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MOTORSPORT

Final preparations underway for Qatar International Baja

Page 3

FOOTBALL

Qatar to open Asian Cup title defence against Thailand

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar will launch their bid for a record third consecutive AFC Asian Cup title against Thailand on January 11, following the confirmation of the match schedule for the 2027 tournament in Saudi Arabia.

The defending champions have been placed in Group F alongside Japan, Thailand and Indonesia. Julen Lopetegui's side will begin their campaign at King Saud University Stadium in Riyadh before taking on Indonesia at Aramco Stadium in Al Khobar on January 16. Qatar will conclude their group-stage campaign against four-time champions Japan on January 20 at King Saud University Stadium. The confirmed schedule marks another step in Qatar's preparations to defend the continental crown they secured with a 3-1 victory over Jordan in the final in February 2024.

Qatar also won the 2019 edition, and another triumph would make them the first team to claim three successive Asian Cup titles.

Japan, the most successful team in the tournament's history with four titles, will be their toughest opponents in Group F.

The top two teams from each group, along with the four best third-placed sides, will progress to the Round of 16.

Saudi Arabia will host the 19th edition of the continental championship for the first time, with the tournament opening on January 7. The hosts will face Palestine at King Fahd Sports City Stadium in Riyadh.

South Korea face Yemen, Australia take on Singapore and Iran meet China in their opening matches.

The knockout stage gets under way on January 22, with the quarter-finals scheduled for January 28 and 29. The semi-finals will follow on February 1 and 2, before the tournament concludes with the final at King Fahd Sports City Stadium in Riyadh on February 5. The title decider is scheduled to kick off at 8pm.

The 24-team competition will comprise 51 matches across eight stadiums in three cities. Riyadh will stage matches at five venues, while Jeddah will have two host stadiums and Al Khobar one.



Defending champions Qatar have been placed in Group F alongside Japan, Thailand and Indonesia.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

Sadd earn first point as Gharafa suffer third defeat

Afif scores for Sadd but Qadsiah force draw after Quinones equaliser

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's Al Sadd ended their goal drought in the AFC Champions League Elite but were held to a 1-1 draw by Saudi Arabia's Al Qadsiah yesterday, while Al Gharafa suffered a third consecutive defeat after going down 2-1 to Al Ahli Saudi FC in Jeddah.

In Dammam, Akram Afif put Sadd ahead in the 74th minute, only for Julian Quinones to equalise 10 minutes later to take Qadsiah to five points, while Al Sadd earned their first point after back-to-back defeats. Qadsiah's first chance came in the 13th minute when Mohammed al-Qahtani sent his effort from inside the area narrowly wide after a fine build-up.

Sadd responded a minute later, with Mohamed Camara sending Afif through on goal. Shadowed by Qadsiah's Ahmed al-Siyahi, the two-time AFC Player of the Year tried his luck from distance, but his effort drifted just wide of the left post.

The Qatari side came close to breaking the deadlock in the 21st minute, with Claudinho setting up Afif to break into the box but the Qadsiah defence intercepted his cross towards Roberto Firmino. Qadsiah threatened again in the 38th minute, with Mateo Retegui setting up Quinones, whose effort from inside the box narrowly missed the target before Quinones set-up Suleman Sani six minutes later, only for the Nigerian midfielder to pull his effort narrowly wide.

Brendan Rogers' side carried their threat into the second half, with Quinones heading just wide from Julain Weigl's corner in the 51st minute, while Yasser al-Shahrani then sent his long-range effort over the bar.

A swift counter-attack presented Sadd with two chances in quick succession, Afif surged into the box but shot wide in the 64th minute before Mohammad al-Mannai sent his effort over the bar a minute later.

Sadd kept probing and were rewarded with the opener in the 74th minute with Afif finding space before unleashing a powerful curling effort into the top right corner to end the Qatari side's wait for a goal in the League Stage.

But Qadsiah refused to give up and levelled the tie 10 minutes later with Bonsu Baah laying the ball nicely for Quinones, whose shot took a deflection off Tarek Salman before crossing past a rooted Meshaal Barsham.

In Jeddah, Matheus Goncalves came through as Ahli left it late before defeating Gharafa 2-1. Goncalves struck in the 86th minute as Saudi Arabia's Ahli moved up to seven points while Al Gharafa of Qatar suffered a third consecutive defeat.



Al Sadd forward Akram Afif celebrates after scoring against Saudi Arabia's Al Qadsiah in the AFC Champions League Elite in Dammam yesterday.



Al Ahli's Ivan Toney (right) battles for the ball with Al Gharafa's Jang Hyun-Soo.

Ahli looked to catch Gharafa off guard as early as the third minute, with Roger Ibanez sending a deep ball forward for Ivan Toney, who was caught offside.

The two-time champions, however, found the way through a minute later when Eduard Spertsyan played a teasing through ball for Toney to clip over Gharafa goalkeeper Ahmed Kone. Gharafa sought a response, with Adam Ounas setting up Alaa Eddin Hasan inside the area but the forward's attempt to wriggle his way through the Ahli defence fell flat.

Ahli came close to doubling their lead in the 37th minute when Toney sent a delightful ball into the box that evaded Seydou Sano, only for Kone to rush off his line and gather before Saad Yaslam could reach it.

The game opened up in stoppage time with Spertsyan firing over the bar after being played through by Artem Bondarenko, while Ounas was unable to capitalise after dispossessing Bondarenko on the right flank. Toney then laid the ball nicely for Trincao, whose shot struck the right post, before Ziyad al-Johani sent the rebound just wide of the left post.

Gharafa broke through to draw level in the 53rd minute with Yacine Brahimi sparking the move through the middle, surging past Bondarenko before playing in Saif Eldeen Fadlalla, who cut the ball back for Florinel Coman to finish with aplomb.

The Qatari side took confidence from the equaliser and began to build momentum, with Brahimi proving to be a handful for Ahli, sending his long-range effort over the bar in the 57th minute before coming close again from inside the box in the 66th minute.

The game shifted balance 10 minutes later when Sano received his marching orders after picking up his second yellow card, with Ahli capitalising on their numerical advantage in the 86th minute.

Goncalves, collecting al-Johani's cross from the right, curled in a superb finish into the bottom left corner to seal the three points for his side.

PREVIEW

Shamal face stern test against unbeaten Hilal

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Hosts Al Shamal will need to be at their best when they face Saudi giants Al Hilal in the AFC Champions League Elite clash at the Al Bayt Stadium today. Al Shamal have had two draws to their name while Hilal are on a perfect six points going into the clash.

Shamal will be meeting Hilal for the first time but the latter's recent record against teams from Qatar is impressive as they are unbeaten in 10 matches. The Qatari side will, however, relish the meeting as it gives them a chance to gauge themselves against one of the continent's most successful sides. Shamal's Spanish coach, David Prats, while speaking on eve of the match acknowledged that the task for his team was far from easy but called on his players to step up to the challenge.

"Our preparations were good for the match, which we realize is very difficult against a strong team that includes a group of distinguished players. We are seeking to come out with a positive result from the match, and we hope to show the required level while working to raise the level of focus during the match," he said.

"We respect Al Hilal and we know how big the difference is in the history of the two teams. This is our first participation in the tournament, but we have good players, and they must show their full potential in order for us to come out victorious. "We have a desire to put on a great performance despite the strength of the opponent, who have players and a coach with experience in dealing with matches in this continental tournament," he added.

Prats also stressed the fact that the arrival of Algerian star Riyad Mahrez gives his side more flair and strength. "The addition of Riyad gives the team quality, strength and confidence, and this is what drives us to compete against strong teams in this tournament. It is necessary to have outstanding players to compete in these tournaments," said Prats.

Al Hilal however will be supremely confident after having - for the third consecutive season - opened their campaign with two wins. Making Al Shamal's task even tougher is the fact that Al Hilal are unbeaten in 24 league/group stage games, the longest streak by any side.

Al Hilal's Italian coach Simone Inzaghi said his team were ready for their match against Al Shamal as they look to maintain their winning run in the continental competition. "We realise the importance of the match and are fully prepared to continue our winning run," the Italian said at a press conference.

Inzaghi said his team had some absentees, including Reuben Neves, but stressed the importance of managing the demands of a busy schedule.



Riyad Mahrez trains ahead of Al Shamal's match against Al Hial.

SPORT

CRICKET

Australia give Smith chance to prove his fitness

CAPTAIN CUMMINS SAYS GREEN WILL BAT IN MIDDLE ORDER

Reuters
Cape Town


Australia's Steven Smith was hampered by a neck problem in the Gqeberha Test. *(AFP)*

Australia will give key batter Steve Smith as much time as possible to prove his fitness ahead of the third and final Test against South Africa at Newlands, captain Pat Cummins said yesterday.

Smith injured his neck in South Africa's innings and 31-run victory in the second test in Gqeberha which levelled the series at 1-1 going into the decider in Cape Town starting today.

"Hopefully, it all goes well and he'll be there," Cummins told reporters yesteday. "But we just want to wait for that last piece of the puzzle (before naming a team).

Cummins said Cameron Green would bat "preferably in the middle order", which will likely mean Matt Renshaw opening with Travis Head after Nic Maddinson was dropped from the squad.

For Smith, it would be a return to the scene of his darkest day after his role as captain in the "Sandpapergate" scandal that rocked Australian cricket in 2018.

"He's been awesome this tour," Cummins said. "In the last couple of years, probably particularly the last 12 months, it feels like he's in a really good place and he's enjoying his cricket.

"He's getting himself out (and about), whether it is playing golf or going for coffee club every morning. He's been super invested in what's going on and very helpful for me out in the middle."

Smith has averaged a little over 20 in four innings with the bat and took a blow to the head in the first Test, before injuring his neck in the second.

"He looks in total control of how he's going about his work. He's one of the greatest batters we've ever had. You don't play 100 odd Tests without matches where you're not 100% fit," Cummins said. Cummins was part of the side involved in the Sandpapergate scandal, though denies any knowledge of events, and another infamous Test Australia played in Cape Town in 2011.

"My first ever Test experience was here. I was running the drinks and we got bowled out for 47. So that was a wild introduction," he said with a smile.

Ryan Rickelton of South Africa said his side was thrilled with the outcome in the second Test.

"Australia, for a long period of time, have been the No.1 team in the world and a superior team as well," Rickelton said.

"For us to even beat them in our conditions is massive. And if we had to go No.1 in the world, that's great. But if we're looking and talking about the bigger picture of things, we've got a full home summer series. If those go according to plan, then we'll eventually end up (at the WTC final) in London, hopefully in June.

"So ask me that question at the end of June, hopefully if we get to that game and win that game, then my answer will be a bit of a direct yes. For now, both teams are very evenly matched. Australia definitely, through recent history and maybe past history, have got a lot on us in world cricket. We're just living to fight another day and hopefully we can have a really good week this week," the left-hander added.

"To be able to force a result in PE (Gqeberha) was massive for us and the confidence they gave the group. We're now sitting in a similar position of 1-1 coming into Cape Town, like we were in 2018 as well," Rickelton said.

"The confidence is there. The importance of it as well. We've obviously got Australia here. We've got England coming. We've got a good Bangladesh side as well coming.

"To be able to consistently do that is something that we've spoken about.

"It's something that we're looking forward to. If we can get over the line this week, the confidence that injects into this side, into the coaching staff, and just the way that we do things is quite important for us," he added.

SPOTLIGHT

South Africa select 'enforcer' Coetzee for Australia decider


South Africa pacer Gerald Coetzee replaces injured Anrich Nortje for third Test against Australia. *(AFP)*

AFP
Cape Town

Fast bowler Gerald Coetzee will replace injured fellow paceman Anrich Nortje in the South African team for the series-deciding third Test against Australia, starting at Newlands today.

Australia, meanwhile, are waiting on the fitness of key batsman Steve Smith, who is recovering from a neck injury.

"He's the closest we've got to a like-for-like replacement for Anrich Nortje," South African captain Temba Bavuma said of Coetzee at his pre-match press conference yesterday.

Like Nortje, Coetzee is capable of bowling at speeds of up to 150km/h (93 mph).

And, like Nortje, bowling at high pace has led to lengthy periods on the sidelines because of injuries.

Nortje played in the first two Tests against Australia after a three-year lay-off - and was ruled out of the third Test by a groin injury.

Coetzee last played in the Test team two years ago but played in two of the three one-day internationals between South Africa and Australia last month.

"It's about the balance of the attack," said Bavuma, who said Coetzee and the medium-paced Wiaan Mulder added different strengths to the strike duo of Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen.

"Gerald's got that extra bit of pace. You need someone in that enforcer role who can pick up a wicket when the wicket is flat."

Mulder made crucial breakthroughs during South Africa's innings and 31 runs win in the second


Temba Bavuma

Test by bowling with tight control. "When you want someone who brings the stumps into play Wiaan comes into the conversation," said Bavuma.

Australia will delay naming their team until the morning of the match but are set to make changes in their batting line-up.

Opening batsman Nic Maddinson has been released from the squad after three failures in four innings. Matt Renshaw, player of the match in Australia's 214-run win in the first Test, is set to return to his accustomed position as an opening batsman after batting at number five in the first two Tests.

Australian captain Pat Cummins said Cameron Green would return in the middle order after recovering from an abdominal injury, while Smith would be given "every chance" to recover from a neck injury which hampered him in the second Test in Gqeberha.

Smith only faced gentle throwdowns on Sunday and his availability depended on how he feels today after a more thorough examination in the nets yesterday.

"Hopefully it all goes well and he will be there," said Cummins.

India eye third successive win over New Zealand


New Zealand's captain Mitchell Santner during a training session in Wellington. *(AFP)*

WELLINGTON: World champions India will be seeking their third successive win today when they face New Zealand in the third T20 international of the five-match series at Sky Stadium in Wellington.

India currently lead the series 2-0 after winning the opening two matches in Christchurch.

In the first T20I on October 22, India successfully chased down New Zealand's total of 225/4 with four wickets and two balls to spare, driven by Sanju Samson's 67.

In the second T20I on October 24, they restricted New Zealand to 180/5 before sealing another four-wicket win with one ball remaining, led by Tilak Varma's 51.

With a 2-0 lead, India will enter the Wellington fixture aiming for an unassailable series victory.

New Zealand, meanwhile, must win to keep the series alive.

New Zealand pacers Lockie Ferguson and Matt Henry will both miss the third T20I.

Ferguson is sitting out this match before returning for the final two games of the series in Auckland and Hamilton, while Henry has been ruled out of the remaining T20Is to prepare for the upcoming ODI series.

Tall fast bowler Kyle Jamieson will play his final T20I of the series in Wellington before leaving the squad to play domestic cricket ahead of the ODIs.

Blair Tickner has joined the squad for the remainder of the T20I series to bolster the pace attack, and Matt Fisher has been brought in as cover for the Wellington fixture.

For India, wicketkeeper-batter Ishan Kishan will miss his second consecutive match. Kishan is continuing his recovery from a right adductor strain sustained in the series-opener.


India's Vaibhav Sooryavanshi attends a training session at the Basin Reserve in Wellington yesterday. *(AFP)*

FORMULA 1

Antonelli looks to seal title 'in style' after win in Austin

AFP
Austin, Texas


Andrea Kimi Antonelli kisses his trophy on the podium after winning the Grand Prix of the United States at Circuit of The Americas in Austin, Texas. *(AFP)*

Kimi Antonelli said his mindset will not change as he heads to next week's race in Mexico seeking the two points he needs to become Formula One's youngest world champion.

The 20-year-old Italian delivered a well-executed and dominant drive to claim his ninth victory this year for Mercedes in Sunday's United States Grand Prix and move within reach of the title.

Antonelli is on the brink of smashing the previous record for youngest champion, held by Sebastian Vettel who was 23 years and 133 days old when he won his first title in 2010. He is also set to become the first Italian to win the title since Alberto Ascari in 1953.

"The best way, the perfect way, would be to finish off in style and then just enjoy the rest of the season," he said. "I'm very aware that it's very close but the mindset doesn't change. I want to finish the season on a high in order to then go with high hopes into 2027. But we'll first focus and worry about finishing this well, and then we'll see."

After Sunday's triumph at the Circuit of the Americas he leads with 365 points ahead of nearest rival and team-mate George Russell on 242 and seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton of Ferrari on 241. He will be champion if he finishes in the top nine or, if he doesn't score, Russell or Hamilton fail to win.

But on current form, after winning again for the first time in four races, he looks certain to take the title in his own happy, generous and infectious style.

"That was the perfect way to end the weekend," he said.

"It was an incredible team effort, especially from strategy, to believe in me and go for one stop because I wasn't sure whether one or two stop was the quickest.

"But I'm really happy that we made it stick. Today was a really important victory for me and for the team, especially after having a couple of difficult races, so being back on top feels very good."

Antonelli's ability on the track and infectious attitude off it have landed him numerous admirers around the paddock, including 1996 world champion Damon Hill.

"The team love him, he's enjoying everything he's got in F1 and he's very grateful for all the breaks they've given him at Mercedes," Hill said on the *BBC*.

"But he delivers. He's such a nice kid. It's incredible. Twenty years old and he's on the verge of winning his first championship, which I'm sure will be the first of many."

Russell needed to finish in the top eight to remain notionally in the title race and he did indeed finish eighth after taking an early five-second penalty.

"My pace was just rubbish today. That's the long and short of it," he said. "Of course, the five seconds didn't help things and probably cost me two or three positions, but nevertheless, the pace was not good enough when it needed to be."

Hamilton is the only other driver who still has a mathematical chance of catching Antonelli but the seven-time champion was left to rue missed opportunities in Sunday's race.

"I felt the race was lost in my first two stints," said Hamilton. "I lost so much time. I couldn't turn the car in the lower speed corners particularly.

"I was adjusting my settings and by the last stint I was closer to the right balance.

"I think I've lost a lot of points in the last five races or so and I think it's really come from set-up or just not perfecting the set-up. It's something I've really got to get on top of."

SPOTLIGHT

LIC signs partnership deal with Ooredoo for F1 and MotoGP

By Sports Reporter
Doha



The agreement was formalised at a signing ceremony attended by Abdulrahman Hassen al-Mulla, Executive Director of Shared Services at LIC, and Thani Ali al-Malki, Chief Strategy and Digital Transformation Officer at Ooredoo Qatar.



Lusail International Circuit and Ooredoo Qatar officials pose after signing a partnership agreement.

Lusail International Circuit (LIC) announced a partnership with Ooredoo Qatar, naming the leading telecommunications and ICT provider as its founding partner for the Formula 1 Qatar Airways Qatar Grand Prix and the MotoGP Qatar Airways Grand Prix of Qatar 2026.

The agreement was formalised at a signing ceremony attended by Abdulrahman Hassen al-Mulla, Executive Director of Shared Services at LIC, and Thani Ali al-Malki, Chief Strategy and Digital Transformation Officer at Ooredoo Qatar.

The partnership establishes Ooredoo Qatar's presence across Lusail International Circuit's motorsport calendar, encompassing two of the world's leading motorsport championships.

Throughout the Formula 1 and MotoGP race weekends, Ooredoo Qatar will bring fans closer to the action through the 5G+ network, delivering enhanced speed, capacity and reliability alongside engaging activations designed to enrich the spectator experience, both at the Circuit and beyond. To support this connected environment, Ooredoo has upgraded Lusail International Circuit with comprehensive indoor and outdoor 5G+ coverage and expanded network capacity.

The partnership will also extend beyond race weekends, with LIC and Ooredoo Qatar collaborating on corporate social responsibility and sustainability initiatives that deliver meaningful benefits to the community.

Through this collaboration, both organisations reaffirm their commitment to supporting Qatar's continued development, creating lasting community value and contributing to the objectives of Qatar National Vision 2030.

Abdulrahman Hassen al-Mulla, Executive Director of Shared Services at LIC, said: "This partnership reflects the confidence our partners place in Lusail International Circuit as a world-class motorsport destination and a venue for major international sporting events. Together with Ooredoo Qatar, we look forward to continuing to enhance fan experience, further strengthening the Circuit's position as a leading destination for sporting and entertainment events while delivering an exceptional experience for all participants and visitors."

Thani Ali al-Malki, Chief Strategy and Digital Transformation Officer at Ooredoo Qatar, commented: "As a Founding Partner of the Formula 1 and MotoGP Qatar Grands Prix, Ooredoo is proud to bring the power of 5G+ network to two of the world's most prestigious motorsport championships. As the first operator to launch the 5G+ network in Qatar, we continue to set new benchmarks in connectivity, delivering greater speed, capacity and reliability for fans and event operations alike. Our advanced infrastructure at Lusail International Circuit demonstrates how our 5G+ can deliver tailored connectivity for spectators, enterprises and mission-critical services.

"From enabling immersive fan experiences to supporting connected healthcare and public safety operations, we are showcasing the wider potential of next-generation connectivity while reinforcing Qatar's position as a global hub for sports and digital innovation."

The partnership begins with two major race weekends at LIC in November 2026.

The MotoGP Grand Prix of Qatar takes place from November 6 to 8 and is the only night event on the calendar.

The Formula 1 Qatar Grand Prix follows from November 27 to 29 as the penultimate round of the championship.

MOTORSPORT

Final preparations underway for Qatar International Baja

Event hosts penultimate rounds of FIA World and Middle East Baja Cups

By Sports Reporter
Doha

This weekend's Qatar International Baja will go a long way to determining the outcome of the various racing categories in both the FIA World and Middle East Baja Cups.

The Lusail-based event hosts the penultimate rounds of both championships with the Dubai International Baja set to round off the respective race calendars the following weekend (November 5th-8th).

The Drivers' and Navigators' Championships in the FIA World Baja Cup are set for a barn-storming conclusion with four drivers present in Qatar in with a very realistic chance of claiming the silverware.

Saudi driver Dania Akeel leads the way on 273 points but the Toyota driver has already scored from her permitted six events and sits on the sidelines for the season's finale, as Mitchel van den Brink, Francisco Barreto, Lionel Baud and Saood Variawa battle it out for the title. Van den Brink, Barreto and Variawa have posted four scores so far to the five notched up by Baud.

Van den Brink is the runaway leader of the Challenger category as well and heads to Lusail in his South Racing Can-Am with 265 points and a seven-point cushion over Barreto, the winner in both Italy and Portugal this year in an SVR Toyota.

Baud is the outsider and trails Van den Brink by 18 points but Jordan Baja winner Variawa is 33 points adrift and, more importantly, has two Bajas still to complete. Barreto, Baud and Variawa will also battle it out to overhaul Akeel in the Ultimate class.

Akeel's partner Sébastien Delaunay leads the way in the Navigators' Championship, but is also absent as Bart van Heun, Paulo Fiúza and Lucie Baud tussle for supremacy.


Qatar's Mohammed al-Marri leads the junior rankings, holds third in the Drivers' Championship and has a 58-point lead in the SSV class.


Qatar's Ahmed al-Kuwari is in fifth place in the SSV class.

Lionel Baud leads the way from Hamed al-Wahaibi in the Master driver category.

Van den Brink's cushion over Al-Wahaibi is 60 points in the Challenger section. Al-Wahaibi returns from a freak leg injury to try and push R-X Sport on to Teams' glory as well, but needs Van den Brink to falter on at least one of the last two Bajas if he is to prevail. The QMMF Team's Abdulaziz al-Kuwari is a distant third in the rankings, while Van Heun leads the way from Maciej Giemza in the Navigators' category.

Neither SSV and Junior Driver leader Hedda Hosås nor Emirati Mansour al-Helai have made the trip to Qatar and that has opened the door for Argentina-based Fernando Alvarez to push on for glory.

The Can-Am driver trails Hosås by 33 points with one score in hand. His navigator Xavier Panseri is in a similar position in the battle for the Navigators' series.

Al-Mashna al-Shammeri has already posted six scores this season and amassed 226 points in the Stock category. He must sit on the sidelines to see if fellow Nissan driver Majed al-Thunayyan can finish the event and snatch the title in Qatar.

The outcome of the FIA Middle East Baja Cup looks to be a lot more straightforward. Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and Max Delfino have already taken wins in Saudi Arabia and Jordan this year and have 17-point leads in their respective championships over the absent Yasir Seaidan and Xavier Flick. Al-Attiyah will be one of the favourites for outright success in an MD Optimus Rallye – he has won the Qatar event in its various guises on a dozen occasions since 2004.

Talented young Qatari Mohammed al-Marri leads the Junior rankings, holds third in the Drivers' Championship and has a 58-point lead in the SSV class. He teams up with Pierre Delorme on this occasion, knowing that a strong finish in Qatar will be enough to see off the challenge from the likes of Hamad al-Harbi, Maha al-Hamali and Mohammed al-Atteya to claim SSV success.

Seaidan's absence has left the door slightly ajar for Dubai-based Briton David Mabbs and his navigator Dave McBride to make a late push for Challenger honours. Mabbs trails Seaidan by 68 points and faces strong Qatari competition for points this weekend. He is also in contention for the regional Master Driver title, but trails the absent Miroslav Zapletal by 37 points.

Today will be a day of pre-event preparations in the service park for teams and crews, while staff at the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) put the finishing touches to event logistics before administration checks, scrutineering and the pre-event press conference take centre stage at the Lusail International Circuit tomorrow.

McDowell joins long list of golfers saying no to LIV 2.0

Former US Open champion Graeme McDowell added his name to the long list of golfers not signing up for LIV 2.0. The 47-year-old from Northern Ireland joined LIV Golf in 2022 and played for multiple teams, most recently OKGC in 2026. "I've decided not to pursue LIV 2.0," McDowell posted yesterday on X. "I'm grateful for the opportunity I've had over the last four years and want to thank everyone who has been part of that journey. I look forward to the next chapter in my career."

Ian Poulter, Tyrrell Hatton and Tom McKibbin announced Friday they won't be returning to LIV in 2027. Jon Rahm, Sergio Garcia, David Puig, Abraham Ancer, Charles Howell III, Adrian Meronk, Louis Oosthuizen and Thomas Pieters are also part of the exodus. McDowell won 11 events on the European tour and four on the PGA Tour, including the 2010 US Open at Pebble Beach. Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund announced earlier this year that it would end its financial support of LIV Golf. CEO Scott O'Neil has lined up funding for LIV 2.0 as the league goes through Chapter 11 bankruptcy proceedings, with plans to play a 10-event schedule in 2027 that includes five events in the United States and five internationally.

TENNIS

Eala breezes past world number 411 in Tokyo opener

AFP
Tokyo

Philippines star Alexandra Eala said "the ball doesn't know what rank you are" after beating world number 411 Mika Stojsavljevic 6-1, 6-2 in her opener in Tokyo yesterday.

World number 19 Eala arrived at the Pan Pacific Open on the back of a poor run of form that saw her win just one match at her last three tournaments.

That included a shock first-round defeat to 217th-ranked Chinese qualifier Shi Han at the Wuhan Open this month.

Eala avoided a similar banana skin against British 17-year-old Stojsavljevic, brushing past her opponent in 75 minutes. "I try to look at the player separate from the ranking," said Eala.

"The ball doesn't know what rank you are. It's just being ready and trying to keep that intensity all the time."

Eala is followed everywhere by adoring fans eager to see the 21-year-old, who in August became the first player from the Philippines to win a title on the women's WTA Tour.

She was again supported by a small but passionate group of fans on centre court in Tokyo.

Eala breezed into a 5-0 lead in the first set and closed it out despite Stojsavljevic pulling a game back. The British player gave her more problems in the second set, but Eala was never seriously troubled and took the match without ever having her service broken. "It's a little faster than the court I played on last week," said Eala.

"It's indoor, comfortable weather, not very hot. I think I'm finding my groove."

Number five seed Elise Mertens of Belgium also progressed, beating Japan's Moyuka Uchijima 6-4, 6-2. But number two seed Maja Chwalinska and defending champion Belinda Bencic both withdrew from the tournament through injury without playing a match.

Bencic, who was the fourth seed, said her season was over after several ligament tears were discovered in her right foot.

"I am still completely unsure when and how this occurred, but it is sadly preventing me from competing here in Tokyo this week and in Hong Kong next week," said the Swiss player.

SINNER SET TO RETURN AT POSTPONED SIX KINGS SLAM

World number one Jannik Sinner will make his comeback at the Six Kings Slam in Saudi Arabia following the tournament's postponement to December due to security concerns, organisers said yesterday.

Italian Sinner, winner of the previous two Six Kings, announced this month that he would not compete again in 2026 as he continued his recovery from a knee injury that has sidelined the 25-year-old since winning Wimbledon in July.

That decision ruled him out of the European indoor hardcourt swing along with the season-ending ATP Finals in Turin where Sinner also triumphed in the last two years.

The lucrative Six Kings Slam exhibition event, a non-ATP tournament, was due to take place in Riyadh from October 21-24, but is now scheduled for December 27-30.

Organisers announced the date change after an attack by Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthis on Riyadh's international airport killed 13 people.

January's Dakar Rally was moved out of Saudi Arabia due to security concerns, and golf's Asian Tour has postponed the Saudi International indefinitely.

Sinner beat Carlos Alcaraz in both Six Kings finals, earning himself $6mn at each event.

Along with Sinner and Alcaraz, the event will also feature Novak Djokovic, Alexander Zverev, Taylor Fritz and Alex de Minaur. Zverev is guaranteed to finish 2026 as the ATP's year-end world number one.

Alcaraz heads strong Spanish Davis Cup team

Carlos Alcaraz will lead a strong Spanish Davis Cup team named by captain David Ferrer yesterday.

Seven-time Grand Slam winner Alcaraz, Rafael Jodar, Alejandro Davidovich Fokina, Marcel Granollers and Pedro Martinez will compete for Spain, who last won the competition in 2019.

"We have a very good team, without a doubt," said Ferrer. "I'm happy to have all the players available and very excited.

"Obviously, we're one of the favourites to win the Davis Cup, but that's okay, it's always better to have the best players."

World number three Alcaraz missed four months of the season with a wrist injury, but returned at the US Open and triumphed in Tokyo at the Japan Open earlier in October.

The competition takes place in Bologna from November 24-29. Last year's runners-up Spain will open with a quarter-final against Austria, before a possible semi-final against Britain or Germany.

LA LIGA

Mourinho gives Real the answers to Barca test

A 2-1 win showed Mourinho's Real Madrid can challenge Barcelona for the title

Reuters
Barcelona


Real Madrid's Kylian Mbappe (second left) celebrates with teammates after scoring the winner against Barcelona. *(Reuters)*

Real Madrid recorded just a second victory in eight games against Barcelona on Sunday night, with the return of Jose Mourinho to the fixture haunting the reigning champions.

In the first Clasico of Mourinho's first spell at Real Madrid, Barcelona ripped his side to shreds in a 5-0 win at Camp Nou. A 2-1 win in the first Clasico of his second spell suggests Mourinho's Real Madrid can challenge Barcelona's recent La Liga dominance in his first season back in Spain.

Although the chances were shared out evenly, with Barcelona racking up more shots on goal, more possession and more passes throughout the match, those statistics were not an honest reflection of the game. Real Madrid played as if they had the answers to the test Barcelona posed.

"The lads played an extraordinary match," said Mourinho in his press conference afterwards. "Very organised, focused, and showing the courage to play the ball out from the back against an opponent that applied a lot of pressure."

Time and again, Mourinho's side moved the ball with urgency and precision in their own half to escape Barcelona's pressing. Fede Valverde was praised for playing through injury by Mourinho, but above all he embodied the presence of mind to identify where the space was whenever the ball was turned over. The Uruguayan did so from the right-back position, despite stating in September 2025 that he was "not born to play as a full-back."

Valverde later denied he had expressed any unwillingness to play in defence, but a number of Spanish outlets took this as a suggestion he was not pleased about doing so, and perhaps he was not on board with then-manager Xabi Alonso's style of management. For a third game in a row, the Real Madrid captain started at right-back and delivered a captain's performance. Valverde's impressive showing in his unfavoured position demonstrated Mourinho not only is finding tactical solutions to get the best out of his players, but is winning over the Real Madrid dressing room.

Mourinho remarked that leaving Camp Nou just three points behind Barcelona "gives us peace of mind, and it's well deserved."

The victory over Barcelona should help to boost morale and build unity within the Real Madrid squad. More importantly, Mourinho now has evidence his methods can help return Real Madrid to the summit of Spanish football.

"If we win today but lose at El Sardinero, it counts for nothing, because Madrid isn't playing to win at the Camp Nou," Mourinho said. "They're playing to win the championship" - a statement that now looks closer to reality after two defeats in September had sown early doubts about Mourinho's plans.

REAL CENTURY 'JUST A DETAIL' FOR MBAPPE AFTER CLASICO WIN

Kylian Mbappe said reaching a milestone 100 goals for Real Madrid during the 2-1 Clasico win over Barcelona in La Liga on Sunday was "just a detail" compared to the team's victory.

The French forward hit a brace to bring up his century for Los Blancos across all competitions since joining in 2024. Mbappe's double, either side of a Raphinha strike for the hosts at Camp Nou, brought third-place Real Madrid within three points of the La Liga leaders and reigning Spanish champions.

"I'm very happy, I think everyone knows I like to score goals, I like to help the team with that, but I think today it's just a detail, because... the most important thing is the team's win," Mbappe said. "Honestly, the real star of the game today is the team, the group, because we knew we had to play a big game, a team game... We know that in the end it was a great game, but it still only counts as three points, and we need to pick up a lot of points to win La Liga."

Jose Mourinho's Madrid have now won five matches in a row and seem to be coming into strong form. "It doesn't mean anything, we have to continue, because five games for us is nothing, we want to win every game," added Mbappe, 27.

"(Winning) is a good message today, but we can't think the season is done – next week (at Racing) Santander we have to put in the same intensity."


Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho reacts after his side beat Barcelona in La Liga.

FIFA U-17 World Cup trophy tour kicks off Thursday as tickets go on sale



Doha: Football enthusiasts and families across Qatar will get the opportunity to see the FIFA U-17 World Cup Qatar 2026 trophy as its nationwide tour kicks off on Thursday, with general public tickets for the tournament now on sale. The trophy tour will visit three popular destinations ahead of the global showpiece, starting at Doha Festival City on October 29, followed by West Walk on November 5 and Msheireb Downtown Doha on November 12. All three visits will run from 6pm to 10pm.

Each stop will feature fan activities and photo opportunities with the official trophy as Qatar prepares to host 48 international teams competing across 104 matches from November 19 to December 13.

Fans can purchase digital tickets through www.roadtoqatar.qa, with Day Passes allowing access to up to eight matches a day at Aspire Zone, as well as cultural and entertainment activities at the Fan Zone.

Day Passes are priced at QR20 per matchday for the group stage, Round of 32, Round of 16 and quarter-finals. A maximum of six tickets per person can be purchased for each matchday.

A Prime Pass is also available for fans wishing to reserve seats for high-demand matches. Tickets cost QR35 for the group stage, Round of 32, Round of 16, quarter-finals and semi-finals, while the third-place play-off pass is priced at QR20. A maximum of four Prime Passes per person can be purchased for each main pitch per matchday.

Tickets for the December 13 final at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium, scheduled for 7pm, are also available. Category 1 tickets cost QR30, while Category 2 tickets are priced at QR15. A maximum of six tickets per person can be purchased for the final. Tickets also include accessible seating options for fans with disabilities.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Manchester United crisis deepens as Carrick faces axe

AFP
Manchester



Winless in eight games and hovering just above the Premier League relegation zone, struggling Manchester United are facing the prospect of yet another managerial change, with **Michael Carrick** likely to pay the price. The former United midfielder was warmly applauded by fans as he made his way down the tunnel after his team's chastening 3-0 defeat by Bournemouth at Old Trafford on Sunday.

Moments later a chorus of boos erupted as the players left the pitch 2 with fans clear in their minds where the blame lies for United's current malaise.

Carrick was handed a two-year deal in May after inspiring an impressive revival following the team's struggles under Ruben Amorim – United secured third place in the Premier League and a return to the Champions League. But a drastic decline this season is an all-too-familiar story for United supporters, who last witnessed a Premier League title triumph 13 years ago under Alex Ferguson.

An emotional Carrick denied his lap of the pitch at full-time on Sunday was a goodbye as he struggles to come to terms with his team's precipitous decline. "I definitely knew that we hadn't cracked it and there was a lot of work to be done, but that doesn't mean to say that it should have gone this way," he said. Carrick, 45, is clinging on but his position appears increasingly precarious, with former Newcastle boss Eddie Howe and ex-Germany boss Julian Nagelsmann apparently in the frame for the job. The United boss, who won multiple titles in the club's golden era under Ferguson, was the seventh permanent appointment since the Scot retired.

David Moyes was proven in the Premier League, Louis van Gaal and Jose Mourinho had stellar records and Erik ten Hag and Amorim were seen as rising stars of coaching. Carrick is in the same category as Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, who was in charge for three years from 2018 – a sentimental choice as a former player who played a major role in the club's glory years under Ferguson.

"The Manchester United fans are singing the Michael Carrick song because I think they know what's going to happen here. They've seen this before. He's one of their own and he's popular," former United captain Gary Neville said. "But the owners, the sporting department and the players are not popular and they've badly let this football club down."

The problems at the club, as Neville points out, go far beyond the dugout. Despite fierce, ongoing protests from fans, the US-based Glazer family still hold a majority stake in the club Malcolm Glazer bought via a leveraged takeover in 2005, saddling United with huge debts.

Any hopes that the arrival of British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe as a minority owner in 2024 would signal a new dawn have been dashed. Ratcliffe has overseen cost-cutting measures including widespread redundancies and ticket hikes but the club's debt has still soared above £1.1bn ($1.47bn).

United, who for years bullied their rivals in the transfer market, lost out on the biggest names as they targeted a summer midfield rebuild, with Elliot Anderson, Sandro Tonali and Mateus Fernandes all choosing other clubs.

United instead recruited Carlos Baleba, Youri Tielemans and Andrey Santos – none of whom have made a strong impression – for combined fees of about £150mn.

Significant rifts have emerged in recent weeks. Lisandro Martinez criticised director of football Jason Wilcox for not doing more to strengthen Carrick's squad. Last week captain Bruno Fernandes publicly questioned Carrick's tactics in a 4-1 humbling by Champions League debutants Como.

Carrick is expected to take the blame, but the route back to the top for one of the world's biggest clubs appears tougher than ever. "It can't just be the manager again. There has got to be consequences above that. You can't keep letting the people pick the manager who keep getting it wrong," said Neville.

"It's years now without a Premier League title. That will be another five or 10 before you know it because there are other clubs set up for success and Manchester United aren't."

SPOTLIGHT

Barca face familiar questions

AFP
Barcelona


Barcelona's Lamine Yamal looks dejected after the loss to Real Madrid on Sunday. *(Reuters)*

Rik Sharma After a superb start to the season Barcelona were brought crashing back down to earth by Real Madrid and Paris Saint-Germain last week, raising fresh doubts about the Spanish champions' ability to compete against the strongest opponents.

Hansi Flick's side have dominated in Spain over the last two seasons, winning back-to-back La Liga titles, but notably in Europe have fallen short on high-pressure nights.

The Catalan giants have played sumptuous attacking football this season and won their first 11 games across all competitions, but once the quality of their opponents rose, it was a different story.

Barca were beaten 4-2 in Paris by European champions PSG on Tuesday, showing they are still some way from matching Luis Enrique's side.

That was compounded by Sunday's painful 2-1 home defeat by Jose Mourinho's Real Madrid in La Liga, in which Barcelona's defensive frailties were laid bare again. A draw would have been an acceptable result and maintained their six-point lead on Madrid in the top flight, but they left far too much space for Los Blancos to exploit in the final stages.

With three minutes to go Eduardo Camavinga raced through on goal and squared for Kylian Mbappe to net his 100th Madrid goal and second of the night to snatch victory. "In the end sometimes in the big, big games, small things are important and they decide the game and which way they end, and today that was not on our side," Flick told reporters, pledging to improve. "We know what we have to make better. We speak about this in every training. We will do it, I'm not worried about that. It's a part of this game to lose also. In this week, we had two (losses) and it's too much."

However it is a discourse which the German coach has repeated during his tenure. "We are a young side and we have to mature," said Flick, after Inter Milan ousted Barcelona in the Champions League semi-finals in May 2025. "We are working on it and we have to improve in defence and in other aspects."

Despite spending good money on Anthony Gordon, Rodri and others this summer, and trying to bring in Atletico Madrid striker Julian Alvarez, Barcelona did not sign a centre-back.

Instead Flick has persisted with Gerard Martin, a converted left-back, playing alongside Pau Cubarsi. Martin has done well, considering his technical limitations and change of position, but against the world's best strikers is clearly out of his depth.

The defender's poor clearance handed Madrid their first goal against Barca, with Mbappe gleefully capitalising. To Martin's credit, he did defend well to stop Jude Bellingham and Mbappe in a two-on-one situation early in the second half, which exposed a more structural problem Barca have.

Their high-line defence is easy to breach when the team's pressing is not executed perfectly, with high energy. Flick suggested Barcelona lacked "freshness" against Madrid, after a gruelling schedule, although his team had an extra day to recover midweek and the coach waited until the final minutes to introduce Gabriel Jesus and Karim Adeyemi.

Napoli coach Allegri handed two-match ban

Turin: Napoli coach Max Allegri has been handed a two-match ban for abusive remarks and an aggressive attitude towards match officials and an AS Roma staff member being sent off during Saturday's 3-3 home draw, Serie A's sports judge said.

Allegri was dismissed shortly after Leonardo Balerdi scored a late equaliser for Roma. Allegri, who believed there was a foul during the build-up, reacted with anger when the VAR cleared the goal, leading to a straight red card. The manager, who has also been fined €10,000 ($11,200), is set to miss the Serie A games at Monza on Wednesday and Juventus on Sunday as his 10th-placed Napoli side look for a turnaround after winning only one of their last four league matches.

Allegri in a post-match interview denied having abused the match officials."The fourth official called the referee and got me sent off but I said absolutely nothing," he said.