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FOCUS

Shamal and Duhail clash as QSL resumes after break

Leaders Sadd host Arabi tomorrow, with defending champions aiming to maintain their perfect start

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Shamal and Al Duhail resume their Qatar Stars League campaigns today with a crucial clash at Al Bayt Stadium, as both sides look to strengthen their position in a tightly packed upper half of the table.

Shamal are third on eight points, while Duhail are fifth with six. Shamal, the runners-up last season will be keen to return to winning ways after being held 1-1 by Al Wakrah in their previous outing, a result that allowed Al Rayyan to move into second place.

Shamal coach David Prats expects a tough test against a Duhail side he considers among the strongest in the league. "We are excited for the return of the league competitions after the recent break, and we are striving to give our best in this new start to the league season," Prats said at the pre-match press conference. "We will face Al Duhail tomorrow, which is one of the best and strongest teams in the Qatari league, so we must be properly prepared."

Prats is also hoping to end Shamal's losing record against Duhail from last season, when they were beaten in both meetings. "We lost both matches last season against Al Duhail, and we are looking to make up for that in tomorrow's match, so winning will be our only goal in the game," he said.

Duhail have also made an inconsistent start, with three draws and one victory from their four matches. They were held 1-1 by Al Shahania in their previous outing.

Coach Djamel Belmadi said the lengthy international break had allowed his squad to work on preparations, with QSL Cup matches providing valuable playing time. "Naturally, during the long international break, we worked hard to prepare the players by competing in QSL Cup. We aim to

translate the preparations made during the break into positive results in the coming period," Belmadi said.

"We played tough matches against strong teams like Al Arabi and Al Rayyan. The encounter with Al Shamal will certainly be a challenging one as they are a good team that is making progressive strides."

SADD SEEK FIFTH STRAIGHT WIN

Leaders Al Sadd host Al Arabi at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium tomorrow, with the defending champions aiming to maintain their perfect start.

Sadd have won all four matches and lead the standings with 12 points after a 6-3 victory over Al Sailiya before the break. Razvan Lucescu's side are chasing a fifth successive win as they seek a fourth consecutive league title.

Al Arabi are fourth on six points after three draws and one victory. They were held 1-1 by Qatar SC in their previous match and will be looking to close the gap on the leaders. Sadd's preparations were affected by the Gulf Cup, with nine of their players involved with Qatar, compared with two from Al Arabi.

Second-placed Al Rayyan, on 10 points, face Qatar SC at Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium tomorrow. Rayyan have won three and drawn one of their four matches and will be aiming for a fourth victory after beating Al Ahli 3-0 last time out. Qatar SC, meanwhile, are 11th with two points from two draws and two defeats.

GHARAF, WAKRAH SEEK REVIVAL

Al Gharafa and Al Wakrah meet at Khalifa International Stadium today, with both sides desperate for a victory after difficult starts. Gharafa, the 2026 Amir Cup champions, have collected four points and sit ninth, while Wakrah are 10th with two points from four matches.



Al Shamal, the runners-up last season, will be keen to return to winning ways after being held 1-1 by Al Wakrah in their previous outing.

Gharafa coach Pedro Martins said his side are ready for an important encounter and have prepared well during the break. He stressed the need for focus and discipline, urging his players to avoid mistakes, make the most of their chances and maintain their concentration throughout the match.

Wakrah coach Jose Luis Sierra also said his team are ready for the challenge, adding that preparations during the break were aimed not only at the Gharafa match but also at the fixtures ahead.

Sierra said the QSL Cup matches had

provided an opportunity to give playing time to players who had featured less regularly in the league and improve their match readiness.

On Saturday, Al Ahli, eighth on four points, host bottom side Al Sailiya at Al Thumama Stadium. Ahli will be looking to bounce back from their 3-0 defeat to Al Rayyan, while Sailiya are still searching for their first point after four straight losses.

Also on Saturday, sixth-placed Lusail face Al Shahaniya at Khalifa International Stadium. Lusail have made an encouraging return to the top flight, collecting

five points, while Shahaniya are seventh on four.

FIXTURES

Today: Al Shamal vs Al Duhail at Al Bayt Stadium | 5:45pm; Al Wakrah vs Al Gharafa at Khalifa International Stadium | 8:00pm

Tomorrow: Qatar SC vs Al Rayyan at Lusail Stadium | 5:45pm; Al Sadd vs Al Arabi at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium | 8:00pm

Saturday: Al Shahaniya vs Lusail at Khalifa International Stadium | 5:45pm; Al Ahli vs Al Sailiya at Al Thumama Stadium | 8:00pm

SPOTLIGHT

Argentina retirement saddest day of my career: Messi

AFP
Buenos Aires

Lionel Messi described his retirement from international football as the "saddest day of my career" on Tuesday after playing his final game for Argentina in a 3-0 defeat of Benin. Messi, who scored a goal and provided two assists in the victory at the Monumental Stadium, took to the field after the win to express gratitude to fans and teammates as he reflected on his 21-year career with Argentina.

"It was a huge source of pride for me to defend this jersey for more than 20 years," Messi told the 80,000-plus spectators in the stadium. "Even in the worst moments we went through and that I had, I never stopped fighting, never stopped being here," added the 39-year-old.

"Not coming anymore is going to be deeply painful. I swear I'd like to play for the rest of my life, because playing for the Argentina national team is the most beautiful thing that can happen to you."

Beforehand, Messi wiped away tears as the bus carrying him and his Argentina team-mates made its way through crowds of wellwishers en route to the stadium. Messi took the field alongside his three children and received affectionate waves from his wife, Antonela Rocuzzo, and his mother, Celia Cuccitini, who were watching from a VIP box.

Shortly before kick off, a giant Argentina jersey bearing the word "Gracias" (Thank You) above the football superstar's No.10 was laid out on the pitch as the crowd roared their approval.

Messi welled up again as Falklands War veteran Fabio Santana sang the national anthem beside a banner which read - "The Malvinas are Argentine" - the same banner held aloft by players after their 2-1



Lionel Messi cries as a tribute in his honour is displayed on the big screen after the Argentina forward played his last international match, a friendly against Benin, at the Monumental Stadium in Buenos Aires on Tuesday. (AFP)

World Cup semi-final win over England.

The match was halted in the 10th minute - in tribute to Messi's famous shirt number - for a minute-long ovation to the former Barcelona star. At the final whistle a drone show lit up the night sky above the stadium, showing Messi's image and thanking the eight-time Ballon D'Or-winner for his career.

Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni, who

was at the helm as Messi finally achieved his dream of winning football's biggest prize the World Cup in 2022, said there would never be another player of his ability. "He is unique," said Scaloni, whose played alongside Messi for a year in the national team. "I have never seen such a set of skills in any other player in all my life."

An emotional Scaloni, who cried during the national anthem, said to have been

given the opportunity to coach a team with Messi in it was beyond his wildest dreams. "I owe him a debt of eternal gratitude, for everything he gave to us," said the 48-year-old. "I told him in front of everybody, with the little energy that I still had: never in my life did I imagine I would coach the best footballer in history."

Messi said that returning to the Monumental - where Argentina played their

first game after winning the 2022 World Cup - was bittersweet.

"Now I'm here on the saddest day of my career, which is the day I have to say goodbye to the national team, goodbye to all of you. But now I'll be on that side (with the fans), supporting all the boys, everyone who comes in. Always united," he said.

Messi though said that despite the sadness, he had no regrets about the timing of his international exit, citing the exertions of Argentina's campaign at this year's World Cup, where the South Americans battled through to the final only to lose to Spain.

Messi said the emotional roller coaster of that tournament - which included a 2-1 defeat of bitter rivals England in the semi-final - had taken a toll. He was also to suffer a bodyblow in August when his father and agent Jorge died.

"Even though I want to be here all my life, I feel that this is the moment. The last World Cup was too much, everything I had to live through," said Messi. "We had the dream of fulfilling my dream and the dream of the whole country, of becoming world champions again. In the last World Cup we were very close, and the reality is that nothing strange happened, as people say. The match against England took a huge toll on us physically, and emotionally it was very big."

"We arrived with just enough, we fought like we always did with this jersey, with all the teammates I got to be with and share things with, not only them but also those who were around in the time when we managed to win. We were very close."

Scaloni said Messi left an "unbelievable legacy" but he as coach must now focus on life without team's talisman.

"The only way to make up for his leaving is to have a great team which means everyone brings something to contribute to the building of it."

INDIA'S 2036 GAMES BID FUELS SPORTING DREAMS BUT HURDLES, RIVALS REMAIN

BENGALURU: India's bid for the 2036 Olympics sits at the heart of a wider effort to transform the country into a sporting superpower and the Indian Olympic Association is convinced it can come out on top in a fiercely competitive process, its chief executive officer Raghuram Iyer told Reuters on Wednesday. India's ambitions took a step forward on Tuesday after the International Olympic Committee said the world's most populous nation along with Qatar, Germany, Hungary, Turkey, South Africa and South Korea were in the running to stage the 2036 Games. The bid faces no shortage of challenges with the lack of recent experience hosting multi-sport Games, governance issues within the IOA, limited Olympic medal success and its poor doping record all counting against India. Despite the hurdles, Iyer argued that close engagement with the IOC and growing experience in hosting international events would

help India secure the Games, which officials see as a springboard for its sporting ambitions. "We have the mission to become a sporting superpower," Iyer told Reuters in a telephone call. "It is not a one-off event. It is a complete process we're in and hoping that India one day becomes a superpower and comes in the top 10 in the world or the top five in the world. "The legacy will continue until sports becomes a part of daily life of every Indian, because it's more than just winning medals, it's all about health, fitness, mental well-being and the nation becoming healthier and fitter overall." A series of embarrassments over leaking stadiums and filthy accommodation in the lead-up to the Commonwealth Games hosted by New Delhi in 2010 muddled India's reputation as hosts of international multi-sport events. Since last year, however, the country has staged dozens of international competitions across 15



cities and is on course to host 65 events by 2028 - a target it hopes will demonstrate its capacity to stage a multi-sport spectacle like the Games. The next step is presentations to the IOC's Future Host Commission next month and bids will then go through feasibility assessments, site visits and detailed reviews before the IOC narrows the field.

A shortlist of preferred candidates is expected in late 2028, with IOC members due to elect the host in 2029.

CHALLENGERS WITH PEDIGREE Iyer said the IOA was committed to working with the IOC to iron out any "blind spots" in the bid and the body has already started addressing some potential issues.

After visiting the IOC last year, it announced a new anti-doping education programme in an attempt to tackle its position atop the World Anti-Doping Agency's list of offenders for three straight years. The IOA also offered assurances of unity after India was threatened with a ban from the 2024 Paris Games over governance and election disputes. India would be up against rivals with far stronger Olympic pedigrees like former hosts Germany and South Korea, while Qatar brings with it the experience of having staged the 2022 soccer World Cup. The western city of Ahmedabad, the political stronghold of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is central to India's ambitions and is lined up to stage the 2030 Commonwealth Games and potentially the 2038 Asian Games. The Times of India reported last year that Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar detailed a blueprint to host the Games with costs estimated around \$3.51bn to \$6.61bn.

GROWING INVESTMENT Iyer said that India's bid was being driven by growing investment in sport from both the government and private sector, arguing that greater resources were beginning to translate into stronger performances on the international stage. India have claimed a total of 41 medals at the Olympics since 1900, with seven of them coming at the Tokyo Games five years ago and six from Paris 2024. "You've seen over the couple of years the kind of focus that's been on sport and the kind of investment that's coming from the government, the private sector and from the various parties involved," Iyer added. "There's a lot of focus and some of it's also showing in the results that are coming out on the international stage. "The Olympics is the ultimate (thing). Our ambition is to pitch for it, hopefully host it and in the process, become the sporting nation and the sporting powerhouse we want to be."

CRICKET

Australia seek reboot in series against Proteas

Kingsmead pitch may aid spinners, allow SA to rest pacer Rabada



South African captain Temba Bavuma (centre) is seen with all-rounder Marco Jenson (right) and wicketkeeper Ryan Rickelton during a team photoshoot ahead of the first Test against Australia. **RIGHT:** Australian captain Pat Cummins.

Reuters
Durban

Australia play their first Test in South Africa since the 2018 ball-tampering scandal when they start a three-match series in Durban tomorrow, with the visitors unlikely to face more than a few heckles over the incident that rocked the sport eight years ago. The tourists' efforts to roughen up the ball using sandpaper, and aid reverse swing, in Cape Town in March 2018 were caught on camera and led to a major reckoning for the game in Australia, with captain Steve Smith among those banned for their role in the subterfuge. South Africa have played Tests

in Australia since 'Sandpapergate', and Australia have toured South Africa in the interim for limited-overs internationals. The scandal has attracted little media focus in South Africa over recent weeks in comparison to the attention devoted to the incident in the Australian press. After dethroning Australia last year in a thrilling World Test Championship final at Lord's to win a first major title, South Africa are focused on improving their chances of a return to the final at the end of the 2025-27 WTC cycle.

AUSTRALIA LOOK FOR A BRIGHT START Australia are also in need of a boost after a surprise home Test defeat by Bangladesh in August and with an Ashes tour to Eng-

land starting next June. The pitch at Kingsmead often proves a fickle track but should offer the spinners a chance to play a leading role in a change from South Africa's usually seamer-friendly surfaces. It is unusual for South Africa's chances to be largely entrusted to their spin attack, but Simon Harmer and Keshav Maharaj wreaked havoc in India last November when they triumphed in their last two Test outings. Spin was also a key factor for the home side as they beat Australia in the recent One-Day International series. South Africa may therefore opt to rest frontline attack bowler Kagiso Rabada from the Test as he continues his comeback from a hamstring injury. "Everybody wants him to play. The spectators, us in the

change room, the Australians. I obviously don't know exactly where he's at," Simon Harmer, South Africa's offspinner, who addressed the media yesterday, said. "There'll be a decision made, I'm sure, as close to the game as possible. He's proved season in, season out that he's a world-class player and he's only going to make our team better." Injury to Australia all-rounder Cameron Green opens up a chance at number five for Cooper Connolly, or a fairytale return for 34-year-old Nic Maddinson after recovering from cancer. South Africa's also has a choice to make over their number three batsman, with coach Shukri Conrad having several options including a potential first cap for 30-year-old Marques Ackerman.

COMMENT

Australia's Head hits back at critics 'putting a bullet' through the team



Reuters
Durban

players that we have huge respect for, but that's the caper?"

Australia opener **Travis Head** has taken to task former Test players turned critics whom he accused on Wednesday of "putting a bullet" through the current team, who start the first Test against South Africa in Durban tomorrow. Head did not single out any pundit directly, but his strong remarks at a press conference came the day after Matthew Hayden, one-time holder of the record for the most runs in a Test innings, accused selectors of "promoting the greatest pile of mediocrity that we've seen in a generation of cricket". The reference, made in a podcast, was about the recall of Nic Maddinson, who has been out of Test cricket for nearly 10 years, but who joined the squad in South Africa after Josh Inglis fractured his finger and Cameron Green suffered a stomach injury. "I think it's unfairly judged a fair bit from a group of past players, pretty much that put the bullet through a lot of players, which I think is unfair," Head said. "But that's what they're paid to do. Some of them need a job, so they go after us, and that's totally fine. "This group is strong enough to deal with those sorts of things. That's how it is. It's unfortunate sometimes to have some of that feedback from a generation of

SELECTORS ACCUSED OF DISRESPECTING CRICKET Hayden accused the selectors of "disrespecting first-class cricket", asserting that batsmen should have an average of 45 runs or more before being considered for Test selection. But Head praised Maddinson's abilities and the benefits of choosing experienced players for Test cricket despite the 34-year-old replacement having a first-class average of 37.11. "We need mature guys that know what they need to be doing," Head said. "And I think that revolves back to why we've been so good over a period of time, and why Australian cricket was so good back then in that era, because you'd bring in the Mike Husseys of the world, who are 30, who are tried and tested and know what they need to do." Former Australia captain Allan Border suggested that the 32-year-old Head would face his toughest Test as an opener against the South African bowling attack and would perhaps be better batting at number five. "I have laughed at a fair bit of it because if a traditional opening batter had pushed out the same sort of numbers in his first 20 innings, I think he'd be pretty safe and not talked about in the way that it has been talked about," Head said. "It's a lot of headline stuff"

Australia women, ACA seek more summer home games during peak periods

MELBOURNE: Leading women cricketers and the Australian Cricketers' Association (ACA) have called on Cricket Australia (CA) to schedule more matches during the peak summer months, arguing the current calendar is limiting the team's growth. Australia begin their home season with three one-day internationals against Bangladesh in Brisbane before a three-match Twenty20 series against New Zealand in Sydney, all before the end of October. The world's top-ranked ODI and T20 side will not play another home series until New Zealand's ODI tour in March. Under the current ICC calendar, there will be no Women's Big Bash League or women's internationals

during Australian school holidays for at least the next three years. "The scheduling of the 2026-27 home summer in not playing any matches in Australia between 23 October to 5 March is disappointing, concerning and a missed opportunity to continue to build on the growth of the women's game in Australia," ACA head of women's cricket **Holly Ferling** said in a statement yesterday. "Our team at the ACA have been progressing a piece of work on a Women's Vision Plan, furthering our enduring commitment to continue to build, grow and develop the women's game in Australia." Australia's most-capped player Ellyse Perry expressed similar concerns last month.



FOCUS

NZC defends its decision to launch T20 league

Reuters
Auckland

New Zealand Cricket (NZC) said yesterday it had considered a range of expert opinions before deciding to launch a domestic T20 competition amid criticism of its handling of a Deloitte report that favoured joining Australia's Big Bash League. After NZC announced in March that NZ20 would replace the existing Super Smash provincial competition, cricket great Richard Hadlee and former NZC President Lesley Murdoch criticised what they said was a lack of transparency in the process and the body's refusal to share the Deloitte report with stakeholders. NZC Chair **Diana Puketapu-Lyndon** said the governing body should have done a better job ex-



plaining the decision when it announced its plans. The Deloitte report was just one of four expert reports considered by the board in making the decision, alongside analyses of community cricket, high-performance pathways and fan engagement, she added. "Its analysis favoured exploring the Big Bash opportunity further, for reasons including finan-

cial upside and governance, but it also said weighing the options was for the board and encouraged us to continue exploring both options," Puketapu-Lyndon said in a statement. The board had also considered feedback from the country's six Major Associations and the New Zealand Cricket Players Association, both of which supported NZ20 ahead of seeking to put a

New Zealand team in the established Australian league. "When all of that was considered, alongside the board's own due diligence, the board voted unanimously, 7-0, to support NZ20 as the preferred option," said Puketapu-Lyndon. NZC said it would not release the full report, citing confidentiality. "This is the biggest change to domestic cricket in a generation, and we know not everyone agrees with it," she said. "NZ20 is genuinely aspirational. It has the potential to revolutionise the game of cricket in this country and ensure a sustainable future from the grassroots to the elite." NZ20 organisers had initially planned to launch the six-team competition this summer but NZC postponed the tournament until the 2027-28 home season to allow more time to establish the privately owned franchise league.

TENNIS

Online abuse was draining, says Gauff after loss to Mertens

‘The amount of racist comments I’ve received in the last few hours is insane’



Belgium's Elise Mertens (right) shakes hands with USA's Coco Gauff after their match at the China Open in Beijing yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Beijing

Coco Gauff said online racist abuse had left her feeling exhausted after she went out of the China Open with her loss to Elise Mertens yesterday, later announcing she would skip next week's tournament in Wuhan.

The American world number four, who is Black, turned in an uncharacteristically listless performance in Beijing, double-faulting eight times as she went down 6-3, 6-3 to her Belgian opponent. Gauff, 22, was playing a day after she called out the “insane” amount of abuse she had received on the internet following her win over Chinese teenager Sun Xinran in the previous round.

“It has been kind of draining. I’m not going to lie,” Gauff said of the impact of the online comments. “But I just turn off my phone and move on. There’s nothing you can do.”

Asked about the match, she said: “I think I just didn’t play well. I think I wasn’t moving well.

“There were a lot of things I didn’t do well. I thought Elise played well on the bigger points.”

During her previous match in Beijing, against Sun, Gauff requested a video review over flickering LED lights on the stadium’s advertising hoardings.

The move prompted some boos from the crowd. The umpire agreed to have the point replayed, and Gauff went on to win 7-5, 6-1.

Early on Tuesday, Gauff wrote on X: “Hey everyone, you can dislike me or disagree about what happened without being racist.”

She was responding to a post that contained a racial slur. “The amount of racist comments and messages I’ve received in the last few hours is insane,” she wrote.

Gauff also clarified that she challenged the point before Sun had returned the ball, when she noticed the lights flicker for a second time. Asked about the incident, a spokesperson for the Women’s Tennis Association (WTA), the global governing body, said they were “appalled by the racial abuse directed at Coco Gauff and are in contact with her to offer our full support”.

It added in a statement to AFP that there was “no place for racism, discrimination, or abuse in tennis”, and that it was “seeking action” against the abusive content.

Gauff, who won the Beijing title in 2024 and made the semi-finals last year, is a popular player among fans at the tournament itself.

A group of supporters in the largely empty stadium tried to encourage her into a comeback yesterday. Hours later, the Wuhan Open said Gauff had withdrawn from the prestigious 1000-level tournament “citing fatigue”.

“I’m disappointed to withdraw from Wuhan, especially as the defending champion. I always love playing there,” Gauff said in a statement shared by the tournament on Instagram.

“After a long year, my body needs some time to rest and recover. I look forward to returning next year,” Gauff said. The Wuhan Open runs from October 12 to 18 in China’s central Hubei province.

Mertens was undeterred as she punched her ticket for a quarter-final clash against Iga Swiatek.

The world number 19 called

Gauff an “incredible player”, adding: “I knew it was going to be a very tough match”.

She dedicated her win to her coach, who is also her boyfriend.

Earlier, Swiatek swept aside American teenager Iva Jovic 6-1, 6-3 in one hour and 35 minutes.

In the night session, China’s Zheng Qinwen pulled off another three-set victory to dispatch Alina Charaeva 6-1, 2-6, 6-4, ending a breakout week for the 118th-ranked player in which she beat freshly minted world number one Elena Rybakina.

“I started pretty well... but maybe during the second set I think I felt myself decline, also with the temperature getting colder and colder and the ball speed dropping,” Zheng said afterwards. “I’m really grateful,” she told the crowd, tearing up as the on-court interviewer reminded fans it was the day before Zheng’s 24th birthday.

“All I can say is that it’s all come too fast,” Zheng said, smiling as the crowd wished her “happy birthday” in unison. Zheng, the current world number 54, will face Ukraine’s Elina Svitolina, the sixth seed, in the quarter-final.

FOCUS

Rahm quitting LIV Golf over ‘unacceptable’ terms

AFP
New York

Jon Rahm is quitting LIV Golf due to “unacceptable” terms, the star’s lawyer said yesterday, dealing a significant blow to the divisive breakaway tour as it attempts to relaunch itself after declaring bankruptcy.

Along with Bryson DeChambeau, double major winner and former world number one Rahm was arguably the most prominent golfer to defect from the PGA Tour and join the free-spending Saudi-backed league.

But LIV filed for bankruptcy protection last month after its deep-pocketed Middle Eastern backers pulled the plug.

The tour is trying to relaunch next year with new investors as “LIV 2.0”. Retaining popular stars like Rahm was widely seen as critical to its prospects.

“Mr. Rahm has independently reviewed the proposed terms of LIV 2.0 as the parties have been referring to it, and has determined that those terms are unacceptable as to him, and he will not be participating going forward in LIV 2.0,” his lawyer John Beck told a U.S. Bankruptcy Court of New Jersey hearing yesterday.

Beck said that “advanced discussions for a consensual separation agreement of Mr. Rahm and LIV” are ongoing, according to a courtroom audio recording



Legion XIII's Jon Rahm celebrates with the LIV Golf Mexico City trophy on April 19, 2026. (Reuters)

verified by AFP. That agreement is expected to be presented before the court next month, he added. “If the parties, for whatever reason, are unable to reach a consensual separation agreement, Mr. Rahm intends to press his objection” through legal channels, said Beck.

LIV Golf did not respond to an AFP request for a comment.

Launched in 2022, LIV Golf’s emergence led to bitter divisions throughout the sport as several of golf’s top names left the PGA Tour after signing big-money deals. Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund (PIF) poured an estimated \$5bn into the tour, before abruptly pulling the plug earlier this year.

Documents from bankruptcy filings show that LIV owes between \$500mn and \$1bn in esti-

mated liabilities to at least 1,000 creditors, including star players.

Rahm, DeChambeau and fellow golfer Dustin Johnson hold the largest unsecured claims against the tour, totaling more than \$5mn each in immediate past-due payments, per the bankruptcy filing. Still, new lead investor BC Partners Credit has pledged an initial funding commitment of a potential \$300mn to help LIV relaunch in 2027.

Tour officials have outlined a shorter schedule and reduced prize money with tournaments across five continents, in locations including Australia, South Africa, Mexico, England, Hong Kong and the US.

Representatives for Rahm did not respond to an AFP request for a comment on the 31-year-old’s future plans.

MOTORSPORT

Madring working on track changes after dull debut race

Reuters
London

Spanish Grand Prix organisers are planning to make changes to the Madring after complaints about the absence of overtaking and on-track thrills at this year’s debut event, a spokeswoman for Formula One’s newest circuit said yesterday.

The grand prix hype ultimately turned into a procession that even some drivers said had risked sending them to sleep, despite the banked ‘La Monumental’ curve promising to deliver as a standout feature, after earlier fears of crashes and safety cars.

Discussing the event at the Leaders Week London sports business conference at Chelsea’s Stamford Bridge stadium, Nira Juanco recognised there was work to do.

“The complaints about the lack of action on track, that’s something we’re working on,” she said.

“It’s not a difficult thing to change, because it’s just a small modification in certain corners, but as you know it’s not in our hands. We need FIA approval, but we are working on it.”

Juanco said some pedestrian bridges would have to be moved after problems with visibility for some spectators sitting in certain grandstands. There were also gripes about the amount of time spent queuing for food and beverages in the fan zone.

McLaren’s reigning world champion Lando Norris, who lost a likely win after an early virtual safety car period, said after the race that the circuit needed to “get rid of” turns 18 and 19 and have more of a straight into the hairpin to allow overtaking.

“I’m excited to come back here next year if they can make these changes because I think it’s a track that is good fun to drive and it can be a great racetrack. To me, it’s not a great racetrack,” he added.

Juanco felt the situation had been exacerbated by an excess of caution by teams and drivers after a spate of crashes in junior series races, both in testing and early in the race weekend, that triggered red flags and safety cars.

There were also concerns about energy management with the new crop of hybrid cars, with engine tweaks already approved for next year.

“Finally, we had nothing, just a virtual safety car. And so I think we can improve the show on track next year where we are working on it,” she said.

MOTOGP TO INTRODUCE QUALIFYING FOR SPRINT RACE

Next season’s MotoGP campaign will have a new look after organisers announced yesterday there would be a separate qualifying session for the sprint race.

Since its introduction in 2023, the grid for the sprint race - which unlike Formula One takes place at every MotoGP weekend - has been decided by the qualifying session for pole.

However, now it will have its own specific qualifying session on the Friday, with the sprint race on the Saturday.

Qualifying for the MotoGP pole position keeps its Saturday spot.

“Alongside the new bikes and technical regulations,

the sport announces a new-look weekend for next year with the introduction of a qualifying session for the MotoGP Sprint - creating distinct grids for the Sprint and Grand Prix race at every round,” read a MotoGP statement.

This season’s title race is turning into a thriller with Spaniard Jorge Martin leading his compatriot and defending champion Marc Marquez by just two points ahead of the next round of the championship in Indonesia this weekend.

There are six rounds remaining, subject to a final decision on the Qatar race amid uncertainty caused by the Middle East war.

FORMULA 1

Russell hit with grid penalty for taking new power unit

AFP
Singapore

George Russell’s hopes of winning the 2026 world championship hit another road bump yesterday when it was announced that because of an engine penalty he would have to start from the back of the grid in this weekend’s Singapore Grand Prix.

The Englishman had to retire in the closing laps while running third in the Bahrain GP in Malaysia last weekend, allowing his Mercedes teammate Kimi Antonelli, who came second, to open up a gap of 84 points at the top of the standings.

Russell will exceed the season allocation of power unit components and be penalised at least 10 places although Mercedes acknowledged that because of the number of parts he needs replacing, he will start Sunday’s race from the back of the grid.

“Malaysia was obviously a very difficult weekend for us,” said team principal Toto Wolff who at least had the comfort of Antonelli’s podium behind race winner Max Verstappen.

“We have spent the days since then working hard to understand why our performance was not where it should have been.

“George has the added challenge of a power unit penalty, which will mean starting from the back of the grid on Sunday, following the engine failure in Malaysia.

“That is particularly frustrating given the way he drove last weekend and the result he deserved to be fighting for. Unfortunately, these things are part of the sport.”

Russell, 28, saw himself as



Mercedes' George Russell celebrates his pole position after the sprint qualifying session of the Dutch Grand Prix at The Circuit Zandvoort, western Netherlands. (AFP)

one of the main contenders for the world title as early as winter testing in February, but he was quickly beaten on merit - and with a dose of bad luck - by Antonelli. The Englishman has at times admitted he has lost the championship and at other times said he has regained “confidence”, notably after his victory on the Baku street circuit two weeks ago.

In Malaysia, he quipped after his retirement: “Better to laugh about it.”

Sunday’s Singapore GP, which will be held on a street circuit at night, is preceded on Saturday by the last sprint race of the season, in which Russell will not be penalised.

One crumb of comfort for Russell might be that when Antonelli had to start from the back for a similar reason in Monza, he worked his way through the field to win the Italian Grand Prix.

Roglic wins European time-trial title

Tour de France champion Tadej Pogacar was missing but Slovenia still had a home hero to celebrate as Primož Roglic won the European Championships time-trial title yesterday. The Tokyo 2020 Olympic time-trial champion started fast and held off his charging challengers to win the title by 6.59sec ahead of Frenchman Bruno Armirail, whose compatriot Maxime Decomble finished third. Roglic, 36, benefited from the absence of world and Olympic time-trial champion Remco Evenepoel and Italian specialist Filippo Ganna as he was cheered on by the home fans on the 22km course in Sencur.

“It’s simply a great feeling. Of course, it’s my victory, but it’s also for all the people along the course and everyone who made it possible for the European Championships to take place in Slovenia,” said Roglic. With French prodigy Paul Seixas also skipping the Euros to focus on this weekend’s final Monument one-day classic, the Tour of Lombardy, it meant none of the medallists from the world championships just over two weeks ago were on the start line.

World champion Marlen Reusser continued her dominance in the discipline by winning the European title for the fifth year in a row. Dutch rider Demi Vollerling, who had won the world and European road race titles over the previous 10 days, came second with Juliette Berthet of France third.

SPOTLIGHT

Arteta targets more Arsenal glory after signing new deal

‘This club is unique, its character and the way it makes you feel’

AFP
London

Mikel Arteta vowed “this is only the beginning of what we can achieve together” after signing a new contract with Premier League champions Arsenal until 2030.

The Spaniard’s deal had been due to expire at the end of the 2026/27 season but if he sees out his new contract he will have been at the Emirates for more than a decade. The club said in a statement that the new agreement, which was widely expected, “reflects our shared belief that the progress we’ve made and last season’s success is the beginning of a special period in our history”.

Arteta has reportedly been given a substantial pay rise after leading Arsenal to their first Premier League title for 22 years following three successive runners-up finishes.

“It’s a privilege to commit my future to the club and to continue to work with exceptional people who want the best for Arsenal,” said the 44-year-old.

“This club is unique, its character and the way it makes you feel, and I have a great sense of privilege that our journey together will continue. We have already built a special bond and created memories that will last a lifetime, and what is so exciting is that this is only the beginning of what we can achieve together.”

Arteta, who replaced Unai Emery in December 2019, is now the longest-serving manager in the Premier League following Pep Guardiola’s departure from Manchester City. The former Arsenal captain came under significant pressure early in his managerial reign at the Emirates but has overseen the club’s return to the top of English football.

Arteta also led the Gunners to their first Champions League final in two decades last season but they lost to Paris Saint-Germain on penalties.

He has been in charge for 361 matches in all competitions, with his win percentage of just over 62 percent the best of any full-time manager in the club’s history.

Arsenal are currently second in the Premier League, three points behind leaders City after a surprise 3-0 defeat to Brighton before the international break.

Club co-chairs Stan and Josh Kroenke said: “It has been an incredible journey so far and



Mikel Arteta has reportedly been given a substantial pay rise after leading Arsenal to their first Premier League title for 22 years following three successive runners-up finishes.

we are excited for what lies ahead in this special relationship.

“Last season was an incredible moment in Arsenal’s history, a moment in which we created memories that will last a lifetime. We’re determined to create many more in the years ahead. “We share a special bond with Mikel. We are so proud of everything we have achieved since he returned to the club in 2019.”

CEO Richard Garlick said Arsenal are in a strong position to dominate men’s football for years to come. Garlick said they were not resting on their laurels as they seek to build on a stellar campaign on and off the pitch.

“We can’t stand still. We can’t sit there, pat ourselves on the back, and say job done. This is the beginning, not the end of our journey. This is where we want to go on and show the confidence that that win is going to bring to us,” Garlick said at the Leaders Week sports industry conference at Stamford Bridge.

“We want to dominate football for the next number of years. We’re in a really strong position to do that, but... we need to keep finding that edge that gives us that advantage, and we

have to be brave because it’d be very easy just to simply say ‘we’ll just roll over what we did last year, and that’ll be enough,’ because everybody’s out to get you. When you’re champions, everybody wants to beat you, and we need to find a way of taking those opportunities and taking those advantages and pushing forward all the time.”

Arsenal were ranked seventh in the 2026 Deloitte money league for the world’s top revenue-generating clubs, behind Manchester City.

However, with City being found guilty of all charges relating to breaches of the Premier League’s financial rules from 2009-10 to 2017-18, there may be a gap to exploit in English football. City have appealed the league’s decision and continue to deny wrongdoing.

Arsenal, owned by American company Kroenke Sports & Entertainment, will be helped by club-record revenue of 822mn euros (\$918.91mn) in 2025, a 15% increase from the previous year and more expected this year.

Arsenal return to Premier League action with a home match against Leeds on Saturday.

Man City should ‘accept’ punishment for rule breaches: Lineker

London: Gary Lineker has called on Manchester City to “accept whatever punishment” they are given for the good of the game after the club were found guilty of more than 100 breaches of Premier League financial rules.

An independent commission said last week that City had arranged “sham” contracts with a number of their commercial partners to artificially inflate revenues and reduce costs over a nine-season period, between 2009 and 2018.

The 10-time English champions, who continue to deny any wrongdoing, confirmed on Friday that they had appealed against the judgement. No sanction has yet been decided upon but City could face substantial points de-



ductions, a fine or even expulsion from the Premier League.

“Obviously, it looks really bad for Manchester City, and bad for the game, too,” former England captain Lineker said at Leaders Week London 2026, held at Chelsea’s Stamford Bridge stadium.

“When they talk about the ‘Premier League conspiracy theories’, you just think to yourself, ‘Well, this is actually the last thing in the world that the Premier League would want’. So, I’d love to see Man City now just own it and just say, ‘OK, we got it wrong but for the good of the game, we’ll accept it and we’ll accept whatever punishment comes our way and we’ll carry on’. That would be a blessing and save their face a little bit at the moment, although it doesn’t look likely.”

Pressed as to whether City should be stripped of the three league titles they won during the period in question, 65-year-old Lineker said: “I wouldn’t be surprised if it goes down that route. But who suffers from that? The

players and the fans.”

Kyle Walker, who spent eight years at City, winning multiple trophies before his departure in 2025, said that the players would always have the memories of their achievements, “whatever happens”.

The Burnley right-back, speaking on Talksport, said: “It’s something that we probably don’t want to talk about because we want to be looked upon as winning (those) trophies and winning them the right way.

“It’s very difficult because we’ve worked very hard for them, and not just us. I look at the fans that have travelled up and down the country, travelled abroad to Istanbul when we won the treble, and they deserve that night as well.”



Spain’s Mikel Merino (centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Croatia in the Nations League match in Split, Croatia. (Reuters)

NATIONS LEAGUE

Spain fight back to beat Croatia, Kane matches Shilton’s England appearance

AFP
Paris

Spain fought back against Croatia to win 2-1 in Split on Tuesday and remain perfect in Nations League Group A3 while Harry Kane continued his hot form as England beat the Czech Republic 3-0 to stay second.

The victory in Split preserved Spain’s long unbeaten run and ensured they will finish in the top two in the four-team group and advance to the quarter-finals.

England stayed three points behind Spain with a home win and will advance to the last four if they do not lose their next game at home to Croatia by eight or more goals. In their previous match, Croatia capitulated 7-0 to England up the Dalmatian coast at Rijeka. Because of a ban brought on by persistent fan racism, that crowd was made up of 6,000 children under the age of 14.

In a very different atmosphere, Croatia gave a spikier performance and took the lead after 17 minutes. Unai Simon dived to save a low drive from Igor Matanovic but only pushed the ball into the air. Ivan Perisic, a former teammate of Kane at Tottenham, nodded the ball home.

While Spain dominated first-half possession, Croatia created the most dangerous chances and Matanovic could have doubled the lead. Spain’s pressure told after 61 minutes, Dani Olmo collected a poor clearance and rolled the ball to substitute Mikel Merino who had space to pick his spot.

Perisic had earned a yellow card for an excited lunge soon after scoring. That turned into a costly sending off when he was booked again after 79 minutes for a push on Marc Cucurella.

With a minute of normal time left, Merino found space in the box to turn and drive home the winner. “Another game in which it was my turn to score from the bench,” Merino said, adding: “I’ll go out there with the best possible attitude even while frustrated about not being able to play more... but this team is a family and that always shows.”

The win stretched Spain’s unbeaten run to 42 games. The one

blemish in that run for the European and World Champions was a penalty shootout loss to Portugal after the last Nations League final had ended in a draw. “There are days like today when the streak can become complicated,” said Merino.

England lost their opener at home to Spain, when Kane missed a penalty that would have salvaged a draw, but have since won three games. Their veteran striker scored once away to the Czechs and twice in Croatia.

On Tuesday, as he equalled the England appearance record held by goalkeeper Peter Shilton with a 125th cap, Kane stretched his national scoring record to 91 with another double. “Perfect night for me personally and also for the team,” Kane said. “An extremely proud evening.”

England were presented with their opener after 27 minutes when Vladimir Coufal, perhaps imagining an attacker behind him, smashed an England cross into his own net.

Kane finished off a quick, clever England attack by wrong-footing the goalkeeper from close range after 40 minutes. He hit the crossbar early in the second half and then headed home a corner after 57 minutes. “You saw some fantastic football from us tonight,” said Kane. “As a striker you’re just licking your lips and waiting for your opportunities.”

Kane received praise from teammate Jude Bellingham. “He’s playing at a level where it’s pretty unmatched, when you look across the world,” said the Real Madrid star. “He’s scoring goals for fun, he’s still dropping in deep and delivering those passes in behind and wide and contributing in so many areas of the pitch.”

In League B, Ryan Christie coolly flicked the ball between his legs to score a 31st-minute opener for Scotland at home to Slovenia but Aljosa Matko and Danijel Sturm hit back after half time to give the visitors a 2-1 win.

Leaders Switzerland ensured they will finish in the top two after they beat North Macedonia 3-0 in Lucerne. Fabian Rieder gave the hosts a first-half lead and Johan Manzambi and Dan Ndoye added late goals.

FOCUS

Ronaldo sets rivalry aside to pay tribute to Messi

Reuters
Lisbon

Portugal captain **Cristiano Ronaldo** set aside one of football’s great rivalries to pay tribute to Lionel Messi after the Argentine said he already missed representing his country following his emotional international retirement.

Messi, 39, delivered one final masterclass in Argentina’s blue and white on Tuesday, scoring once and setting up two goals in a 3-0 friendly win over Benin before more than 85,000 fans at Buenos Aires’ Monumental Stadium, where his farewell became a celebration of an extraordinary 21-year international career.

“Yesterday was my last game, and I already miss wearing the blue and white. I know I’m making the right decision,” Messi said in a lengthy Instagram post. “It’s been an incredible journey, full of joy and also some sadness, but I know for sure that every step I took was worth it... I don’t want to forget Diego (Maradona),

who put our country where it deserved to be and who, as I always say, I know helped us both by being here with us and also from heaven, with every step we took.

“Thank you to the clubs where I played, for always respecting my feelings and allowing me to dedicate myself to my country whenever it was time to put on the national team jersey...”

Messi captained Argentina to the 2022 World Cup title and Copa America triumphs in 2021 and 2024, while also helping them win the 2022 Finalissima.

Messi and Ronaldo have vied for recognition as the greatest player of their generation throughout their illustrious careers, with the 41-year-old Portuguese forward among those to respond to the post. “Leo, after so many years of defending your country, you’ve made history that will last forever. I have the utmost respect for what you’ve accomplished with Argentina. A hug,” Ronaldo said.

RONALDO SAYS PORTUGAL COACH BROKE PROMISES

Ronaldo, meanwhile, is embroiled in a



dispute with Portugal coach Jorge Jesus following his abrupt departure from the national team’s training camp. On Tuesday he accused Jesus of breaking his word about giving him game time in Nations League matches, but said he remained available for his country.

In a statement of nearly 2,000 words, the 41-year-old superstar apologised for walking out on the national team and said he would serve a suspension if necessary.

“I will be available, as I have always been until today, to compete and win for our national team,” Ronaldo said.

Jesus left the forward unused on the bench for a Nations League match against Norway. Before the next game with Denmark, he said Ronaldo would not start and in response the 41-year-old walked out of the national team camp.

“I owe an apology to my national team teammates for having left the camp,” wrote Ronaldo. “Despite the absolute breakdown of trust in the head coach’s word... I shouldn’t have done it. The responsibility is mine alone.”

Ronaldo also apologised to Portugal supporters, but insisted he had been responding to the veteran coach’s “broken word” “I apologise to the Portuguese people once again, but a broken word has, for me, a defining impact,” said Ronaldo. I felt that, from that moment on, my presence would only harm the group, and I did what I always said I would do if I didn’t feel useful: I picked up my bags and left.”

Ronaldo said Jesus, who was appointed after Portugal were knocked out of the

World Cup Round of 16, had initially presented him with a plan for the international window which included starting the opening and final games at home, but not travelling for the matches in Norway and Denmark.

The Al Nassr superstar rejected that proposal, saying it would set a poor example for the captain to remain in Portugal while his team-mates travelled. Ahead of the Norway game, Ronaldo said Jesus unexpectedly asked if he was fit to play 30 minutes. He agreed and warmed up from half-time, but was not brought on. “The head coach failed to keep his word to me,” said Ronaldo, Portugal’s most capped player and all-time top goalscorer.

Former Real Madrid and Manchester United forward Ronaldo said he spoke with Jesus after that and agreed with him that the coach would apologise in a news conference ahead of the Denmark game.

However Ronaldo said Jesus’s subsequent press conference was completely different from what was agreed in their conversation, with an “aggressiveness” he had never previously experienced from the coach.