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MOTORSPORT

Tough test awaits riders at Qatar Baja

There are more than a handful of riders capable of overcoming Qatar's navigational challenges



The riders tackle the demanding two-day route through the northern, central and southern Qatar deserts ahead of the registered crews in the FIA World and Middle East Baja Cups.

By Sports Reporter
Lusail

Forty-five motorcycle riders and eight quad entrants make up the impressive FIM side of the stunning entry list for this weekend's Qatar International Baja.

They will tackle the demanding two-day route through the northern, central and southern Qatar deserts ahead of the registered crews in the FIA World and Middle East Baja Cups.

The main focus may be on Junior rider Alex McInnes and Saudi rival Abdulhalim al-Mogheera at the head of the FIM Bajas World Cup standings, but the entry has strength in depth and there are more than a handful of riders capable of overcoming Qatar's formidable navigational challenges with the pace to succeed on one of the most difficult events in the world calendar.

Emirati Mohammed al-Balooshi is a case in point: the MX Ride Dubai man holds third in the rankings and is a two-time winner in Qatar. Likewise, Pole Konrad Dabrowski has the pace and the guile to prevail and won this event in 2022, 2023 and 2025.

There is strength in depth throughout the field of riders from 17 countries. The vastly-experienced Romain Dumontier has entered on a KTM 450 and has already raced against the likes of Dakar front-runners, Kevin Benavides, Xavier de Soultrait and Toby Price, in the Enduro World Championship.

The Frenchman was 120cc World and European champion in 2009, Brazilian champion 10 years later and inside the world's top 10 between 2014 and 2018. He entered the world of rally-raids in Morocco in 2021 and has become a formidable competitor on rounds of the FIA World Rally-Raid Championship (W2RC).

Talented young English rider Ethan Lane is making his way through the ranks and Qatar-based Makis Rees-Stavros is a regular competitor on the local desert scene and has the experience needed to prevail at the highest level. The likes of Brett Hunt, Martin Chalmers, Andrew Houlihan, Philip Horlemann and Abdullah Abu Aisheh have tackled a lot of desert rallies and Slovenian Toni Mulec is a member of the Bas World KTM Team and first tackled the Dakar in 2023. A regular on ISDE events in the past, the 41-year-old finished ninth overall on the last Dakar in Saudi Arabia and won the Rally 2 category.

Bringing up the rear of the motorcycle field on bike number 46 is Norway's Ola Floene. The KTM rider is better known for his role as a formidable co-driver in the FIA World Rally Championship (WRC). The 57-year-old's career began in the 1980s. He became an official team member for M-Sport and Volkswagen Motorsport, partnering the likes of Andreas Mikkelsen, Henning Solberg, Mads Ostberg and Pontus Tidemand. Ola won the 2015 Rally Catalunya with Mikkelsen and earned 15 career podium finishes in the WRC.

The host nation will be represented by Mohammed al-Kubaisi on his Fanatic XEF 450 Rally and Abdulattif Mojadam, riding a Husqvarna FE 450.



The service park for the Qatar International Baja at the Lusail International Circuit.

SAUDI'S AL-JABER LEADS IMPRESSIVE QUAD FIELD

FIM Bajas World Cup leader Ahmed al-Jaber leads an eight-strong quad entry into the Qatar deserts. The Yamaha rider has a seven-point cushion over fellow Saudi and 2024 event winner Hani al-Noumesi in the points' standings but the duo face, perhaps, one of the strongest quad line-ups of the season.

Emirati Abdulaziz Ahli topped the quad section in Qatar last year and has won the Dubai International Baja for the last four years. He rides a Yamaha Raptor along with Saudi's Abdulaziz al-Atawi. Khalifa al-Bastaki also represents the UAE on a Yamaha.

Matteo Lardori (Polaris) and the Saudi CF Moto CForce duo of Abdulrahman Alabdullatif and Badr al-Hamdan round off the entry. Minor pre-event changes on the FIA entry list see Xavier Flick partnering Maha al-Hamali in place of Michael Metge, Stefano Tironi sitting alongside Stefano Marrini in his Yamaha YXZ 1000 R and former Emirati quad rider Atif al-Zarouni joining forces with Christiano Gabbarrini as a navigator.

Three Qatari riders have topped the quad standings in the recent history of the event: Abdullah al-Shamein was triumphant on a Yamaha in 2004, Adel Abdulla won the 2011 Baja and, three years later, Mohammed Abu Issa secured victory on the longer five-day cross-country edition with a Honda TRX 700.

Today, administration and scrutineering checks will take place at the Lusail International Circuit before several of the leading drivers and riders join QMMF officials and members of the media for the pre-event press conference at 6pm.

SPOTLIGHT

Suhail revealed as mascot of FIBA World Cup Qatar 2027

By Sports Reporter
Dohai



With less than a year to go until the start of the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027, Suhail has been revealed as the official mascot of the flagship competition in Doha, Qatar.

Inspired by the main star that has guided brave people of the Gulf region to journey beyond the horizon, Suhail, which is also known as Canopus in Western culture, has watched over sailors, nomads, and pearl divers for centuries.

Beneath its light, the people of Qatar and the Gulf region have crossed deserts, navigated seas, and built the foundations of nations.

Unveiled in the host city of Doha, the Suhail star is a well-known natural calendar marker across the Gulf region. Traditionally associated with the transition from peak summer heat to cooler temperatures and more comfortable evenings, the star is expected to be visible in the night sky during the FIBA Basketball World Cup 2027 in Qatar.

Suhail has been created from meteorite origins. A body made of crystalline facets, fragments of a star fused with meteorite metal, and each surface catching the light and glowing with energy drawn from the sun. Suhail is a being of both sky and earth, strength from stone, brilliance from the cosmos.

Abdulla Ali al-Mawlawi, Executive Director of Communications & Guest Relations at the Local Organising Committee said: "The unveiling of Suhail marks an important milestone in our preparations to host the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027, with the official mascot reflecting our commitment to showcasing Qatar's cultural identity and celebrating its rich heritage. Inspired by the Suhail star, which holds a special place in Qatari and Gulf cultural traditions, the mascot symbolizes our connection to the past and our aspirations for the future."

He added: "We hope Suhail will help strengthen engagement with fans of all ages, and play an active role in promoting the tournament in the coming months. We are also committed to ensuring that the FIBA Basketball World Cup experience extends beyond the basketball court to encourage younger generations to take up basketball, and contribute to the sport's growth in Qatar and across the region.



CRICKET

MATCH REPORT

Starc strikes late as Australia fight back at Newlands

Australia's fast bowler takes six wickets as Proteas are all out for 329

Reuters
Cape Town


Australia's Mitchell Starc and Pat Cummins (second left) celebrate the dismissal of South Africa's Wiaan Mulder on day one of the third Test at Newlands stadium in Cape Town yesterday. *(AFP)*

Marques Ackerman scored a career-best 95 for South Africa and Australia fast bowler Mitchell Starc took 6-72 as the hosts were bowled out for 329 on a seesaw first day of the decisive third Test at Newlands yesterday.

Australia will bat on the second morning after Starc ran through the South African tail with the new ball and the home side let a commanding position slip.

Australia were dealt a blow before play started when key batter Steve Smith was ruled out due to a neck injury on the ground where he was involved in the infamous Sandpapergate scandal in 2018.

For the third time in the series, Australia captain Pat Cummins won the toss and chose to field, only the 12th time a team has done so in Tests at Newlands since 1889.

At the time it looked an odd decision, even more so after South Africa made an excellent start.

"We probably expected more out of the wicket, it was not our best start and South Africa took advantage," Starc told reporters.

"(The wicket) was quite slow, with a tennis ball type bounce. We had to reassess at lunch, problem solve and find a way to be effective. The last two sessions for us went well.

"At one point we thought we would have to bowl a fair bit tomorrow, so to get them out today is good."

QUICK START

The home side were fast out the blocks as Ackerman and Aiden Markram put on 158 in 31.4 overs for the first wicket in a display of attacking intent.

Approaching his maiden century in his second Test, however, Ackerman had a rush of blood to the head as he charged down the wicket at spinner Nathan Lyon (2-71) and was stumped.

It was not only a rash shot that denied him a century, but the catalyst for a collapse as South Africa lost six wickets for the addition of 74 runs, several to poor shots. Markram (78) and David Bedingham (50) were caught on the boundary attempting pulls, and Wiaan Mulder was caught behind by wicketkeeper Alex Carey playing the same shot as Australia employed an effective short-ball plan.

Ryan Rickelton (42) and Marco Jansen (52) put on 95 for the seventh wicket to edge South Africa ahead again before both were removed in the same over by Starc.

He also took the wickets of Gerald Coetzee and Kagiso Rabada to end the innings just before the scheduled close of play. The series is level at 1-1 after Australia won the first Test by 214 runs in Durban and South Africa responded with a victory by an innings and 31 runs in Gqeberha.

The team who win the match will occupy the number one position in the Test world rankings, a position currently held by Australia.

BRIEF SCORES
South Africa 329 (Ackerman 95, Markram 78, Jansen 52, Starc 6-72, Lyon 2-71) **vs Australia**

FOCUS

Sri Lanka end England hopes with crushing win over Pakistan


Sri Lanka's Kamindu Mendis plays a shot during the ODI tri-series match against Pakistan in Lahore yesterday. *(AFP)*

AFP
Lahore

Pace bowler Dilshan Madushanka grabbed a career best 5-34 as Sri Lanka cruised to a thumping eight-wicket win over Pakistan in Lahore yesterday which ends England's hopes of reaching the tri-series final.

The left-armer was well supported by spinner Sahan Arachchige, who took 2-24, to dismiss Pakistan for a paltry 110 in just 25.3 overs. The Sri Lankan batters reached the target in just 18.1 overs.

The victory is Sri Lanka's second in three games, enough to deprive the third team England of a spot in Sunday's final, for which Pakistan have already qualified with three wins.

The English, who have contrived to lose successive matches against Sri Lanka and Pakistan from winning positions, needed the hosts to win to have any hope of joining them in the final.

Consequently, tomorrow's match between Sri Lanka and England is a dead rubber.

Kamindu Mendis struck two sixes and eight fours in his 62 not out from 60 balls, reaching his fifth ODI half-century with a six off Shaheen Shah Afridi. Pavan Rathnayake was unbeaten on 23.

Avishka Fernando fell for 16 and skipper Kusal Mendis made eight, with wickets going to Shaheen and Arafat Minhas.

Mendis praised the efforts of his bowlers, particularly Madushanka.

"We executed our plans well and Dilshan bowled superbly, everyone is happy at the team's progress," said Mendis, whose team hunted down 430 against England on Thursday - the second highest successful chase in all ODIs.

Shaheen put on a brave face after an abject display by his team.

"We must forget this match and get ready for the final," said Shaheen.

"We will come back in the final and bat stronger."

Earlier, it was Madushanka's demolition act that wrecked Pakistan, who were put in to bat. Their 110 was their second lowest ODI total at home behind the 75 they made against the same opposition and at the same venue in 2009.

Pakistan, who chased down 242 in a thrilling one-wicket win against England on Sunday, batted poorly on a flat Gaddafi Stadium pitch with token resistance from Babar Azam, top-scoring with 29, and Hasan Nawaz who made 17.

Madushanka dismissed out-of-form opener Fakhar Zaman for five in the fourth over to start the slide.

Azam and Saad Baig put on 23 for the third wicket before Madushanka had Baig caught at cover for five, while Arachchige removed Salman Agha for nine.

PREVIEW

Bangladesh seek Test championship boost in West Indies series



Bangladesh's captain Najmul Hosssain Shanto (left) and West Indies' captain Roston Chase pose with the series trophy on the eve of their first Test in Dhaka yesterday. *(AFP)*

AFP
Dhaka

Bangladesh skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto said yesterday the prospect of making the World Test Championship final inspires his team heading into a two-match series against the West Indies.

Currently fourth in the WTC standings, Bangladesh have six Tests remaining in the cycle including the West Indies opener in Mirpur starting today.

Former winners Australia lead the WTC table, followed by New Zealand and reigning champions South Africa in third place.

Bangladesh will need to win at least four and draw one of their six Tests to have a chance of making the final scheduled between June 9-13 at the Oval, and Shanto said there is no pressure.

"I find it inspiring rather than pressurising," Shanto told reporters on the eve of the Mirpur Test.

"We do not want to do anything extra. We want to follow our process and give 100 per cent to the things we know how to do."

The hosts enter the Test series after failing to take the final seven wickets against Afghanistan in their most recent Test defeat in the United Arab Emirates.

Bangladesh have previously struggled to handle pressure on big occasions, but Shanto said the team has learned from their mistakes.

"We have a lot of conversations about it in the dressing room," he said.

"If you look at recent times, I would say that this problem has become less frequent. I am not saying we have completely overcome it, but it has reduced considerably."

The West Indies will look to finish their WTC campaign strongly, despite the absence of in-form batter Shai Hope, who has been rested.

"He's going to be a big miss for us having Shai Hope out, but he's been playing a lot of cricket," captain Roston Chase said.

The West Indies have won two, drawn one and lost one of their four Tests this year.

Chase said his team wants to build on that record and climb up the WTC standings from number eight position.

"This is the last series...if we want to make any strides in terms of going up the table, it has to be in this series," he said.

"We're in some good form coming into this series, so we want to take two wins and try to take ourselves up the ladder."

Chase expects a trial by spin at the Mirpur pitch.

The second and final Test will begin in Sylhet on November 5.

T20 SERIES

Abhishek's destructive 113 leads India to series win

AFP
Wellington


India's opening batsman Abhishek Sharma celebrates his century during the third T20 international against New Zealand in Wellington yesterday. *(AFP)*

An aggressive partnership by Abhishek Sharma and Vaibhav Sooryavanshi propelled India to a six-wicket win and a series victory over New Zealand in Wellington yesterday.

India sewed up the five-match series with two games to spare, chasing down New Zealand's total of 198 in just 13.2 overs, Abhishek blasting 113 and Sooryavanshi 45.

The opening pair combined for a 133-run partnership in just 7.1 overs, obliterating the New Zealand bowling attack with one of the most destructive partnerships in T20 history.

The first Jacob Duffy over went for 26 runs, and the openers never let up.

Abhishek hit nine fours and 11 sixes in his 38-ball knock, receiving a standing ovation when he eventually fell to the bowling of Kyle Jamieson.

By that stage, India had reached 178-2 after just 10 overs.

"Key was pretty simple, that me and Vaibhav enjoy our time," Abhishek said of their partnership.

"When we were fielding, we saw there was some extra bounce. Vaibhav started off well, and we took the momentum from there."

Sooryavanshi was promoted to open alongside Abhishek after batting at number three in the second T20, hitting four fours and four sixes in his 19-ball innings.

"It is not that easy, but it is down to the preparation. Huge shoutout to our coaching staff and our side-arm (bowlers)," Abhishek said

"We had a good practice session yesterday and I just wanted to use it. I manifested this innings, and it happened," he added.

"It is not easy to get a fifty in 12 balls (Yuvraj Singh's record effort in 2007). But we do not think about that, we want to just win the match for our team," Abhishek said.

"Getting 100 in five overs, have not seen that before at the international level," India captain Shreyas Iyer said.

"Credit where it is due, the way they played is exceptional."

India won the toss for the third time in three matches and again elected to bowl.

Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Arshdeep Singh extracted prodigious seam from the pitch, beating the outside edge of New Zealand openers Tim Seifert and Finn Allen.

Seifert was removed top-edging Singh for two, before Daryl Mitchell joined Allen and combined for an 86-run partnership.

Mitchell was quick to assess the conditions and moved around the crease in order to counteract the seam movement.

He seized on any shorter bowling with powerful strikes to the short square boundaries, hitting five fours and five sixes on his way to 89 from 52 balls. Allen made 40 from 25 balls before departing, and Mitchell found another powerful partner in Bevon Jacobs who hit an unbeaten 39 from 23 deliveries.

Mitchell Santner, the New Zealand captain, said yesterday: "Tough to stop those guys. We have seen it in the IPL and witnessed it here tonight. It did a little bit early with the ball. Daryl and Jacobs, getting that partnership in. 200 is a good score. They (India) bowled well at the end."

He added: "Batting has been firing nicely. We now go to Eden Park, which is an even smaller ground, so we need to find ways (of stopping India)."

The fourth T20 is at Auckland's Eden Park on Friday.

BRIEF SCORES
India 199 for 4 in 13.2 overs (Abhishek 113, Sooryavanshi 45, Jamieson 2-45) **beat New Zealand 198 for 3** (Mitchell 89*, Allen 40) **by six wickets**


India's Axar Patel catches New Zealand's Tim Seifert during the third T20 international in Wellington yesterday. *(AFP)*

TENNIS

Osaka unveils crane outfit before beating Paolini in Tokyo

'IT WOULD BE FUN IF YOU WATCH IT AND THEN BE SURPRISED'

AFP
Tokyo

Naomi Osaka paid tribute to her Japanese heritage with a crane pattern outfit before beating Jasmine Paolini 6-3, 7-6 (7/4) in her tournament opener in Tokyo yesterday.

The former world number one is appearing at the Japan Open for the first time in four years and she came onto the court wearing a blue robe with long kimono-like sleeves. She said the crane pattern was a nod to her mother's home in the northern island of Hokkaido and that the occasion "felt like a homecoming".

"It felt like on the fashion side I was always giving these great moments to the Slams, and I felt like coming home I wanted to do something special here too," the four-time Grand Slam winner said.

Osaka is known for grabbing headlines with her flamboyant custom-made outfits. She channelled NBA fashion trailblazer Allen Iverson at the US Open and wore an audacious "jellyfish-inspired" outfit in Australia.

She also drew on her Japanese heritage with a kimono-inspired white dress at Wimbledon.

She said her latest Tokyo outfit was made by the same designer.

Asked if she planned to unveil more outfits this week, she replied: "It would be fun if you watch it and then be surprised."



Japan's Naomi Osaka walks onto the court ahead of her Japan Open match against Italy's Jasmine Paolini at Ariake Coliseum in Tokyo yesterday. *(AFP)*

Osaka's last appearance at the tournament in 2022 ended with her pulling out with abdominal pain before her second-round match.

She has since become a mother, taking 15 months away from the sport after the birth of her daughter Shai before returning in 2023.

The 29-year-old, who is now ranked 18 in the world, said she had "changed a lot" since her last appearance in Tokyo. "In that period of my life I was not panicked but stressed all the time," she said.

"Now I'm pretty calm, and I do think that has to do with my daughter.

"She balances me up and it's made me understand that this is my job."

Osaka had a tough opening assignment against world number 35 Paolini, who won their only previous encounter. Osaka's power and accuracy were too much for the Italian in the first set but the second was a much closer affair.

Osaka said she was "pretty confident going into the tiebreaker" after hitting seven aces in the match.

"I knew my serve was better than her serve," she said.

"I felt like I knew what to do and what not to do."

FOCUS

Rybakina looking to clinch year-end number one in Tokyo

AFP
Tokyo

Elena Rybakina said yesterday that she had "definitely got more attention" since becoming world number one as she looks to clinch the year-end top ranking this week in Japan.

The Moscow-born Kazakh player became world number one for the first time last month after winning the US Open, replacing Aryna Sabalenka at the summit.

The achievement punctuated Rybakina's rise in a year in which she also won the Australian Open in January and now has three Grand Slam career titles.

The 27-year-old said she was exhausted mentally and physically after her US Open win but she bounced back to claim her fourth title of the season last week at the Ningbo Open in China.

She has already secured her place at next month's season-ending WTA Finals at Indian Wells.

Rybakina can also clinch the year-end number one ranking if she beats fellow Kazakh Yulia Putintseva in her first match at the Pan Pacific Open in Tokyo.

"The earlier I can confirm it the better," she said.

"For me it's important just to get some matches and be prepared for the final eight.

"If I can make sure here after a win that I am going to stay number one then great, if not I will have another chance at the final eight."

Rybakina took some time off after the US Open and returned at the China Open, losing to 118th-ranked Alina Charaeva in the first round.

She missed the Wuhan Open with a foot injury before beating Leylah Fernandez in the Ningbo final.

Rybakina said being world number one was not enough to satisfy her.

"It was another goal which I achieved which is great, and now there is another one," she said.

"Definitely I got more attention, no matter where I go, which is nice."

Rybakina said she was still dealing with her foot issue but was "getting better every day".

"After the US Open I didn't do much and in Beijing I wasn't at my best at all," she said.

"Physically, mentally I was really tired so I feel like these tournaments now are really good practice for me."



Top doubles players call on ATP to rethink proposed changes

Leading men's doubles players have called on the ATP Tour to reconsider plans that would reduce the size of the doubles competitions at events and move prize money to the singles format.

In a letter addressed to the ATP board and management and signed by 137 active players, 33 former players and 20 federations, the group said it understood the need for reforms but was deeply concerned about the plans being discussed.

The ATP said this month it was reviewing potential changes to the size of the doubles draws at tournaments as part of its plans for 2028 and beyond, with the freed-up funds going towards singles qualifying and early-round prize money.

"The current plans would shift about $20mn in prize money from doubles to singles, while cutting a significant number of professional opportunities for doubles specialists," the group wrote.

"That shift would make it much harder for talented players to build and sustain a doubles career. A healthy professional sport cannot rely solely on a small group of top stars; it needs pathways for players to develop, compete and earn a living."

Reuters has contacted the ATP for comment.

The governing body of men's tennis said earlier this month doubles will continue to be a core part of the tour and its reviews were focused on identifying a model for its sustainable long-term future.

It added that discussions would continue with the Player Advisory Council. The ATP is set to hold its year-end meetings in Turin next month.

The plans being discussed include cutting the number of doubles teams at elite ATP Masters 1000 events to 16 from 32, with events below that level featuring smaller fields.

Apart from the Grand Slams and Olympic Games, doubles receives much less attention than singles and few top singles players commit to playing the format, though it is hugely popular at club level.

Dutch player Sem Verbeek said the ATP should look after the interests of all its members.

"Tennis is more than a business," the doubles world number 60 said on X.

"It's a legacy built on joy, health and sportsmanship. A sport built on those values should open doors, not close them."

The ATP outlined plans this month to boost its bonus pool to $50mn from $21.5mn, and reshape its rankings and calendar as part of a package aimed at lifting player compensation to $350mn from 2028.

CRICKET

Caribbean muscle sets the tone for Abu Dhabi T10

By Sports Reporter
Abu Dhabi



Sixteen West Indies internationals will be in action in the Abu Dhabi T10, which begins at Zayed Cricket Stadium from November 7 to 20.

When the six franchises built their squads for the new-look Abu Dhabi T10, most of them started in the same place: the Caribbean. Sixteen West Indies internationals will be in action at Zayed Cricket Stadium from November 7 to 20, and every team has at least one. Four of the six icon players, the marquee names, each franchise signed before the draft are West Indian.

Kieron Pollard leads defending champions UAE Bulls. Jason Holder is the face of Yas Lions, Nicholas Pooran captains Royal Desert Champions and Rovman Powell heads Emirates Eagles. Arabian Aces signed Andre Russell before the draft, which makes it five headline names, and United Tigers used the draft to bring in fast-bowling all-rounder Odean Smith.

Pooran was the leading run-getter and player of the tournament in 2022, when he captained Deccan Gladiators to the title with 345 runs and 31 sixes, and he led them to another title in 2024.

By the end of the previous edition of the Abu Dhabi T10, he had launched 137 sixes across seasons, more than any other players. Powell was among the three highest run-scorers in the tournament's history. Akeal Hosein, now with Yas Lions, took five wickets for six runs, including a hat-trick, in Qualifier 1 of the 2023 season.

Some franchises went well beyond one star. UAE Bulls have kept Pollard, Narine and Romario Shepherd together from last season's title-winning squad and added Andre Fletcher at the draft. Royal Desert Champions have surrounded Pooran with Sherfane Rutherford, Brandon King and Keemo Paul. Shimron Hetmyer joins Powell at Emirates Eagles, while Alzarri Joseph and Obed McCoy add West Indian pace to Arabian Aces and Yas Lions.

Pollard also knows how fast a campaign can turn in this format. UAE Bulls won only two of their first six matches last season and came close to going out. They then won four in a row, including all three playoff games, to lift the trophy. With this much hitting power spread across six teams, few totals will feel safe this year.

The tournament opens on November 7 with UAE Bulls against Yas Lions, which puts Pollard and Holder on opposite sides from the first ball. The final will be played on November 20.

LOWER-RANKED TENNIS PLAYERS FEEL MENTAL, PHYSICAL STRAIN AS LONG SEASON NEARS END

Frenchman Terence Atmane's admission that he has been struggling with his mental health after an outburst at this month's Shanghai Masters highlighted the pressures lower-ranked tennis players face as another demanding season draws to a close.

Atmane threw his racket towards the stands and narrowly missed striking fans in a qualifying match before apologising publicly for his conduct and detailing the stress of a sharp drop in his ranking to the edge of the top 100.

The closing weeks of a gruelling 11-month campaign can be particularly difficult for lower-ranked players, as fatigue and poor results collide with the pressure to compete for ranking points and prize money that could transform their prospects.

"I received a lot of hate, which is pretty normal because I deserve it. I've been behaving pretty badly," Atmane said at the Almaty Open last week, where a run to the quarter-finals helped him climb to number 90.

"I was struggling ... the season has been very long. I was struggling with my mental health, so it hasn't been easy, but I was trying to get a fresh start."

'DIFFICULT CYCLE'

Former player and sports psychologist Jeff Greenwald said a long season could leave players tired, mentally stale, negative or emotionally reactive, with those low down the ladder facing an especially tough psychological and financial equation.

"Unlike established players who may have a full team managing their schedules, travel, practice arrangements, and other logistics, lower-ranked players often have limited support," Greenwald told Reuters.

"The financial pressure can be enormous. They have limited resources and may feel they have only a certain window of time to make their investment in professional tennis pay off. Every event represents an opportunity to earn points, improve their ranking and potentially qualify for more lucrative ones.

"This creates a difficult cycle. A player may be exhausted, struggling with confidence, or experiencing signs of burnout yet feel compelled to enter another tournament because taking a break seems financially or professionally risky."

Atmane is not alone, with fellow Frenchman Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard speaking about depression and burnout and saying he travelled to North America after Wimbledon despite not feeling mentally ready to compete.

India's Sumit Nagal, ranked 269, also endured a challenging spell in which he played several tournaments this year while not fully fit, before shifting his focus towards enjoying the game rather than being driven by results.

On the women's tour, Germany's Eva Lys ended her season early to focus on her physical and mental health.

The ATP has proposed changes from 2028 that would reshape the men's calendar and rankings to reduce the incentive to overplay, with a $25 million year-end fund to boost financial support to players finishing inside the top 250.

While those plans could ease the demands on players, Greenwald said that recovery remained an undervalued part of the professional game and should be viewed as vital to sustaining performance through the season.

He added the strain often extends beyond physical and mental fatigue, with a lengthy run of disappointing results potentially eroding confidence when a player's sense of self-belief becomes too closely linked to winning and losing. "Tennis players can become very black-and-white in their thinking," Greenwald added. "They're either winning or losing, succeeding or failing.

"When losses accumulate, they can begin to question not only their game but themselves."

One way of protecting players' confidence is to shift the measure of success towards aspects of performance they can control.

"Rather than measuring success exclusively through wins, losses, rankings or prize money, we track their commitment to the game they're trying to develop," Greenwald added.

"This shifts their attention from outcomes they can't fully control to behaviours they can influence. It also allows them to build a more stable sense of confidence grounded in mastery and commitment rather than the outcome of their last match."

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

Mahrez inspires Shamal to historic win over Hilal

By Sports Reporter
Al Khor

Riyad Mahrez starred for Al Shamal with a sparkling show as the tournament debutants registered a historic 3-1 win against Saudi giants Al Hilal in the AFC Champions League Elite match at Al Bayt Stadium yesterday.

The victory was the first for the Qatari side after draws in their earlier two matches as they moved up to sixth in the West standings on five points, one behind Al Hilal. Al Hilal, meanwhile, lost in the league stage of the AFC Champions League Elite for the first time since the tournament was revamped.

There were uncertainties for Al Hilal at the start of the match as head coach Simone Inzaghi's decision to keep Kalidou Koulibaly, Ollie Watkins and Yassine Bounou on the bench gave Al Shamal the invitation to go on the attack.

It took the home side only eight minutes to slice Al Hilal wide open with incisive passing from their own half that saw Riyad Mahrez relay the ball to Ben Romdhane, who then set up Wesley Said for a low strike that beat Mohammed al-Owais.

Al Hilal looked to respond but had to wait till the 31st minute for the equaliser, Kader Meite held off his marker to release the ball to Salem al-Dawsari, who then sent Theo Hernandez surging up the left flank before arriving into the box to tap in the left-back's return pass.

Al Shamal missed a great chance to go back in front shortly after when Baghdad Bounedjah lifted the ball over al-Owais but Ali Lajami got the slightest of touches to disrupt Mahrez's follow-up header which hit the post.

Al Shamal made a blistering start to the second half and restored their lead within three minutes. Tiago Silva flicked a pass to Mahrez on the right and the Algerian wizard picked out Bounedjah at the near post to steer the ball home from close range.

It got even better for the home side with Mahrez, a two-time AFC Champions League Elite winner with Al Ahli Saudi FC, swinging in a pinpoint free-kick to Romdhane at the back post to guide the ball past Al Owais.

Inzaghi sent on Koulibaly, Watkins and Nasser al-Dawsari as the Italian tactician looked to rescue the tie but the best Al Hilal could muster was a Yusuf Akcicek shot that was straight at Babacar Seck as the four-time Asian champions succumbed to their first defeat in the League Stage.



Al Shamal players celebrate after Baghdad Bounedjah (third right) scored against Al Hilal in the AFC Champions League Elite match at Al Bayt Stadium yesterday.

SPOTLIGHT

Bayern 'risk' reaps huge reward for Kane

Newly-crowned Ballon d'Or winner has struck 156 times in 159 games for Bayern

AFP
London



England and Bayern Munich forward Harry Kane reacts next to Brazil's former striker Ronaldo after receiving the Ballon d'Or award. *(AFP)*

The crowning moment of Harry Kane's career came back in his native city of London, but winning the Ballon d'Or would not have been possible without taking the "risk" of moving to German giants Bayern Munich.

A product of the Tottenham academy, Kane blossomed into the club's all-time record goalscorer, with 280 goals by the time he departed in 2023.

Yet even Kane's firepower could not end Spurs' long wait for silverware as he headed to Bavaria seeking trophies to add to a host of goalscoring records.

The England captain's decision to leave his homeland, with Alan Shearer's record for most Premier League goals in sight, was questioned at the time. And some in Germany doubted the wisdom of paying a reported initial fee of 100mn euros ($112mn) for a 30-year-old.

But the move has proved a spectacular success for both Kane and Bayern. "Making the move to Bayern Munich was a big step in my career. Some people saw it as a risk, but for me it was always about improving," Kane said at the glitzy London gala on Monday. "Being around the teammates I am, the team, the club, has definitely pushed me on to another level."

Kane has plundered goals at an astonishing rate since moving to Germany, without sacrificing his ability to drop deep and also act as a playmaker. In last week's 2-2 draw against Arsenal he scored for a 10th consecutive Champions League game and also provided one of the assists of the season for Alphonso Davies.

Overall, Kane has struck 156 times in 159 games for Bayern, picking up two Bundesliga titles and last season's German Cup in the process. That trophy haul is still scant reward for an outstanding career built on hard work and consistency.

"Work hard in silence. Let success be your noise," Kane posted on social media late. But the move to Bayern has given Kane the platform to be considered among the world's best. "There's no way Harry Kane could have won the Ballon d'Or if he was playing for Tottenham," said former England defender turned pundit Jamie Carragher.

Bayern's domination – they have won 13 of the past 14 titles – means the Bundesliga is often demeaned outside of Germany. But by playing for one of the biggest clubs in the world, Kane is guaranteed to play Champions League football every season, and Bayern often go deep into the competition.

The move has also paid dividends for England. Tottenham's reliance on their talisman meant Kane was forced to push himself to the limit during the exhausting English football schedule, with two domestic cup competitions and no winter break.

By contrast, the Bundesliga takes a three-week break over the festive period and there are only 18 teams, resulting in four fewer league games than in the Premier League. The added bonus for Kane is that Bayern often rest their star names later in the season to keep them fresh for the Champions League.

Kane has captained England in the past five major tournaments, which have ended in defeats in two finals, two semi-finals and a quarter-final. At 33 he still believes he has unfinished business at international level and the extra rest afforded by the Bundesliga could prolong his career.

"To be winning awards like this just shows why I made the move in the first place," said Kane. "There's always ambition, there's always dreams for new achievements, new things. I still have a lot to achieve in this game. The Champions League at club level and to win a major trophy with England is the number one priority for sure. There are so many great things I want to achieve."

Bayern have also been big winners from their investment in Kane. The German club are often overshadowed by Barcelona and Real Madrid in the battle for individual honours but Kane has brought the Ballon d'Or back to Munich for the first time since Karl-Heinz Rummenigge won the award in 1981.

"The club and Harry Kane have got together, grown together and achieved the highest aims together. We are proud that this all-round outstanding sportsman and person is part of our FC Bayern family," said Bayern president Herbert Hainer.

FOCUS

Mbappe apologises for dictator comment after anger in China

AFP
Beijing

Kylian Mbappe apologised after the Real Madrid star was dropped by major Chinese brands for apparently joking about Mao Zedong in a video that has gone viral.

The row deepened when, despite La Liga also apologising, state-owned China Media Group (CMG) said Chinese state television was suspending broadcasts of matches from the Spanish league. The offending video shows Mbappe saying that the funniest internet meme he had seen involving him was of his face photo-shopped onto that of "some guy – I think he's a Chinese dictator".

This was an apparent reference to a meme of Mbappe superimposed on an image of Mao. "My comment was ill-judged, and I now understand that it hurt many people in China and in Chinese communities around the world. I apologise to everyone my words have upset," French forward Mbappe said in a statement in French, Chinese and English.



La Liga said it "deeply regrets the offence that Kylian Mbappe's recent comments have caused among Chinese fans. These comments were made in a personal capacity and do not represent La Liga."

CMG, which oversees public broadcaster CCTV, said it had reached the decision to suspend La Liga broadcasts on Monday before Mbappe and the Spanish league apologised. It also called for Real Madrid to apologise and said such apologies were "an absolute prerequisite" and that nothing would be discussed until they were received.

In China, jokes about Mao, the country's founding leader who died in 1976 – and whose drastic policies are blamed by historians for mass starvation and millions of deaths – remain taboo. Beverage giant Dongpeng, which during this year's World Cup ran adverts with AI-generated images of Mbappe consuming its sport drink, said it was terminating cooperation with the France captain.

Mengniu, China's largest dairy producer, and cheesemaker Milkground also said that they were cutting ties with Mbappe, who until now was hugely popular among Chinese fans with millions of social media followers.

Dongqiudi, one of China's biggest online football outlets, said Mbappe's remarks were "offensive to China and the Chinese people".

In an interview with French sports newspaper L'Equipe, the 27-year-old Mbappe in September addressed a previous meme depicting him as a military dictator. "There's a part of it that's funny... but there is another part that's a bit less funny because of the damage such people have caused throughout history," he said.

China's foreign ministry said it was aware of the reports regarding Mbappe, who on Monday finished runner-up to English forward Harry Kane in the Ballon d'Or award for the world's best player. "Words and actions that hurt the feelings of the Chinese people will naturally be met with unanimous rejection from all sectors of Chinese society," spokesman Guo Jiakun told a regular briefing.

Global sports stars who have commented on sensitive topics such as Taiwan, Tibet and Hong Kong have previously caused controversy in China and been dumped by sponsors. China suspended sponsorship deals with the NBA while the state broadcaster pulled NBA games off Chinese television for a year in October 2019.

This followed Houston Rockets executive Daryl Morey tweeting "Fight for freedom, stand with Hong Kong", referring to protests Beijing called separatist and seditious.

Qatar SC down to Al Riffa in Gulf Champions League

Doha: Qatar SC suffered a heavy 1-4 defeat against Bahrain's Al Riffa in the second round of the Gulf Champions League at Khalifa Sports City Stadium yesterday.

Al Riffa took the lead just 19 seconds into the match through Ali Hassan, but Sebastian Soria restored parity for Qatar SC in the 12th minute. Al Riffa regained the lead through Ali Hussein in the 40th minute before Tayeb Meziani and Nini struck in the 47th and 56th minutes to complete the emphatic victory.

Qatar SC, who tralied 2-1 at half-time, struggled to contain their opponents after the break and conceded twice more.

The defeat left them on one point, while Al Riffa moved to three points.

Today, Al Duhail coach Djamel Belmadi is targeting another victory when his side host Yemen's Shaab Hadramout in the second round at Thani bin Jassim Stadium. "Our goal is to continue our winning run in the tournament, and we are taking tomorrow's match very seriously," the Algerian coach said.

Belmadi said the match would also provide an opportunity to give more players playing time amid several absences, while stressing that his side would focus on their own performance despite limited information about their opponents.

Al Duhail opened their campaign with a convincing victory over Oman's Al Shabab.

Carrick to remain Man United boss for Chelsea clash: Reports

London: Michael Carrick is set to remain in charge of Manchester United for this weekend's Premier League match away to Chelsea, according to media reports.

Carrick's future at Old Trafford has been the subject of intense speculation after a miserable run of eight games without a win. Sunday's 3-0 humbling at home to Bournemouth left the English giants just one point above the Premier League relegation zone.

But many news outlets reported that former United and England midfielder Carrick would take the team to Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

KVARATSKHELIA UNDERGOES 'SUCCESSFUL' SURGERY AT ASPETAR

Khvicha Kvaratskhelia "underwent successful surgery for a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee," his club, Paris Saint-Germain, announced. The Georgian attacker, who finished sixth in Monday's Ballon d'Or, underwent surgery at Aspetar Hospital in Doha, Qatar, and "will now begin his rehabilitation", PSG said.

Kvaratskhelia suffered the injury in PSG's Champions League victory over Barcelona last week. His entourage said last week that "it was difficult" to discuss a return date, but that this type of injury usually sidelines players for at least six months.