as part of the long-term development plan.

Al-Buenain also highlighted the performance of Qatar's team sports, with handball, beach volleyball and 3x3 basketball all winning medals. "These achievements reflect a broadening competitive base and the improved performance levels of various sports," he said. Qatar sent 243 athletes to Aichi-Nagoya, competing in 26 sports and 32 disciplines at the Games, which brought together more than 17,000 athletes and officials.

The medal total continued Qatar's upward trend at the Asian Games. The country won 13 medals at Jakarta-Palembang in 2018, followed by 14 at Hangzhou in 2022, before reaching 18 in Japan. Beyond the competition, al-Buenain pointed to the impact of Qatar House in Nagoya, which attracted around 5,000 visitors during the Games and showcased Qatar's culture, heritage and identity.

He thanked the QOC delegation, national federations, administrative and media teams, as well as the Qatar House and Doha 2030 delegations, for their efforts during the Games.

"The assessment of Qatar's participation goes beyond the medal tally. It also encompasses the experience gained by athletes, the emergence



Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan retained their beach volleyball Asian Games gold for third successive time at Aichi-Nagoya 2026.



Ouisal Ikhlef made history by becoming the first Qatari female weightlifter to win an Asiad medal.



Rashed Saleh al-Athba won individual skeet shooting gold and also led men's team to top place.

of promising young talent and the strengthening of Qatar's sporting and cultural presence on the Asian stage," he said. The Doha 2030 delegation was in Nagoya to study the organisation and preparations for the Games, with al-Buenain stressing that the re-

sponsibility of preparing Qatar to host the continental event in four years had now begun. With the next Asian Games heading to Doha, Qatar's record campaign in Japan has provided both a new benchmark and valuable experience as preparations begin for 2030.

FOOTBALL

Mahrez arrives in Qatar ahead of move to Al Shamal

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Shamal have made a major statement of intent by bringing in Algerian star Riyad Mahrez, with the 35-year-old arriving in Doha yesterday to complete his move to the Qatar Stars League club.

Mahrez is set to join Al Shamal on a free transfer and will undergo his medical at Aspetar today before signing a contract that will keep him at the club until the end of the season. The move comes as Al Shamal look to build on their runners-up finish last season and mount a serious challenge for a maiden league title. The club are also seeking to strengthen their campaign in the AFC Champions League Elite.

Former Manchester City winger is expected take the place of Morocco international Mohamed Rabie Hrimat, who suffered a cruciate ligament injury in Al Shamal's second-round match against Al Gharafa.

For Al Shamal, the arrival of a player with Mahrez's experience represents a significant addition to their attacking options. The Algerian has won major honours in England and Saudi Arabia and brings more than a decade of top-level experience.

Mahrez began his professional career with Quimper in 2009 before moving to Le Havre. His breakthrough came at Leicester City, where he became one of the leading figures in the club's remarkable Premier League title triumph in 2016.

He subsequently spent five seasons with Manchester City, winning four Premier League titles and helping Pep Guardiola's side claim their first Champions League crown in 2023. Mahrez made 236 appearances for City, scoring 78 goals and providing 59 assists. In 2023, he moved to Saudi Arabia to join Al Ahli in a deal worth around \$40mn. During his time with the Jeddah club, he played 122 matches, scoring 37 goals and registering 50 assists, while also helping Al Ahli win the AFC Champions League Elite.

Mahrez has been equally influential for Algeria. He has scored 40 goals in 199 international appearances and was part of the team that won the Africa Cup of Nations in Egypt in 2019. He has also featured for Algeria at the 2014 and 2026 World Cups.



Riyad Mahrez is set to undergo medical today before signing a one-year deal with Al Shamal.

CRICKET

Agha sacked as Pakistan name Farhan captain

The opener to lead the team in 3-match T20 series against SL

AFP
Karachi

Pakistan replaced Salman Agha yesterday with Sahibzada Farhan as skipper for this week's Twenty20 international home series against Sri Lanka, while Shaheen Shah Afridi was retained as one-day skipper.

Farhan, Pakistan's fourth T20I captain in two and a half years, led a second-string team in the Asian Games in Japan where they lost to arch-rivals India in the final on Saturday.

While no reason was given for removing Agha, Pakistan selectors had hinted they were looking at building the team for the Twenty20 World Cup 2028, to be co-hosted by Australia and New Zealand.

Under Agha, Pakistan won 31 of 50 T20Is but failed to progress to the semi-finals in this year's World Cup.

Both Shaheen and Babar Azam - another former T20I captain - are not part of the 15-member squad which will take on Sri Lanka on October 9, 11 and 13 in Rawalpindi.

Allrounder Razaullah is rewarded with a maiden call in both squads following his brilliant Test debut against England at Edgbaston last month, hitting 81 and taking four wickets.

Shaheen will continue to lead Pakistan's one-day side, which



Pakistan's Sahibzada Farhan reacts after getting hit with the ball during the cricket final against India at the 2026 Asian Games at the Korogi Athletic Park in Nisshin. (AFP)

will play a tri-series against Sri Lanka and England starting October 18 in Rawalpindi. Senior wicketkeeper-batter Mohammad Rizwan - dropped from the T20I squad earlier this year - is also removed from the ODI side.

Rizwan faces an investigation by Pakistan's cybercrime agency on charges of leaking team infor-

mation, according to news reports. **Pakistan T20I squad:** Sahibzada Farhan (captain), Abdul Samad, Abrar Ahmed, Arafat Minhas, Fakhar Zaman, Hasan Nawaz, Muhammad Imran, Khawaja Nafay, Maaz Sadaqat, Naseem Shah, Razaullah, Saim Ayub, Mohammad Salman Mirza, Shadab Khan, Sufiyan Moqim

Pakistan ODI squad: Shaheen Shah Afridi (captain), Abrar Ahmed, Salman Ali Agha, Arafat Minhas, Babar Azam, Faheem Ashraf, Fakhar Zaman, Muhammad Ghazi Ghor, Haris Rauf, Hasan Nawaz, Naseem Shah, Razaullah, Saad Baig, Saim Ayub, Shadab Khan, Sufiyan Moqim

COMMENT

Pace bowler Hasan says Test cricket momentum turning for Bangladesh

AFP
Dhaka

Fast-rising pace bowler Hasan Mahmud said yesterday Bangladesh's upward trajectory has made a place in the World Test Championship final a realistic dream for his team.

Bangladesh are fourth in the World Test Championship standings after a shock nine-wicket victory over Australia in Darwin in August, a result that highlighted the strides made by a side long regarded as Test underachievers.

"The momentum is coming towards us, definitely," Hasan, 26, told AFP in an interview in Dhaka.

"The atmosphere is such that Bangladesh can now dominate in Test cricket," said the right-arm bowler, who played a key role by taking 6-55 in Darwin.

"We haven't dominated (in Test cricket). Now is the time."

Hasan said the Darwin victory could be a springboard for bigger achievements for Bangladesh, who have won six of their 13 Tests in the past two years.

Bangladesh have six Tests remaining in the current World Test Championship cycle, including home series against the West Indies and England, as well as a tour of South Africa.

"If we win four matches at home, why shouldn't we play in the World Test Championship fi-

nal? That's the dream for Bangladesh now," Hasan said.

The paceman, who enjoyed a successful county stint with Kent this year, has been a central figure in Bangladesh's recent rise.

Nicknamed "Mini-McGrath" after the Australian great Glenn McGrath, he believes the perception of Bangladeshi pace bowling is changing as the South Asian country produces a new generation of quicks.

"Since we started playing, the thinking has changed," he said.

"They now realise Bangladesh also has good-quality fast bowlers who can be world-class."

Hasan's aggressive approach was evident during the Australia series, where he focused on building pressure on batsmen.

"I was just doing my job and bowling. I wasn't giving them anything easy to hit. I would attack them with the short ball and keep bowling my way. If they hit me, they hit me," he said.

Bangladesh were unable to clinch the two-Test series, with Australia claiming the second Test in Mackay by an innings and 51 runs. However, Hasan said he was confident that Bangladesh's "graph will continue to move upward" in the coming days.

"Look at how much we've improved in Test cricket," he said.

"If the fast bowlers stay in good shape and the batsmen remain in form, then we will go to a higher level."

ANNOUNCEMENT

NZ's Bracewell shifts to casual contract, eyes BBL opportunity

Reuters
Auckland

New Zealand all-rounder **Michael Bracewell** will move to a casual contract for the 2026-27 season as he pursues an opportunity in Australia's Big Bash League, the country's cricket board (NZC) said yesterday.

Bracewell, who has played 105 times for New Zealand across all three formats, will feature in the limited-overs series against India beginning this month.

The 35-year-old joins Mark Chapman, Finn Allen, Lockie Ferguson, Adam Milne and Tim Seifert among players who have opted for the casual contract system, which allows them to play in high-paying Twenty20 leagues while remaining available for national duty.

"As a white-ball only player, this felt like too good of an opportunity to pass up," Bracewell said in a statement.

"I'm still very much committed to the Black Caps and can't wait to be involved in the upcoming India tour and future white-ball series."

Batter Nick Kelly will replace Bracewell on NZC's central contract list.

Kelly, the 33-year-old top-order batter who made his New Zealand debut in March 2025, has 15 in-



ternational caps, including two as T20I captain when he filled in for the injured Tom Latham in Bangladesh earlier this year.

"Nick's been a standout performer in domestic cricket for several seasons now and it's testament to his hard work that he's earned this first contract at this stage of his career," Rob Walter, the New Zealand head coach who coached Kelly for two seasons at Otago, said.

"Introducing players like Nick to international cricket a bit later certainly has its advantages in terms of the player knowing their game and being able to trust themselves to perform under pressure."

Walter said that Kelly, who has scored three half-centuries in his last four ODIs, deserved his opportunity.

SPOTLIGHT

SA's Nortje eyes Test return against Australia



Reuters
Durban

South Africa fast bowler **Anrich Nortje** could make a remarkable return to first-class cricket after an absence of almost four years to help an injury-hampered South Africa attack in the first test against Australia, which starts in Durban on Friday.

With fitness doubts over pace spearhead Kagiso Rabada and three other bowlers ruled out with hamstring injuries, Nortje is set to return to red-ball cricket for the first time since South Africa's Test victory over West Indies in March 2023.

That match, in which he took 5-36 in the first innings, was Nortje's last first-class appearance.

A succession of injury setbacks, as he struggled with back and hip problems, subsequently led him to focus on the shorter formats, where bowling in brief

spells has helped reduce the strain on his body.

The 32-year-old has evolved into a T20 specialist, but said he had been working on his red-ball skills.

"It's been quite a bit of a focus for me to try and execute skills with the red ball, to build loads gradually and in the right way try and get the overs up," he told reporters yesterday.

"It's something that I've been doing for quite some time. There's been quite some effort put in to try and upskill again, and improve from where I left off.

"I'll be very excited if I can put my Test cap on again. Growing up, it's the format you want to play. It's the motivation when you train," he added.

Nortje has featured in 19 Tests with a bowling average of 26.71 and regularly bowled at speeds in excess of 145kph - with his action taking a heavy toll on his body.

"You don't think of the tough times in T20 cricket. You just think about executing skills

there, whereas in Tests, you think about the tough times, the good times, the hard work and think that gets you through some sessions.

"There's just that little bit of extra X-factor that comes out, or fire that comes out, and energy that comes out," Nortje added. "Guys want to do well, and everyone wants to perform. It is a big series."

South Africa started an intra-squad match on Sunday and late will cut their preliminary squad from 18 to 15, with Nortje expected to make the cut despite his lengthy absence.

"The guys have grown quite a bit," he said of the test side which has since gone on to win the World Test Championship, beating Australia in mid-2025.

"They've played a lot and they've done really well," Nortje added.

"Hopefully, I can just add on to that. I'm very keen to get going and be on the park and try to do well for the country,"

FOCUS

Evans' title is a boost for Britain but the sport still has a long road ahead

Reuters
London

Elfyn Evans' dramatic title win, ahead of Britain's return to the World Rally Championship next year, is perfectly timed to boost the local popularity of a sport whose profile has faded since the glory years of late greats Colin McRae and Richard Burns.

David Richards, the Prodrive boss whose Subaru team took McRae and Burns to world titles in 1995 and 2001 and who won the world title as a co-driver with Finland's Ari Vatanen in 1981, told Reuters yesterday that the revival was on.

"We're back in the pound seats now. Rallying is back on the front foot again in the UK, I'd say," said Richards, who also chairs the national governing body Motorsport UK.

Evans' nail-biting title success on the gravel roads of Sardinia on Sunday was the first for a British driver in a quarter of a century and only the third since the title was first awarded in 1977. It was also his reward for years of heartache having been five-times overall runner-up in the previous six years.

Britain will host a round of the championship in Scotland next season for the first time since the last running of Wales Rally GB in 2019.

FIA TO INVESTIGATE SOFTWARE BUG AFTER BAHRAIN GP IN MALAYSIA

SEPANG, MALAYSIA: Formula One's governing body has promised a full investigation into a software bug that caused chaos and forced the start of Sunday's Bahrain Grand Prix in Malaysia to be aborted with drivers feeling like they were in battery-powered cars made of Lego. Ferrari's seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton and Red Bull's four-time champion and eventual race winner Max Verstappen were among several affected by the glitch on a formation lap after torrential rain and a long delay at Malaysia's steamy Sepang circuit. Verstappen compared the experience to a 'Lego race' held at Silverstone before the British Grand Prix while Hamilton, the sport's most successful driver of all time, had to stop his car on track and re-start it in what he said was a career first. The episode was the latest in a difficult first season for the new era of cars and engines,

with drivers at the pinnacle of motorsport unhappy since the opening race with the power units' increased electrical component and the need for energy management. The governing FIA said afterwards that "an unprecedented combination of low engine speed, low-grip conditions, wet-weather energy management settings and the Sepang circuit's sector configuration led to an unintended loss of power for a number of cars." "As a result, the FIA technical department removed the energy limit constraint in the affected sectors through an updated software release distributed to all competitors during the race delay caused by heavy rain, enabling teams to make the necessary changes to the power unit before the start of the race. "This issue had not been detected by the FIA or the teams during testing or during the laps to the grid. The FIA, together with the teams and

power unit manufacturers, will undertake a full review of the issue." The FIA's single-seater director Nikolas Tombazis told reporters the lack of pre-season testing in wet conditions had played a part in the chaos at Sepang circuit. "Some cars went very slowly, almost came to a standstill. There was a bit of a concertina effect between cars, and some cars almost stopped completely," he said. "That bug prevented the power from being redeployed, and for the cars to start again. "I think if we had had a bit more testing, we probably would have managed to catch it in time, and not have such a situation." Sepang was the first race weekend of the season with wet conditions, although the track dried during the race. "Sometimes things fall through the net and people learn, and you do a better job next time," said Tombazis.

TENNIS

Djokovic into China Open final as Medvedev sent off for hitting fan with ball

After a botched point, Medvedev slams the ball with a backhand straight into the stands and hits a fan



Russia's Daniil Medvedev (right) is escorted by an ATP official after he was disqualified for hitting a ball into the stands, injuring a spectator, during the singles semi-final against Serbia's Novak Djokovic at the China Open in Beijing yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Beijing

Novak Djokovic advanced to the China Open final yesterday after Daniil Medvedev was disqualified late in the second set, when a ball that came off the Russian's racquet hit a spectator.

A man sitting in the stands behind Medvedev's side of the court was seen holding his face and escorted from his seat after being hit, as Djokovic was serving for the match with the score at 7-5, 5-3.

Eleventh-ranked Djokovic will play world number nine Alex de Minaur for the title today in Beijing.

The Australian had advanced over Hubert Hurkacz after the 29-year-old from Poland retired from their semi-final with an adductor muscle strain.

Medvedev's disqualification arose from a moment deep in the match. When he failed to return a

point, the ball bounced off the back wall and Medvedev hit it with a backhand up into the stands, with the chair umpire stopping play.

"Terribly sorry to the spectator, first of all," he told reporters afterwards, adding it was "100 percent an accident" and that he wished to apologise to the fan in person.

"The ball was bouncing back, so I tried to, like, just hit it anywhere, so it doesn't go out from the court," he said.

It had been a physical battle before Medvedev's disqualification.

Djokovic was red-faced and hunched over between points, with both players forcing each other through gruelling rallies, until the Serbian took control in the second set.

The 39-year-old put on a dazzling performance and saved 16 break points across the match, diving at the baseline and sprinting to the net.

"I didn't see what happened, to be honest," Djokovic told the crowd after the fan was hit.

"I'm sure that Daniil didn't... do it intentionally. It happened by accident. Sorry for the crowd," he said, adding that it had been a tough contest.

"I know the feeling," Djokovic told reporters later, recounting his own disqualification from the 2020 US Open after accidentally hitting a ball at a line judge. "It's horrible... but it happens," he said.

In the women's draw, third-seeded Coco Gauff dispatched Chinese teenager Sun Xinran 7-5, 6-1 to secure a meeting with Belgium's Elise Mertens in the round of 16. "Today was really just about feeling," said the 22-year-old American, adding that it could be tough to play young players with styles largely unknown.

"I was just trying not to get frustrated out there," Gauff added, with a loud crowd behind the 16-year-old.

TOUGH WIN FOR SWIATEK

Former world number one Iga Swiatek staged a comeback to ad-



Russia's Daniil Medvedev (right) speaks with Serbia's Novak Djokovic at the net after he was disqualified at the China Open in Beijing yesterday. (AFP)

Alcaraz advances to Japan Open final

Tokyo: Defending champion Carlos Alcaraz advanced to the final of the Japan Open yesterday after securing a hard-fought 5-7, 6-3, 6-1 victory over fellow Spaniard Jaume Munar.

The world number three said regaining "consistency" at a high level has remained elusive after a months-long wrist injury. He reached the quarter-finals of the US Open last month.

"Right now, I'm trying to get my level back. I would say it's still far from it, still far from it," he said when asked about his current condition compared with his success last year.

He said he was "feeling good" but was still "trying to get into the competition, trying to get into the rhythm of playing matches, playing tournaments".

The Australian Open champion clinched the Tokyo win despite



struggling with mistakes, particularly from the end of the first set through the middle of the second set, when his 49th-ranked opponent put up a brave fight.

Alcaraz unleashed a barrage of big serves and aggressive returns to keep Munar off-balance and running along the baseline.

In the final, Alcaraz will face 19th-ranked Jiri Lehecka of Czechia, who beat Valentin Vacherot of Monaco 6-4, 6-2.

GOLF

Thitikul secures fourth title win this season at Lotte Championship



Jeenoo Thitikul of Thailand poses with the trophy after her winning birdie putt on the 18th green during the final round of the Lotte Championship at Hoakalei Country Club in Ewa Beach, Hawaii. (AFP)

Reuters
Ewa Beach, Hawaii

Jeenoo Thitikul didn't let a late double bogey block her path to a fourth LPGA Tour win this year, responding with birdies on the final two holes to secure the Lotte Championship in Honolulu.

Thitikul of Thailand shot 4-under-par 68 to finish at 21-under-267 at Hoakalei Country Club. The 23-year-old started the round atop the leaderboard with a three-stroke margin and kept it for her 11th career victory since joining the tour in 2022. South Korea's Ina Yoon also shot 68 and was alone in second at 18 under, followed by Japan's Miya Yamashita (67) at 17 under. American Auston Kim (67) was fourth at 16 under despite a stretch of three bogeys from Nos. 12-14.

The No. 2 player in the Rolex world rankings, Thitikul matched

top-ranked Nelly Korda with her fourth victory this season.

Thitikul opened with a birdie at the par-5 first hole and shaved single strokes at Nos. 7 and 8 to make the turn at 33 for the day. The back nine started with five pars, then a birdie at the par-3 No. 15 before she ran into trouble when she drove into the water at the par-4 No. 16.

The double-bogey 6 dropped her to 19 under for the tournament, but she regained the shots with birdies at Nos. 17 and 18.

"It definitely feels so bad after finishing the 16, but I also told myself that I still in the bubble, and then I feel like I trying to play my game, not other or anyone game," Thitikul said. "So I just really want to focus on what I have, because like on my mind I think whenever if I still have a shot, which mean I still have a chance, no matter it's going to be good or bad, I have nothing to lose."

Thitikul hit 11 of 14 fairways and

16 of 18 greens in regulation. Yoon, 23, had a sizzling start with birdies at Nos. 1, 2, 4 and 5 before a bogey at No. 8 and another birdie at No. 9. The back nine was a balance of two birdies and two bogeys.

Yoon hit nine of 14 fairways and 13 of 18 greens in regulation on the last day. She totaled a tournament-best 26 birdies over four rounds.

"It was super fun today," Yoon said after her second runner-up finish of the season, following the KPMG Women's PGA Championship in June.

"Jeenoo played great, and my first nine holes was putting-wise awesome. Yeah, I think I learn a lot about golf from her. Yeah, it was super nice. She's nice player and she's nice person at the same time. Yeah, really congratulations for her. I'm so proud."

Thitikul said that she knew she had to make birdies with the way Yoon, her playing partner, was making shots in the final round.

Austin Smotherman nabs first title at Bank of Utah Championship

IVINS, UTAH: Austin Smotherman survived a back-nine double bogey, birdied three of the last five holes and won his maiden PGA Tour title at the Bank of Utah Championship on Sunday in Ivins, Utah.

Smotherman entered with a one-stroke lead over Doug Ghim and shot a 3-under-par 68 to go 26-under-258 for the week, a new scoring record at the three-year-old tournament. He defeated Ghim by two shots after the latter posted a final-round 69 at Black Desert Resort.

"It didn't have to be pretty," an ebullient Smotherman said. "I got some nice bounces. Made some poor swings, but this game doesn't have to be perfect."

Smotherman, 32, earned a two-year PGA Tour exemption and entry into the PGA Championship and The Players Championship. He's also projected to rise to No. 51 in the FedEx Cup Fall points standings. Players who finish Nos. 51-60 in the fall standings receive invitations to the first two signature events of 2027.

Playing from an awkward lie, Smotherman failed to escape a bunker on his third shot at the par-4 13th hole, and his fourth shot left him 10 feet for bogey, which he could not convert.

His three-shot lead shrank to one when he finished the hole.

But he bounced back to birdie the short par-4 14th, and after going birdie-bogey at Nos. 16 and 17, he and Ghim arrived at the par-5 finishing hole with Smotherman ahead by two.

Ghim had an eagle look in the form of a 31-foot chip that could tie Smotherman for the lead. But Smotherman went first and lagged a 70-foot eagle putt to less than 2 feet from the hole to set up an easy tap-in, and Ghim's chip narrowly missed the cup.

Smotherman said he trusted himself on the 18th to play more conservatively and go for the fat of the green, even though lag putting had been his "nemesis."

"A lot of good shots, those drives coming down the stretch as well, just piping it down the middle of the fairway, being committed," he said.

Ghim, who was also angling for his first PGA Tour victory and the perks that would come with, gave his playing partner a hearty congratulations on the 18th green.

He was asked how fun the battle was for him.

"Absolutely. It's what we play for, it's what we practice for," Ghim said. "Obviously the money and the points are great, but as a little kid trying to win a



Austin Smotherman of the United States poses with the winner's trophy after winning the Bank of Utah Championship at Black Desert Resort in Ivins, Utah. (AFP)

PGA Tour event, just a chance to do that is a dream come true. Today was Austin's day. I did everything that I could, and hopefully I'll learn from some of the mistakes and be a little bit more comfortable next time. But always grateful."

David Ford (64) and Trace Crowe (66) tied for third at 23 under. Kevin Streelman (67) and Ben James (67) tied for fifth at 22 under.

Amateur Kihei Akina, a sophomore at BYU, finished a strong tournament with back-to-back rounds of 65 on the weekend. He finished alone in ninth at 20 under.

"I'd say go back to my roots from here in Utah, even though I'm from Hawaii, but I went to high school here and now I'm obviously in college here in Utah," Akina said. "I hopefully can set an example for some of the Utah junior golfers out there. I've definitely seen that Utah junior golf is making their way up right now, so it's really cool to see that."

END OF AN ERA

Messi readies for final farewell in Argentina send-off

Messi will be joined for his international swansong by 85,000 fans

AFP
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Lionel Messi will bring the curtain down on his glittering Argentina career today with a farewell friendly against Benin that marks the dawn of a new era for the South American champions.

After more than two decades of service to his country, the 39-year-old superstar will hand over the captain's armband for good as he makes his final appearance in the Albiceleste jersey at the Estadio Monumental in Buenos Aires.

Messi will be joined for his international swansong by 85,000 spectators and several of the teammates with whom he reached the pinnacle of football at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, alongside members of Argentina's emerging generation. The friendly marks a symbolic passing of the torch for a player whose international legacy includes a World Cup title, two Copa America crowns and the Finalissima.

Messi also bows out as Argentina's record appearance-maker and leading scorer, with 125 goals in 207 games, as well as a record 68 assists. His farewell comes two and a half months after Argentina's ill-tempered World Cup final defeat to Spain in New Jersey, where Messi exited in tears after making little impression.

"I gave it my all; I have nothing left to give, and besides, there are great young players coming up who deserve their chance," Messi wrote when announcing his international retirement in August.

Messi remains under contract with Inter Miami until 2028, although following the death of his father, Jorge, two months ago, he revealed he may hang up his boots for good sooner than anticipated.

Members of Argentina's 2022 World Cup-winning squad – the players who delivered the country's third star – and their families will join Messi for Tuesday's farewell against Benin, ranked 93rd in the world. Veterans of that Doha triumph such as Angel Di Maria, who retired from international football in 2024, will be there to witness the passing of the torch to a new generation charged with extending the Albiceleste's golden era.

Several of the newcomers, including Franco Mastantuono and Leonel Flores, were not even born when "La Pulga" ("The Flea") made his Argentina debut in 2005 for a team whose history had for so long been dominated by Diego Maradona. "It's going to be an unforgettable day for everyone. Everyone wants to be at this match, and now it's just about enjoying it," Ar-



Lionel Messi bows out as Argentina's record appearance-maker and leading scorer, with 125 goals in 207 games, as well as a record 68 assists.

gentina coach Lionel Scaloni said.

Argentina's new generation has already shown what it can do without its captain, although nobody is pretending replacing a man regarded by many as the greatest footballer in history will be straightforward. "Collectively, we will try to fill the void left by Leo," said Scaloni, who is negotiating a contract extension after leaving his future unresolved following the World Cup defeat in July.

Scaloni, who mastered the art of building the right supporting cast around Messi, will also say goodbye today to 38-year-old vice-captain Nicolas Otamendi. Like Messi and Otamendi, midfielders Rodrigo De Paul and Giovani Lo Celso were called up solely for the Benin game, raising the possibility that neither will represent Argentina again.

Those certain to be involved, at least from the bench, include other veterans of the 2022 World Cup who will be the standard-bearers for Argentina after Messi: defender Cristian Romero, midfielders Alexis Mac Allister and Enzo Fernandez, and forwards Julian Alvarez

and Lautaro Martinez.

Tenacious centre-back Romero is set to inherit the captain's armband, first worn by Messi at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

Goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez and Lautaro Martinez are next in the captaincy hierarchy.

They have already begun to rally around Messi's heirs, who showed their appetite for success in Argentina's first game since the World Cup final, against Bolivia in Cordoba on Wednesday.

Argentina swept the Bolivians aside 4-0, with young talents Nico Paz and Jose Manuel Lopez among the scorers.

They followed that victory with a 7-0 rout of Burkina Faso at the Monumental on Saturday, with Mastantuono and Gianluca Prestianni scoring their first international goals.

While Argentina's future is beginning to take shape, one small but symbolically significant question remains: who inherits Messi's number 10 shirt? "We won't give the number 10 to anyone until Leo's match takes place," Scaloni said. "After that, we'll see."

FOCUS

Klopp's Germany working hard but lacking results

Reuters
Berlin

When Germany coach **Juergen Klopp** walked off the pitch in Thessaloniki just before midnight on Sunday he knew that one win in his first four international matches in charge was hardly living up to the euphoria of his appointment, but he has noted that progress had been made since their disappointing World Cup exit.

Germany fans had been hoping for an immediate impact when the hugely popular former Liverpool and Borussia Dortmund coach took over in July following another early World Cup elimination. Apart from a 2-0 win over Serbia last week, however, results have been disappointing with a home defeat by Greece before Sunday's 0-0 draw and a 1-1 draw with the Netherlands in Group A2.

"Overall, it was evident that many aspects of their game weren't quite clicking yet," said Germany's 1990 World Cup-winning captain Lothar Matthaeus. "It was clear that the young players



thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Unfortunately, the points we got were not at that level. We cannot be satisfied with the points haul."

Germany are third on five points, with the

Dutch and Greece top on eight. The Germans did, however, look more aggressive than in recent years, playing at times Klopp's trademark high tempo attacking game.

"I am very satisfied because I know where we've come from," Klopp said following Sunday's game, the last of the set of four internationals this month.

"I wouldn't have believed we could play a first half like that after just one week. The lads put in a top-notch performance; their movement and positioning were outstanding."

The 59-year-old had raised eyebrows and earned widespread praise when he named 44 players for the four matches – all Nations League games – with two separate squads of 22 players for two matches each.

He called up 16 newcomers as he sets out to restore the four-times world champions international reputation.

"I am very impressed with the team and the way we went about it. Everyone stepped up over the past two weeks and justified their selection," Klopp said. "When we defend collectively like that, the lads can really play football."

SPOTLIGHT

Ronaldo can return to Portugal team if he wants: Coach

AFP
Porto

Portugal superstar **Cristiano Ronaldo** can return to the squad if he wishes, despite walking out on his team-mates, said national team coach Jorge Jesus on Sunday.

Jesus said Ronaldo can come back into the fold "if he wants to" after the team beat Norway without the veteran attacker to reach the Nations League quarter-finals.

The dispute began last week when Jesus left 41-year-old Ronaldo on the bench for Portugal's first win over Norway. Ronaldo subsequently walked out on the squad on Wednesday after learning he would not start against Denmark. "For me, Cris, in the next call-up, if he's playing at Al-Nassr, he'll be a player who can be called up," Jesus told reporters, referring to Ronaldo's Saudi club side. "If he wants to, he'll return to the national team."

The coach said if Ronaldo wishes to speak to him before Portugal's next matches in November, that would happen. "If he wants to, as we did before this call-up, we talked before the call-up, we can talk before the next call-up," continued Jesus. "But Cris is the one

who's going to decide."

Former Real Madrid and Manchester United attacker Ronaldo is Portugal's all-time leading scorer and most-capped player. Jesus said he had told Ronaldo he needed him in the squad for his first games at the helm after replacing Roberto Martinez following the 2026 World Cup.

"Cristiano should end his time in the national team the way he wants, he's the one who will decide how he wants it," said Jesus. "That's how we talked, the two of us -- I said, 'I need you'. In my first call-up, I said, 'I need you, I need you to be close to me, playing or not playing, I need you'. And now I'm saying the same thing."

Ronaldo, who made his Portugal debut in 2003 at the age of 18, has said this will "probably" be his final year in football. The forward has been a fixture of the national team for more than two decades and has played at six World Cups.

In Ronaldo's absence Portugal became the first team to secure a place in the quarter-finals, with two group games still to play. Ronaldo's long-time rival for the title of the world's best player, Lionel Messi, will play his final match for Argentina in a friendly against Benin in Buenos Aires today.



Turkish football boss denies any role in referee scandal

Istanbul: Turkey's Football Federation (TFF) chief denied any involvement in a scandal that has seen the country's top refereeing official and several others arrested on graft charges.

Ferhat Gundogdu, head of the Central Referees Committee (MHK), and four others were on Saturday jailed pending trial on charges of manipulating the referee administration process.

They appeared before a judge at Istanbul's Caglayan courthouse on several charges, including "official document forgery", "breach of trust" and "illegal acquisition of personal data".

The case appears to be linked to a vast illegal betting network that came to light a year ago. "Don't try and pin 30 years of corruption in football on me," TFF President Ibrahim Haciosmanoglu told *Hurriyet* newspaper.

"Let no-one try to blame me and my colleagues on the board... for the corruption, decay and lack of ethics that have existed in Turkish football for 15, 20 or perhaps 30 years," said Haciosmanoglu, who has held the role for just over two years. "For the future of Turkish football, we will be prepared, if necessary, not only to do our part but to assume the full weight of responsibility."

Two other referees officiating in Turkey's top-flight Super Lig, who

were detained on Thursday night, were placed in pre-trial detention by an Istanbul court, media reports said.

Last week, Turkish media leaked an exchange of WhatsApp and other messages between the TFF chief and Gundogdu, suggesting a possible manipulation of referee ranking and promotion processes, as well as alleged preferential treatment. Justice Minister Akin Gurlek has said prosecutors are examining claims about "interference in the processes of referee classification, assignments, scoring and appointments, as well as the exams on rules".

The scandal came exactly a year after the TFF suspended 149 referees on charges of illegal betting. In an investigation involving 571 referees from the professional leagues, the TFF found 371 had sports betting accounts and 152 were actively placing bets.

Journalist Ayhan Sensoy, who wrote a 2024 book on the subject called *"The Gambling Pit"*, told *AFP* the arrests appeared to be a continuation of last year's betting scandal, saying he doubted the current federation bosses had "any chance of staying in office."

The Turkish Super Lig has attracted big-name signings, including Egyptian superstar Mohamed Salah, who joined Trabzonspor from Liverpool in August.

NATIONS LEAGUE

Modric hopes fans back Croatia against Spain after England shame

AFP
Barcelona

Croatia captain Luka Modric said he hoped the country's fans would support the team despite a hefty defeat by England when they face world champions Spain today in the Nations League. Modric and his teammates were crushed 7-0 at home by Thomas Tuchel's England on Saturday and the AC Milan midfielder said afterwards he was "ashamed" of the team's performance. Croatia host Spain in Split in Group A3 seeking to make amends, while La Roja are hoping to seal qualification to the quarter-finals.

"Losing isn't the problem, but the way we lost is," 41-year-old former Real Madrid star Modric told reporters. "I hope the fans will cheer us on as always and that, after the match, they can judge how we played. That's what we need, so we're hoping for a positive reaction because what happened hurts us more than anyone."

The atmosphere should be different. Against England, Croatia were serving a one-match punishment for fan racism and played the game in front of a crowd of 6,000 local children 14 and under, who were exempted from the ban, and a handful of England supporters.

Facing Spain, who won the World Cup for the second time in July and are unbeaten in 41 matches, is a difficult challenge for

Slaven Bilic's Croatia. "Spain is the best team in the world. They're the champions," said Modric.

"I don't know how Spain is going to interpret our defeat... (but) what happened isn't typical for our team, we all know that... Against the best team in the world, we have to fix everything, be aggressive, and not give them too much space to find solutions."

Spain beat Croatia 4-1 in Seville earlier in the international break and have three wins from three games going into the match. Modric said he has not decided for how long he will continue to represent his country. "We're taking it one game at a time. We'll see if I leave the national team in a year or a month," explained Modric,

who earned a 205th cap against England. "The important thing for me is to be in a place that makes me happy. I'm willing to help at any time, both on and off the field."

Bilic, coaching Croatia for the second spell in his career, said facing the new world champions offered a quick chance of redemption. "It (the England thrashing) was incredibly tough. We'll never forget it, but when there's a fire, you have to react," said Bilic. "On one hand we have a very difficult opponent, but it's the best opportunity for us."

Spain coach Luis de la Fuente wrote off Croatia's heavy defeat by England. "What happened the other day was just an accident in football," said the Spain coach. "It doesn't reflect the difference in footballing

ability between Croatia and England. This result can motivate them."

Teenage winger Lamine Yamal has excelled for Spain in their first three group matches, scoring in each of them, including a brace against Croatia. "Lamine is in fantastic form. He's a role model and a born competitor," said the Spain coach. "He's in good shape to play tomorrow's match. But so are other team-mates, who are all in perfect condition."

Spain and Barca midfielder Dani Olmo developed as a youth player at Dinamo Zagreb in Croatia, although he was not used by De la Fuente in their meeting in Seville. Olmo left Barcelona as a teenager to join Dinamo, before later rejoining the Catalan giants in 2024 from RB Leipzig.