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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Duhail end Shamal's run as Wakrah claim first victory

Duhail move to third spot with nine points, while Shamal drop down one place to fourth with eight points

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Duhail and Al Wakrah returned from the international break with important victories in the Qatar Stars League yesterday. Duhail ended Al Shamal's unbeaten start with a convincing 4-0 win while Wakrah edged Al Gharafa 3-2 with a stoppage-time winner. The results reshaped the upper half of the table, with Duhail moving up to third place with nine points and Wakrah securing their first win of the season to go to seventh with five points. Shamal dropped down one place to fourth with nine points, while Gharafa are 10th in the table. At Al Bayt Stadium, Al Duhail produced a dominant display to rout Al Shamal and hand them their first defeat of the campaign. Polish striker Krzysztof Pi tek opened the scoring in the 14th minute, giving Duhail a 1-0 lead at half-time. The Red Knights then put the result beyond doubt with two goals in a five-minute spell after the break. Omar Sekou doubled their advantage in the 67th minute before Qatar international Almoez Ali made it 3-0 five minutes later. Mubarak Shanan completed the thrashing in stoppage time with a superb right-footed strike from outside the box that flew into the bottom corner. At the Khalifa International Stadium, Gelson Dala scored twice, including a stoppage-time winner, as Al Wakrah edged Al Gharafa for their first victory of the season. Aissa Laidouni put Wakrah ahead in the 38th minute after capitalising on a defensive lapse and firing home from the edge of the box. Al Gharafa levelled through Ferjani Sassi, who headed home, before Yacine Brahimi converted a penalty deep into first-half stoppage time to put his side 2-1 ahead. Dala restored parity in the 78th minute after El Amin Zahzouh's penalty was saved



Al Duhail's Omar Sekou in action against Al Shamal in the Qatar Stars League yesterday.

by Al Gharafa goalkeeper Khalifa Ababacar. The ball struck the post and fell to Dala, who reacted quickly to score. The Angolan then struck again in the third minute of stoppage time, with his effort from inside the box slipping through Ababacar's grasp and into the net to seal a dramatic win for Wakrah.

SADD FACE ARABI TODAY

Attention now turns to the top of the table, with leaders Al Sadd hosting Al Arabi at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium today. Defending champions Sadd have won all four matches and lead the standings with 12 points after their 6-3 victory over Al Sailiya before the international break. Razvan

Lucescu's side are aiming for a fifth successive win as they chase a fourth consecutive league title. Al Arabi are fourth on six points after one win and three draws. They drew 1-1 with 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. Lucescu said Sadd are ready for what he expects to be a difficult encounter. "Facing Al Arabi will be complicated, because they are a team that does not give up and fights until the last moment in every match they play, in addition to their players having



Gelson Dala scored twice, including a stoppage-time winner, as Al Wakrah edged Al Gharafa for their first victory of the season.

high physical abilities, so Al Sadd players must be at their peak of focus in order to achieve victory." Al Arabi coach Cosmin Contra said facing the defending champions provided enough motivation for his players. "Facing the league champion and the best team of the last ten years in Qatar does not require additional motivation for the players; everyone has enough enthusiasm to play this kind of big game." Contra added that the break had allowed Al Arabi to regroup and work on their technical and tactical aspects. He said Al Arabi would look to maintain their strong start while becoming more clinical in front of goal.

Meanwhile, second-placed Al Rayyan, on 10 points, face Qatar SC at Lusail Stadium today. 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 in their previous game. Qatar SC are 11th with two points from two draws and two defeats.

FIXTURES

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

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

SPOTLIGHT

African football leaders rally behind Infantino for FIFA re-election

Reuters
Cape Verde

FIFA President Gianni Infantino promised further resources for Africa as the continent's 54 member associations yesterday pledged their unconditional support for his re-election in March in a big boost to the Swiss-Italian's candidacy. Infantino addressed the presidents at a conference in Cape Verde, a first-of-its-kind strategy symposium for African football, which provided a platform to speak to more than a quarter of the 211 voters ahead of the FIFA elections. Infantino had to shelve a controversial plan to sell a stake in FIFA tournaments earlier this year, after a backlash from mostly European and North American nations, many of which have withdrawn support for him at next year's presidential elections. But Confederation of African Football (CAF) President Patrice Motsepe said the 56-year-old Infantino would enjoy the unconditional support of the continent. "There is a unanimous decision by the 54 CAF member associations to unconditionally support Gianni as president of FIFA," Motsepe told delegates at the conference. "This is because of the history and the support that Gianni has given to African football." It comes after former Switzerland defender Ramon Vega said on Wednesday he intends to stand in next year's FIFA presidential election against fellow Swiss Infantino. UEFA President Aleksander Ceferin said on Thursday he will seek another term as head of European soccer's governing body, effectively removing one of the highest-profile figures from the field of potential candidates to challenge Infantino.



FIFA President Gianni Infantino yesterday reminded the CAF presidents of the financial contribution FIFA has made to African football since he was elected in 2016. (Reuters)

Infantino had earlier yesterday reminded the CAF presidents of the financial contribution FIFA has made to African football since he was elected in 2016. "As FIFA president, I am proud to have contributed with you a little bit in this revolution (in African football) in the last 10 years," Infantino said. "With the FIFA Forward programme we have invested one billion dollars in 10 years in Africa, with 124 different projects and many other actions." Without referring directly to the failed attempt to sell a stake in FIFA tournaments, Infantino spoke of wanting an open dialogue on matters of disagreement. "When you go through a journey, sometimes concerns are raised," he said. "When they are raised, we have to address them. As far as we are con-

cerned at FIFA, we address them always with the spirit of dialogue and with open arms, an open heart and an open mind. We can always be better and do better." He reiterated his support for Africa and that FIFA would continue to invest in the continent. "Our commitment is to make sure that your football is going to continue to improve and grow, give you more opportunities. Ten countries at the (last) World Cup has been a success for the entire continent," he said. "We need to continue together on this path, because it is up to you as CAF to tell us what you want. How we can make you stronger and better. We will continue to look for the resources and the increases (in funding) that are necessary to boost the African game to the top of world football."

CAS opens hearing into Senegal AFCON title appeal

Lausanne: The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) yesterday opened its hearing into Senegal's appeal against being stripped of the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) title in favour of Morocco. The hearing in Lausanne comes almost 10 months after Pape Gueye's extra-time goal gave Senegal victory over the tournament hosts following a chaotic finish to normal time. Many Teranga Lions players had walked off the pitch in protest at a late penalty award to Morocco, which was missed by Brahim Diaz once the Senegalese players returned to the pitch almost 20 minutes later. But in March, the Confederation of African Football (CAF) overturned that result, awarding Morocco a 3-0 victory, and the title. Yesterday's opening day of the hearing lasted more than five hours behind closed doors. "I know it's a long wait for the fans a few months after the final between Senegal and Morocco," said CAS Director General Matthieu Reeb. "The timetable and the procedural calendar were established with the agreement of the parties involved in this case. So everybody knew about the timeline, and our objective as CAS, as the last instance authority, is to provide a reasoned award as soon as possible after the hearing today," he told reporters. The long-running saga over the winner of this year's Africa Cup of Nations title will be concluded within days although Reeb did not give a definite date. The Moroccan delegation

did not speak to reporters but Senegal's football federation president Abdoulaye Sow said he hoped that "sports law" would be upheld "for the dignity and honour of Africa". Following their defeat, Morocco appealed to CAF, who ruled that Senegal had broken rules barring teams from leaving the field of play without the referee's authorisation. Senegal blasted that decision as the "most blatant administrative robbery in the history of our sport" and even paraded the trophy to their supporters in Paris at the end of March. According to Thibault Ulrich, a researcher in sports law at Lausanne University, the CAF ruling was "extremely strict" and failed to recognise Congolese referee Jean-Jacques Ndala's decision to allow the match to continue. The International Football Association Board (IFAB), the guardians of the laws of the game, have a rule which suggests that Ndala's decision to continue the match cannot be overturned, even if he erred in doing so. CAS's own rules favour respect for a referee's decisions, unless he has been proven to be corrupt or acting in bad faith. On March 18, the Senegalese government called for an investigation into suspected corruption at CAF. Two weeks before rendering its decision in favour of Morocco, CAF had fired lawyer Yassin Osman Robleh, from Djibouti, who had been in charge of guaranteeing the integrity of its procedures for the previous six years, without publishing its reasons.

PREVIEW

Rabada out but ‘X-Factor’ Nortje in for SA

AFP
Durban, South Africa

Star South African fast bowler Kagiso Rabada will miss the first Test against Australia starting at Kingsmead today - but Anrich Nortje will return for his first Test appearance since 2023.

Rabada, who took nine wickets in the match when South Africa beat the same opponents in the World Test Championship final at Lord's last year, would be given more time to recover from a hamstring injury, according to South African captain Temba Bavuma.

But Bavuma was excited by the return of Nortje, who he said was an "X-Factor" player. "There are not many guys around bowling at 150kmh plus," Bavuma said at his pre-match press conference.

Nortje, 32, has had a history of injuries, including back stress fractures, but has been working hard on his fitness.

He played in the European T20

Premier League in the Netherlands and Ireland last month and impressed Bavuma with the pace he achieved in South Africa's week-long preparation for the Test.

South Africa opted for two specialist spin bowlers in left-armers Keshav Maharaj and off-spinner Simon Harmer. Fast bowlers Nortje and Marco Jansen will be backed up by seam bowling all-rounder Wiaan Mulder. While Bavuma announced South Africa's 11, Australian captain Pat Cummins said that the tourists would wait until tomorrow morning before finalising their team.

Australia need to handle test grind better, Cummins says

Australia must become better at grinding out results in test cricket rather than relying on strong individual performances, captain Pat Cummins said yesterday.

Conditions are expected to fluctuate on what is often described as a tricky wicket, and Australia have to be ready to handle any ebb and flow, he told a press conference.

"For the batsmen and for the bowling group as well, getting into that grind is important. We haven't played too many of those kinds of test matches in the last few years, particularly in Australia," he said.

"They've been quite fast-paced. A lot of our success has come off big moments, be it a Travis Head century or Stacey (fast bowler Mitchell Starc) running through the top order, but I think we've got to get a little bit better, and we can get a bit better getting into the grind.

"It might not be the glamorous stuff, but it's that grinding out of sessions, not these whirlwind innings at times. Whatever tempo gets thrown at us or what the game needs, we must make sure we match that," he added.

Australia's last Test against Bangladesh in August was completed inside two days, as were two of the five tests in the Ashes series against England, played in Australia between last November and January. Australia delayed an-

nouncing their team, in contrast to South Africa, whose captain Temba Bavuma had earlier revealed their line-up.

"We don't know our team at this stage; the selectors will come down here and we'll just want to have one more look at the ground," Cummins explained.

"We're trying to work out what we think is the best batting line-up for these conditions. Obviously, Cam Green's out and Josh Inglis isn't here as well.

"So that's a couple of changes that we've got to match up. What are the conditions going to throw at us? We've got a full squad. Everyone brings something a little bit different and it's just trying to work out what we think the best combinations are," he added.

South Africa Team: Temba Bavuma (captain), Aiden Markram, Ryan Rickelton, David Bedingham, Tristan Stubbs, Wiaan Mulder, Kyle Verreynne (wkt), Marco Jansen, Simon Harmer, Keshav Maharaj, Anrich Nortje.



Recovering South Africa pacer Kagiso Rabada to sit out of first Test against Australia, which starts from today at Kingsmead. (Reuters)

T20 SERIES

Skipper Farhan hopes Pakistan's new setup clicks

'I KNOW HOW TO LEAD THE SIDE AND I WILL NOT TAKE PRESSURE'

AFP
Rawalpindi, Pakistan

Pakistan captain Sahibzada Farhan hopes a new combination without star players Babar Azam and Shaheen Shah Afridi will come good against Sri Lanka in their Twenty20 International series starting in Rawalpindi today.

The three-match series will see Farhan take on the skipper's role after leading a second-string side to silver at the Asian Games in Japan, losing to India in the final last week.

Also missing from the squad are former T20I skipper Salman Agha and wicketkeeper-batter Mohammad Rizwan, part of an exodus aimed at building the side for the 2028 T20I World Cup in Australia and New Zealand.

"I am confident that this new combination is the best and will settle in this series," said Farhan yesterday.

"I know how to lead the side and I will not take pressure."

Azam's form had dipped in T20Is, and he was also dropped from Pakistan's final match against Sri Lanka at the Twenty20 World Cup in February.

Shaheen is also out of favour for T20Is but will skipper Pakistan's one-day international side in a tri-series with Sri Lanka and England starting in Rawalpindi from October 18.

Sri Lanka are also in a transition phase with star leg-spinner



Pakistan's captain Sahibzada Farhan (left) and his Sri Lankan counterpart Kusal Mendis pose with the series trophy at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium on the eve of their first T20 match. (AFP)

Wanindu Hasaranga and former skipper Charith Asalanka dropped for the tour.

Hasaranga is joint-fifth in the all-time T20I wicket-taking list with 163 in 101 games.

"Unfortunately, Wanindu is still injured, and we will miss him but

we have a few other exciting players who I am sure will stand up and perform," said Sri Lankan skipper Kusal Mendis.

"I think everyone knows how to play in Pakistan," said Mendis, who played in the Pakistan Super League (PSL) earlier this year.

"Pakistan also have some new faces but their players are good and we know some of them from the PSL, so I hope our players will do well."

The remaining two matches are on October 11 and 13, also in Rawalpindi.

SPOTLIGHT

Paceman Starc compares Australia's daunting year to McIlroy's major sweep

Reuters
Durban

Australia's ageing Test side face a defining year with tours of South Africa, India and England, and pace spearhead Mitchell Starc said winning all three series and retaining the one-day World Cup would be the equivalent of Rory McIlroy winning golf's four majors in a single season.

Australia begin the daunting 12-month stretch with a three-test series against South Africa in Durban today, before tours of India and England next year and the defence of their 2023 ODI World Cup title.

Having not won a Test series in England since 2001, India since 2004 and South Africa since 2014, the Australians face one of their toughest assignments in recent years.

"It's somewhat unusual that you play the three marquee series away from home in the space of 12 months," Starc told ESPNcricinfo.

"And there's two where we, as an Australian team, haven't won in a long time. Then you throw in the side of the narrative that we're obviously an older side and we've been together a long time, and the pressure comes from both of those things.

"But if, in 12 or 14 months time, we are sat here and we



have won three away Test series and a World Cup it'd be, I guess, the equivalent of Rory McIlroy winning four majors in the same year."

The challenge comes at a pivotal moment for a team increasingly scrutinised over its ageing profile, with key members of Australia's core now in their 30s.

Starc, 36, acknowledged the discussion around the team's ageing roster but said the team still had plenty it wanted to achieve.

"We're acutely aware of how old we are, particularly from the outside noise," Starc said.

"We know what's coming up, and we know series are big, but at some point the story's going to end, right? We're all aware of what we could achieve. We certainly want to win everything and there's still a lot of things we all want to achieve."

T20 ties have softened on-field rivalries, says Harmer

South Africa spinner Simon Harmer expects none of the animosity of Australia's last Test tour to South Africa to resurface in the three-match series between the two countries, which gets underway at Kingsmead today. Australia are playing their first test series in South Africa since the 2018 "Sandpapergate" scandal, when the tourists used sandpaper to illegally alter the condition of the ball in a bid to gain more swing, resulting in bans for captain Steve Smith, David Warner and Cameron Bancroft.

The scandal followed a series of ugly confrontations, including off-field fighting and on-field jostling between the two teams in a sport that prides itself on its etiquette. Harmer believes the growth of Twenty20 franchise cricket, where international rivals regularly become teammates, has taken some of the sting out of such contests. "I expect Australia to come out firing and being competitive, but I think the nature of T20 cricket is such that you're playing with a lot of players, a lot of the time," he told a press conference. "Gone are the days where you had these huge rivalries, where you would play against one another every 18 to 24 months, and it created that sort of argy bargy on the field. "I think T20 has softened that a little bit but I don't expect Australia to be soft by any stretch of the imagination." The 37-year-old Harmer, expected to be one of two spinners South Africa will use in the first test, said Australia were always extremely competitive and the series in South Africa would be closely fought. "They fight to the death; their lower order always seems to score a lot of runs with a never-say-die attitude. I think it is quite a similar trait to South Africans. We're resilient, and we probably do our best when our backs are up against the wall."

SRI LANKA APPOINTS MENDIS AS TEST CAPTAIN

Sri Lanka's cricket board appointed Kusal Mendis as the new Test captain yesterday, replacing Dhananajaya de Silva who stepped down ahead of selection for next month's two-match series against Pakistan. The upcoming Test series will be Mendis's first assignment as national skipper, Sri Lanka Cricket said in a statement. The 31-year-old played his first Test in 2015

against West Indies in Colombo. He has played 75 Tests and scored 4,836 runs. De Silva said he would still be available for selection and would remain with the team, but was giving up the captaincy with immediate effect. "It's my genuine opinion that the mantle should go down to the next generation," de Silva, 35, said in a letter addressed to the selectors.

De Silva, a middle-order batter, has played 69 Tests since making his debut against Australia in 2016. He has scored 4,431 runs and taken 43 wickets in the longest format of the game. He has not been included in T20 and ODI teams since January when Sri Lanka hosted England. The first Test against Pakistan will be played in Rawalpindi from November 9 and the second is due in Lahore from November 17.

BOTTOMLINE

Bangladesh aim to keep progress going in Afghanistan Test

AFP
Abu Dhabi

Bangladesh captain Najmul Hossain Shanto targets further improvement in the five-day format as they meet Afghanistan in a one-off Test starting in Abu Dhabi from today.

Bangladesh upset Australia by nine wickets at Darwin in August before losing the second Test to draw the two-match series 1-1, an outcome that was seen as a huge step forward for the visitors.

The win lifted Bangladesh to fourth place in the nine-team World Test Championship (WTC) and gives them a good chance to play next year's final.

Although the Test against Afghanistan is not included in the WTC, Shanto said his team was ready for the challenge.

"We had a very good series in Australia but I believe that is past now," Shanto said at Sheikh Zayed Stadium on Thursday.

"This is a new opponent and different conditions so we must progress further."

A win will further boost Bangladesh's confidence as they host the West Indies later this month, tour South Africa in November and host England in February next year.

Afghanistan also hopes to improve their Test record under new captain Rahmat Shah, having won just four of the 13 Tests they have played since gaining Test status

in 2017. They have lost eight and drawn one. When they last met Bangladesh in Dhaka three years ago it resulted in a heavy 546-run defeat. But they won their other Test against Bangladesh by 224 runs in 2019.

Afghanistan will sorely miss their ace spinner Rashid Khan, who was not selected for the Test on medical advice to give his back

some rest ahead of important white-ball matches. Bangladesh will be without their fast-rising pacer Naheed Rana for a second consecutive series as he recovers from a side strain.

The pitch at Zayed Stadium is on the slow side, bringing spinners into the equation early with high temperatures of 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) expected.

FORMULA 1

Russell expects one more penalty as title hopes fade

Russell and Antonelli to run different Mercedes aero packages

Reuters
Singapore

George Russell expects to take another engine penalty before the season ends, adding to the Mercedes driver's frustrations as he prepares to start the Singapore Grand Prix from the back of the grid with his title hopes fading fast.

Mercedes confirmed that Russell had no engines left in his season's allocation of four and would have to take a new one for the Singapore sprint weekend. Team boss Toto Wolff said the Briton would start Sunday's race from the rear of the field.

Russell retired from last weekend's Bahrain Grand Prix in Malaysia with a power unit problem five laps from the finish while running third, leaving him 84 points behind teammate and championship leader Kimi Antonelli.

"The engine wasn't stretched too long. It was the sixth race of the engine and obviously four engines a year, six races per engine when you split it up," Russell told reporters on Thursday.

"We actually put that engine in on Sunday in Budapest, so it was actually the sixth race, but minus qualifying and the practice sessions of Budapest. We were waiting to take the engine penalty... but unfortunately, we've had to take it here.

"But with seven races remaining - that's longer than the engines are designed for, unfortunately - that means I'll be taking another penalty at some point between the next race and the end of



Mercedes' George Russell in Marina Bay Street Circuit in Singapore yesterday. (Reuters)

the season.

"So it feels a little bit like one thing after another right now, but that's just how the cookie crumbles."

Mercedes will run different car specifications this weekend, with Antonelli continuing to develop their new package while Russell reverts to the setup that carried him to victory in Baku.

"Actually I instigated the conversation prior to the race on Sunday," Russell added.

"So when the failure happened, it was kind of a no-brainer, be-

cause we were kind of 50-50 about it pre-race and I was more in favour of doing it. And that was even pre-race, whereas now it is a total no-brainer.

"So this engine penalty this weekend is just giving a good opportunity to roll back. It's a car that I won in Baku with."

Antonelli remains optimistic about the new package even though the results were not evident in Sepang, where he finished second behind Red Bull's Max Verstappen.

"I think there's an actual im-

provement. It's just we didn't quite see it in Sepang and I think that's why it was such an outlier," he said.

"But hopefully this weekend we will be able to understand it more, put the car in a better place and be able to use its full potential.

"We really want to understand this new package and try to extract the maximum out of it because the team has done a tremendous job. They've put in so much work on this new package and it would be just a shame to write it off so early."

CHINA OPEN

Andreeva fights off Alexandrova to set up semi with Bartunkova

Reuters
Beijing

Russian fourth seed Mirra Andreeva overcame compatriot Ekaterina Alexandrova 7-6(4) 7-6(3) on Thursday to reach the China Open semi-finals where she will face Czech Nikola Pietrangola in a young-guns showdown at the WTA 1000 event in Beijing.

French Open champion Andreeva, 19, broke 19th seed Alexandrova to move 2-0 ahead before falling 5-3 behind in a fluctuating opening set as both players struggled to hold serve. The teenager, however, recovered to edge the tiebreak.

Andreeva seemed firmly on course for victory in the second, leading 4-1 and serving for the match at 5-3 before Alexandrova, 31, staged a late fightback to force another tiebreak.

Andreeva took control of the tiebreak with a forehand winner for a 3-2 lead and won five of the final six points to seal victory and reach her first Beijing semi-final.

"Even when I had an advantage in the second set leading 5-2, I felt like she was still pressuring me," Andreeva said in her post-match interview.

"I felt like she was playing better and I did not take my chances. I could have played more aggressive.

"But what a match this was. I'm super happy with how it

BARTUNKOVA CRUSHES MUCHOVA

Earlier yesterday, 26th seed Bartunkova reached her first WTA 1000 semi-final with a dominant 6-3 6-0 victory over fellow Czech and seventh seed Karolina Muchova in 67 minutes.

Bartunkova, 20, controlled the contest from start to finish, winning five consecutive games to begin the match and the final seven games to complete the rout of Wimbledon runner-up Muchova, who is 10 years her senior.

"I follow her (Muchova) a lot," Bartunkova said. "I have also similar style like her - playing lot of drop shots, volleys."

Bartunkova continued her impressive run in Beijing after stunning four-times Grand Slam champion Aryna Sabalenka in the last 32.

Bartunkova will make her top 30 debut after the tournament.

"For sure (I did not expect it) before this tournament," Bartunkova told a press conference. "I played lot of practices with top players - (Iga) Swiatek, (Coco) Gauff and others. Maybe it helps a little bit. It was one week before the tournament.

"I tried to play a lot of practices, lot of matches. I think that was the reason I had good preparation for this tournament. I had confidence. But honestly I didn't expect these results."



Russia's Mirra Andreeva hits a return to Russia's Ekaterina Alexandrova during the China Open quarter-final in Beijing yesterday. (AFP)

Drivers divided on cooling vests as sweltering conditions loom in Singapore

Formula One drivers are split on whether to embrace cooling vest technology as they prepare to battle soaring temperatures at this weekend's Singapore Grand Prix, with four-times champion Max Verstappen leading the sceptics.

The FIA, the sport's governing body, has already declared a heat hazard for the weekend at the Marina Bay Street Circuit, with temperatures forecast to exceed 31 degrees Celsius (88 degrees Fahrenheit).

Despite being held at night, drivers can lose three kilograms of body weight over the course of the race. While teams must fit driver cooling systems such as liquid-cooled vests, drivers can opt out and take a ballast penalty instead.

Verstappen, who won the race in Malaysia where a heat hazard was also declared that weekend, remains firmly against using cooling vests.

"For me, it's not needed. Yes, it's hot, but it's not a sauna," Verstappen told reporters.

"With this cooling vest, you have these stupid cables in your car, so it's just limiting your movement as well. I don't need it.

"Even if it would work for one-and-a-half hours, I don't need it. It doesn't work anyway for one-and-a-half hours."

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc said he would opt for

cooling vests if they lasted longer than 20 laps.

"Let's say that for 15-20 laps it works pretty well. Then, after for the rest of the race, you are quite warm just like you are without the cooling vest," he said.

'VERY BAD EXPERIENCES'

Mercedes' championship leader Kimi Antonelli shared Verstappen's reservations, citing a painful experience that put him off the technology.

"When I wore it last year I had very bad experiences. The first time it didn't work as long as we hoped for," Mercedes' championship leader Kimi Antonelli said.

"The second time the pump system failed. It was in Austin and I did the whole session with the system pumping the water at 50 degrees. I suffered a heat stroke after the session, so it wasn't very pleasant.

"So ever since I was like, 'You know what, I'm going to train hard so I don't have to use it for the weekends'."

But the Italian said if the vest was developed to the point where they had confidence that it would work every time and for the required duration, he would consider it.

RUSSELL ADVOCATES COOLING VESTS

However, his Mercedes teammate George Rus-

sell remains a vocal advocate for the cooling vest, painting a stark picture of what drivers have endured without them.

"You can never quantify how much lap time you're losing because your body is well and truly overheating, but I know," Russell said.

"I spoke with Alex Albon after the race in Qatar in 2023, and he felt like he was hallucinating during the race. You just couldn't breathe out there and you would have done anything to cool down."

Russell noted that car design improvements have helped reduce cockpit temperatures compared to previous years when electronic boxes, hydraulic lines and radiators in close proximity created furnace-like conditions.

"So a lot of these things have a huge impact on the cockpit temperature. Our cockpit this year is substantially cooler than it has been in years gone by," he added. But Russell added that making the system work well would require teams and the FIA to commit engineering and manufacturing resources, potentially drawing personnel away from other areas of development.

"I'd race it every weekend, bar (Las) Vegas and tracks that are really cold. I definitely see a benefit in it, I really like it," he said. "I guess just collectively between the teams and the FIA, we need to find a way to make it work."

Dakar organisers working on new Saudi route for race, sources say

Dakar Rally organisers are working on an alternative route for the January race to ensure it can go ahead in Saudi Arabia despite the ongoing situation in the Middle East, three people involved in the World Rally-Raid Championship told Reuters.

Two drivers and a team member said Dakar organisers attended the Rallye du Maroc last week to speak with competitors and team managers. They said they were working on a new route in the north of the kingdom, with fewer bivouacs than planned.

Bivouacs are accommodation camps and vehicle service and repair parks set up every night between racing stages.

Race organisers Amaury Sport Organisation unveiled the original route in May, with the start and finish in King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) and many stages taking place in the western part of the country. ASO, the International Automobile Federation and International Motorcycling Federation did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Middle East situation has forced organisers to adapt their plan amid escalating hostilities between Saudi Arabia and Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthis movement, which has stepped up attacks on Saudi cities, airports and energy infrastructure.

The World Rally Championship decided to cancel the final round of the season in Saudi Arabia, which was scheduled for next month, due to safety concerns.

The Dakar Rally is scheduled to run from January 1 to 15. The Dakar is one of the world's most prestigious motorsport events. A record 5,320 km of timed stages were originally planned for the 2027 edition, the race's eighth in Saudi Arabia.

TENNIS

Djokovic backs Sinner's decision to end season and focus on recovery

Reuters
Shanghai

Novak Djokovic has backed Jannik Sinner's decision to shut down his 2026 season as the world number one continues his recovery from a knee injury, saying the Italian was right to prioritise his long-term future over a rushed return.

Sinner has not played since beating Germany's Alexander Zverev in the Wimbledon final on July 12, with the 25-year-old missing the North American hardcourt swing, U.S. Open and ongoing Asian swing.

The Italian will also sit out the European indoor season and ATP Finals in Turin, where he lifted the trophy in the last two years. Sinner's absence has opened the door for Zverev to finish the year at the top of the world rankings.

"But at the same time, he has to think long-term," Djokovic told

reporters in Shanghai yesterday. "That's smart because as someone that always tried to have the big picture in my mind, I really support that kind of thinking and mindset.

"It's important that you give yourself more years to your career, so you have more chances to accomplish all of your objectives."

Djokovic, who returned from his own lengthy injury layoff after elbow surgery in 2018, said the challenge of coming back extends beyond physical recovery.

"Of course, physically, if you're ready, you're ready," he said.

"But then it's mental. You know, you're on the court and you're thinking, 'Am I really completely healed and free to make this run?'"

The 39-year-old Serbian arrived in Shanghai fresh from winning the China Open title on Tuesday and the 10th seed will begin his Masters campaign against Hubert Hurkacz on Friday.



Serbia's Novak Djokovic speaks during a press conference at the Shanghai Masters in Shanghai yesterday. (AFP)

Alcaraz, Sinner among stars locked in for Australian Open 1 Point Slam

Defending Australian Open champion Carlos Alcaraz will headline the popular AO 1 Point Slam alongside Jannik Sinner, Coco Gauff and Naomi Osaka next year as top professionals take on amateurs again for a million-dollar payday ahead of the Grand Slam. The event, part of the Australian Open's opening week, sees professionals and amateurs battle in a knockout contest where a game of 'Rock, Paper, Scissors' decides who serves or receives and one point is enough to send a player through. It proved hugely popular among fans after its introduction at the 2025 tournament, with some of the amateurs toppling more fancied opponents, before Australian professional Omar Jasika pocketed the inaugural A\$60,000 (\$41,736) prize.

This year, Sydney amateur Jordan Smith bagged A\$1mn after beating Taiwan professional Joanna Garland in the final, having also downed Sinner and Amanda Anisimova earlier.

"The AO 1 Point Slam is unlike anything else in world sport," the Australian Open's Chief Tennis Officer Tom Larner said in a statement. "It creates an opportunity for grassroots tennis players to share the spotlight with some of the biggest names in the game and delivers a level of excitement that only the Australian Open can provide."

At the Australian Open launch in Melbourne yesterday, organisers said amateur players across the nation were competing in qualifying events at local clubs. The 2027 champion will receive a signature AO 1 Point Slam trophy crafted from Australian silver, they added. The final of the tournament takes place on January 13 at Rod Laver Arena.

FOOTBALL

Man City must 'stick together' during crisis, says Haaland

City face a severe points penalty or even expulsion from league

AFP

Manchester

Erling Haaland said Manchester City must "stick together" in uncertain times after being found guilty of over 100 charges of breaking Premier League financial rules.

City face a severe points penalty or even expulsion from the Premier League after an independent commission found they used "sham" commercial contracts to inflate revenue and cut costs by over £900mn (\$1.2bn) between 2009 and 2018.

Haaland did not join City until 2022 but it is the current squad that could bear the burden of any sanction. Premier League leaders City return to action for the first time since the guilty verdict was revealed at Liverpool on Sunday. "We have to stay positive, look ahead and try to win football games and try to enjoy the situation and win the game," Haaland told the club's website.

"We have to stick together, and we have to spread the love to each other. So yeah, stick together, enjoy the ride and smile."

Haaland signed a contract until 2034 last year, but his future is likely to depend on the severity of any sanction. The Norwegian has scored 169 goals in 205 games for the club and also shone in spearheading his country's run to the World Cup quarter-finals.

Europe's top teams would be lining up for the 26-year-old should City face dropping out of the Premier League or even a prolonged spell without Champions League football.

"I care a lot about City, I have to say," added Haaland, whose father, Alf-Inge, also played for the club. "I care a lot about the fans because I'm a fan myself - I feel with them as well."

City manager Enzo Maresca echoed Haaland's call for unity. "Personally, I'm very calm, to be honest," Maresca told City's website. "The club has been quite clear. We trust completely the club. We understand the noise but the focus for us is just what we can control and we can control just the football side. We need to be all together. I said many times the reason why this organisation in the last 15 years was top was because from the owner, the CEO, the sporting director, the manager, players, fans, they are all on the same page. And this is fantastic."

City have made a perfect start to the Premier League season, winning all of their opening five games, with Maresca insisting the mood among his squad is "fantastic" following a lengthy international break.

"The players are excited for the next two games," he said. "But especially they are ex-



cited because in this moment we are top of the league. The players are just focused on that. They know what we can control is the football side - they are not worried at all about different things."

He added: "They know their profession and they know that the noise is there, but they don't care too much about the noise. They are just focused in this moment on how we can beat Liverpool and how, together with the fans, we can try to win in Anfield."

MOURINHO JOKES CITY CASE MAY OUTLAST HIM AS CLUB APPEALS VERDICT Meanwhile, Real Madrid manager Jose Mourinho joked that he may not live to see the end of Manchester City's legal battle with the Pre-

mier League. Mourinho managed Manchester United from 2016-18 and led them to a second-placed Premier League finish behind Pep Guardiola's City in 2017-18.

"I would rather laugh about it," Mourinho said, when asked about the case in an interview with Italy's *Corriere dello Sport*.

"I think we will eventually get an ending, but we are both in our 60s and we'll need to be lucky enough to still be around when the final verdict arrives. There will be a verdict, then appeals, then more appeals."

The appeal process will be conducted in private and it remains unclear whether any sanctions would be imposed before it is heard, or whether any punishment would take effect immediately.

SPOTLIGHT

Argentina friendlies no fairy tale for African footballers

AFP

Abidjan

When Benin and Burkina Faso flew to Buenos Aires for friendlies against Argentina - including superstar Lionel Messi's swansong - it would have seemed like dreamland for players who rarely if ever rub shoulders with the aristocrats of the 'Beautiful Game'.

In reality, the organisation was a shambles, a member of the Benin delegation said. The flight to Buenos Aires took not hours but days. There was no hot water in the hotel. Training facilities were "not up to scratch".

And the African football associations invited didn't receive any of the profits from the match, which potentially generated millions of dollars in revenue and TV rights, he said. Before the match, the state-owned daily La Nation in Cotonou looked forward breathlessly to the team "showcasing Benin to the whole world" and the national football association revelled in the "privilege" of being selected to play.

"I'm going to tell Messi, 'You are a god'," Benin defender Mohamed Tijani informed the Argentine press of the country's legendary No 10. "He's the best player in the world."

The Cheetahs lost 3-0. Whilst there is no standard practice for organising international professional friendlies, smaller African teams generally rely on agencies to manage their away fixtures and don't necessarily make any profit from the games.

"African football associations accept these deals because everything is taken care of. It saves them having to find opponents and organise friendlies," explained an expert on African football who asked not to be named. "But it's true the travel and accommodation arrangements are substandard."

The Burkina friendly turned into a farce. On the eve of kick-off, the Stallions were still stranded in Morocco after their connecting flight to Buenos Aires was cancelled. When organisers eventually found them a plane at the last minute, the senior squad was so annoyed

it refused to board and Burkina ended up hastily despatching an under-23 team.

The young players arrived jet-lagged just a few hours before the match and were predictably thrashed 7-0 by this year's World Cup finalists.

Piqued, Burkina's military ruler Ibrahim Traore complained the country's football was "in a sorry state" and threatened "significant decisions" to "remedy it".

"The next international window in November is fast approaching," Burkinabe Football Federation official Ibrahim Dianda warned on Facebook.

"If the relationship between the stakeholders doesn't change, we risk a repeat of these difficulties and the consequences could be even more regrettable," he wrote.

Fans want to know who is to blame for the humiliation. Could it be the African federations that accept these one-sided deals? Or the Argentine Football Association (AFA), which is accused by some of capitalising on its high profile and on appearances by Messi - the country's most famous living export - to maximise revenue?

Whatever the underlying motives, the AFA is in financial difficulty, faces a money laundering probe and has a president, Claudio Tapia, suspected of tax evasion. In Argentina, some newspapers and social media channels pour scorn on what they sniffily refer to as "chatarra" (cheap, low-quality) fixtures.

Messi's side also played Mauritania (110th in the FIFA rankings) and Zambia (91st) in World Cup warm-ups this year, beating them 2-1 and 5-0 respectively. His team also pocketed a hefty sum - several million dollars - for travelling to Luanda in November 2025 for a friendly marking Angola's 50th Independence Day celebrations.

An assist and a goal by the eight-time Ballon d'Or winner ensured a 2-0 victory over the African side. In reaction to the uproar in Burkina over the national team's treatment, match organiser Eurodata Sport issued a terse statement shared online by the AFA that it had "honoured its contractual commitments".



Argentina's forward Lionel Messi (centre) attempts to get past Benin's Hassane Imourane and Junior Olaitan during a friendly match at the Mas Monumental stadium in Buenos Aires on Tuesday. (AFP)

UEFA president Ceferin to stand for re-election in 2027

Paris: UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin told the 55 member national associations of European football's governing body that he would stand for a final re-election next year.

The announcement reversed the Slovenian's previous decision that he would not seek re-election and came following "unanimous" support from the national associations, UEFA said in a statement.

The 58-year-old was first elected in 2016 to replace Michel Platini, who resigned after the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) banned him from football-related activities over a FIFA corruption case.

Ceferin will stand for a final four-year term at UEFA's congress in Kazakhstan next April. "I want to thank the national associations for their trust," Ceferin said following meeting in

Berlin yesterday.

"We have faced extraordinary challenges over the past years, and we have faced them as one team. There is still important work ahead, and I have therefore accepted their request. My ambition remains the same: to keep European football united, make our game stronger and leave UEFA ready for the next generation."

HATHAB

Al-Jaber and Nasser emerge victorious

By Sports Reporter

Doha

Mohammed Yousef al-Jaber and Nasser Hamad al-Thani won the Silver Tour and Amateur Tour respectively as the second round of the 10th edition of the Longines Hathab Qatar Equestrian Tour got underway yesterday at the Qatar Equestrian Federation's indoor arena.

Al-Jaber topped the 130cm Silver Tour in 32.69 seconds on Shotgun 7. Hamad Nasser al-Qadi finished second in 33.68 seconds on Happy Tina, while Abdulaziz Fahad al-Eid took third in 38.06 seconds on Real Star V/D Dompelhoeve.

Al Shaqab League Manager Khalid Sanad al-Nuaimi presented the awards to the Silver Tour winners.

Al-Thani won the 100cm Amateur class in 29.38 seconds on Equinoxe de l'Aulne. Maryam Abdulkarim finished second in 30.02 seconds on Jumbo, while Al-Qaqa bin Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and Hessa Ali al-Jaber shared third place after both clocking 31.85 seconds on Early Star d'Alfa and Parel de Guldenboom respectively.

Manager of the Qatar Eventing Team Saad Waheed al-Kuwari presented the Amateur class awards.

Competitions continue today with the Future Riders class for riders aged 6-12 over 70cm obstacles, followed by the Open Class at 110cm. The day will conclude with the



Nasser Hamad al-Thani won the 100cm Amateur class in 29.38 seconds on Equinoxe de l'Aulne.

Gold Tour, featuring individual and team competitions, over 140cm obstacles.

The Longines Hathab Qatar Equestrian Tour is organised by the Qatar Equestrian Federation in partnership with Al Shaqab.



Al Shaqab League Manager Khalid Sanad al-Nuaimi presented the awards to the Silver Tour winners.

The 2026-27 season features 14 rounds of show jumping and dressage, alternating between the indoor and outdoor arenas.

The championship has played a key role in developing showjumping and dressage and expanding the base of male and female riders in Qatar.

Al Shaqab League to begin on Oct. 16

Doha: The fourth season of the Al Shaqab League will begin on October 16 at the Longines Indoor Arena, with the national competition providing riders with a structured pathway to develop their skills and progress towards higher levels, including international competitions.

The new season will feature five rounds, starting with Al Shaqab League 1 on October 16-17, followed by Round 2 on November 13-14, Round 3 on December 11-12, Round 4 on April 30-May 1, 2027, and the final round on May 14-15, 2027.

The competition will cater to riders across different age groups and experience levels.

The programme begins with Introductory 1 at 40cm for riders up to 12 years old, Introductory 2 at 60cm for riders up to 18, and Introductory 3 at 80cm for riders up to 21.

The progression continues with the Amateur 100-110cm class, Future Champions 110-120cm for riders up to 16, Junior Champions 120-130cm for riders up to 18, and Youth Champions 130-140cm for riders up to 25.

The highest level will be the Al Shaqab Champions 135-145cm class, which is open to eligible competitors.

Season 4 will also see a change to the team competition, with the Al Shaqab Champions category replacing the Amateur category used last season.

Each team will comprise riders

from four categories: Al Shaqab Champion, Youth Champion, Junior Champion and Future Champion. The Al Shaqab Champion will serve as Chef d'Equipe. A total of 12 teams are currently set to compete.

The team format is designed to encourage collaboration between riders at different stages of development and allow younger riders to compete alongside more experienced athletes.

Al Shaqab, a member of Qatar Foundation, said the league is part of its long-term commitment to developing riders, building future champions and strengthening the foundations of equestrian sport in Qatar. The league provides riders with regular competition opportunities to gain experience, improve their performance and progress towards higher levels of the sport.

