



TENNIS | Page 3

Eubanks beats Humbert in Auckland



FOOTBALL | Page 4

I believe in my team, says Al Rayyan star Boli



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GULF TIMES
SPORT



CRICKET

Kohli century powers India to big ODI win over Sri Lanka

Page 2

DAKAR RALLY

Al-Attiyah plays it safe to stay on course for back-to-back titles

Qatari ace holds a lead of 1hr 21min over another Toyota driver Moraes, with Loeb a further 19min in arrears



A rescue helicopter flies over as Toyota driver Nasser al-Attiyah of Qatar and his co-driver Mathieu Baumel of France compete during the ninth stage of the Dakar Rally between Riyadh and Haradh in Saudi Arabia yesterday. *(AFP)*

AFP
Riyadh

Qatari driver Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah's strategy of playing it safe saw him move a step closer to retaining his Dakar Rally title and his fifth in all following yesterday's ninth stage.

The 52-year-old Toyota driver finished eighth 11min 8sec adrift of the stage winner, nine-time world rally champion Sebastien Loeb. However, the pressure further eased on al-Attiyah as his closest pursuer overnight, the South driver African Henk Lategan, suffered a mechanical problem and lost 40 minutes. Al-Attiyah holds a lead of 1hr 21min over another Toyota driver, Brazil's Lucas Moraes, with Loeb a further 19min in arrears.

"Today we did a really good job without any mistakes, without any problems," said al-Attiyah, bidding to become the first back to back winner since Stephane Peterhansel in 2016/17. "We need to take it day by day like this without any problems. We have a big gap now and I hope to finish and to win this Dakar."

Three-time Dakar Rally car champion Carlos Sainz showed gritty determination in ordering a helicopter ambulance to turn around and return him to his stricken car. The 60-year-old's Audi came to grief just six kilometres into the stage and as a precaution he and his co-pilot Lucas Cruz were airlifted to hospital.

"The Spaniard wished to have a chance of resuming the race and demanded that the helicopter ambulance turn round and drop him back at his car," race organisers Amaury Sport Organisation said in a statement. The two-time world rally champion had lost all hope of a fourth title last Friday when a front wheel came off in an accident. Despite suffering from chest pain as a result of the mishap he insisted on carrying on and started yesterday's stage languishing in 100th spot, over 29 hours in arrears of al-Attiyah.

Earlier Argentinian rider Luciano Benavides, younger brother of title contender Kevin, won the stage in the motorcycling category. The 27-year-old Husqvarna motorcyclist secured his second stage win of this year's race as he timed 1min 2sec faster over the 358-kilometre special than Australian Toby Price on a KTM.

Overall leader Skyler Howes of the United States was third, 2min 57sec off the pace set by the stage winner. Howes retains the overall lead for a fifth successive day but he enjoys a razor-thin advantage over Price of three seconds as the ultimate test of endurance enters its decisive stages with the climax on Sunday. "It was a demanding stage, for sure, with lots of water," said Howes. "It was super crazy. We were going through giant rivers in the middle of the desert. So now we head all the way down to the Empty Quarter and I assume it's going to be the same, with more and more challenges down there."

Kevin Benavides is not out of the mix either as he sits in third spot, 5min 9sec adrift. However, there were two big losers on Tuesday – Frenchman Adrien van Beveren and fourth stage winner Joan Barreda of Spain. Van Beveren finds himself over 15 minutes off Howes, having started the day under three minutes shy of the leader, due to getting lost on the first part of the stage. For Barreda, though, there is no coming back as the Spaniard was airlifted to hospital with back pain following a crash on his Honda. Howes said it was a "bummer" to see Barreda lying prone in the sand.

STAGE 9 RESULTS

1 Sebastien Loeb/Fabian Lurquin (Bahrain Raid Xtreme) 3h05m14s
2 Vaidotas Zala/Paulo Fiuza (Teltonika Racing) +3m07s
3 Guerlain Chicherit/Alex Winocq (GCK Motorsport) +4m18s
4 Mattias Ekstrom/Emil Bergkvist (Team Audi Sport) +7m21s
5 Romain Dumas/Max Delfino (Rebellion Racing) +9m48s
6 Kuba Przygonski/Armand Monleon (X-raid Mini JCW) +10m33s
7 Giniel de Villiers/Dennis Murphy (Toyota Gazoo Racing) +11m05s
8 Nasser al-Attiyah/Mathieu Baumel (Toyota Gazoo Racing) +11m08s
9 Sebastian Halpern/Bernardo Graue (X-raid Mini JCW) +12m18s
10 Lucas Moraes/Timo Gottschalk (Overdrive Racing) +12m43s

OVERALL STANDINGS

1 Al-Attiyah/Baumel (Toyota Gazoo Racing) 34h19m20s
2 Moraes/Gottschalk (Overdrive Racing) +1h21m57s
3 Loeb/Lurquin (Bahrain Raid Xtreme) +1h43m08s
4 Henk Lategan/Brett Cummings (Toyota Gazoo Racing) +1h46m23s
5 De Villiers/Murphy (Toyota Gazoo Racing) +2h04m17s
6 Dumas/Delfino (Rebellion Racing) +2h25m51s
7 Martin Prokop/Viktor Chytka (Orlen Benzima Team) +2h45m36s
8 Brian Baragwanath/Leonard Cremer (Century Factory) +2h48m06s
9 Wei Han/Ma Li (Hanwei Motorsport Team) +3h32m15s
10 Juan Cruz Yacopini/Dani Oliveras Carreras (Overdrive Racing) +3h52m52s

ARABIAN GULF CUP

Bahrain come from goal down to beat Qatar

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar went down to Bahrain 1-2 in their second group stage match of the Arabian Gulf Cup at the Al Minaa Olympic Stadium in Basra, Iraq, yesterday. The young side were gunning for their second successive win – after 2-0 victory over Kuwait in the opener – and a place in the semi-finals.

But defending champions Bahrain came back from a goal down to keep their unbeaten record against Qatar in the Gulf Cup intact, having not lost to them in the regional competition since 2002. Qatar, missing many senior players and under temporary Portuguese coach Bruno Pinheiro – controlled the possession but two costly errors from Mohamed Waad cost them the game.

Waad had a hand in Qatar's goal in the 34th minute with the midfielder's cross nodded in by Ahmed Alaaeldin. But Waad was left helpless as Kamil al-Aswad shot took a deflection off his right foot and went to the net. Waad's night ended in more agony when he conceded a penalty with a handball in 89th minute. Abdulla Yusuf Helal converted the penalty as Bahrain moved one step closer to semi-final spot.

Bahrain are top of Group B on six points, with Qatar second on three points. Kuwait, who edged past the United Arab Emirates earlier, are also on three points. Qatar next take on already-eliminated UAE on Friday, while Bahrain face Kuwait.



Qatar's Ahmed Alaaeldin scores of a header during Arabian Gulf Cup Group B match against Bahrain at the Al Minaa Olympic Stadium in Basra, Iraq, yesterday.

"We will rectify our mistakes and come back strongly in our next match," Qatar captain Ismaeel Mohamed said after the match. "Losing is part of the game and I am confident that the team will play well to reach far in the tournament. One defeat doesn't mean we are out; in fact it will help us improve. We played well in our first match and this defeat will not affect our confidence. I am hopeful that the team will bounce back," he added.



Qatar coach Bruno Pinheiro during the match against Bahrain. *(Reuters)*

Bahrain, under Coach Helio Sousa, showed they have the quality to retain the title. After a disappointing World Cup qualification campaign last year, the team looks settled and has plenty of experience.

Sousa was pleased with yesterday's win. "We were good from the start. Our desire was great to win and the players managed to come away with the full points. Yes, there are young players playing for the first time but they deserve this opportunity. These matches will help in their development. The best achievement in my career with Bahrain was winning the Gulf Cup in 2019, which brought out many promising players after that," the Portuguese manager said.

Earlier, UAE crashed out of the tournament after following a last-gasp defeat to Kuwait. Rodolfo Arruabarrena's side, who opened their Group B campaign on Saturday with a 2-1 defeat to holders Bahrain, were beaten 1-0.

An own goal by captain Walid Abbas in stoppage time ended the UAE's hopes of a third title. The defender turned in Ahmad al-Dhefiri free-kick to leave Emiratis heartbroken. The result leaves the UAE, champions in 2007 and 2013, unable to qualify for the semi-finals by dint of their head-to-head record with the other sides.

SPORT

CRICKET

Kohli ton powers India to big ODI win over Sri Lanka

'I thought I was hitting the ball nicely. It was close to the template I play with'

AFP
Guwahati, India


India's Virat Kohli plays a cover drive during the first one-day international match against Sri Lanka in Guwahati yesterday. *(AFP)*

Virat Kohli yesterday said playing "without any fear" remains key to success after his 45th one-day international century led India to a 67-run win over Sri Lanka in the opening match. Kohli hammered 113 off 87 balls to drive India to 373-7 after they were invited to bat first at the start of the three-match series in Guwahati.

Skipper Rohit Sharma (83) and fellow opener Shubman Gill (70) put on 143 runs to lay the foundations of the mammoth total. The bowlers, led by Mohamed Siraj, then restricted Sri Lanka to 306-8 to give India a 1-0 lead in the series.

Skipper Dasun Shanaka top-scored with an unbeaten 108 after opening batsman Pathum Nissanka hit 72 but the knocks could only reduce the margin of loss for the tourists. Kohli, who survived two dropped catches on 52 and 81, stood out with his 73rd ton across all formats as he let out a roar and took off his helmet to bask in the stadium's applause. "My preparation and intent always remain the same," man of the match Kohli said. "I thought I was hitting the ball nicely. It was close to the template I play with."

The former captain has hit two successive ODI hundreds since coming out of an extended lean patch last year when he spoke about his mental struggles during the phase.

"The one thing I learnt was desperation doesn't get you anywhere," Kohli said on lessons learnt during his slump in form.

"You go out there and play without any fear. You go out there playing for the right reasons and almost play every game like it's your last and just be happy about it. I can't hold on to things, the game is going to move on. I am not going to play forever. I am in a happy space and enjoying my game."

He finally fell to third-time-lucky quick Kasun Rajitha, who was also bowling when wicketkeeper Kusal Mendis and Shanaka dropped the star batsman.

Gill hit three successive boundaries off debutant left-arm quick Dilshan Madushanka in the fourth over and Rohit smashed two sixes and a four off Rajitha to begin the charge on a batting-friendly pitch. Rohit, who returned to captain the side after missing India's 2-1 T20I series win, reached his fifty with a four and Gill raised his half-century a short time later.

Gill took on Dunith Wellalage with three successive fours in one over before he fell lbw in the next to Shanaka's medium-pace bowling.

Rohit attempted to keep up the attack with regular boundaries but Madushanka cut short his knock with a length ball that bowled the Indian skipper off an inside edge. The rest of the innings belonged to Kohli, who is now four ODI tons away from batting icon Sachin Tendulkar's all-time record of 49.

In reply, Sri Lanka were never in the chase after losing two early wickets including Mendis bowled for a duck off Siraj. Nissanka attempted to give some life to the chase with his fighting knock and a 72-run fourth-wicket stand with Dhananjaya de Silva, who made 47.

Sri Lanka slipped to 206-8 in the 38th over but Shanaka stretched the match till the final ball with an unbeaten 100-run stand with Rajitha.

Shanaka reached his second ODI century with a four on the penultimate ball and ended the match with a six. The skipper said he is doing the "basics well". Umran Malik took three wickets with his express pace. The second match is tomorrow at Kolkata's Eden Gardens.

BRIEF SCORES

India 373-7 in 50 overs (V. Kohli 113, R. Sharma 83, S. Gill 70; K. Rajitha 3-88)
beat Sri Lanka 306-8 in 50 overs (P. Nissanka 72, D de Silva 47, D. Shanaka 108 not out; M. Siraj 2-30, U. Malik 3-57)
Toss: Sri Lanka
Result: India won by 67 runs
Series: India lead 3-match series 1-0

HORSE RACING

Al Ghazali Stud's Sha'alan wins Athbah Cup


Jockey Hugo Besnier leads Sha'alan to Athbah Cup victory at Al Uqda Equestrian Complex yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Jockey Hugo Besnier guided Al Ghazali Stud's Sha'alan to Athbah Cup victory – the feature event of Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's (QREC) 7th Al Uqda Meeting at Al Uqda Equestrian Complex yesterday.

The five-year-old gelding eased to one-and-a-half length win over Shamlowl, ridden by Lukas Delozier, to claim the 1400m race in the delayed meeting, which was scheduled to be held on Saturday but was postponed due to rain. The Purebred Arabian Premium Maiden victory completed a double for Besnier and trainer Mohamed Ghazali with five-year-old Manakel reigning supreme in 1,400m Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate earlier yesterday. Also, Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki-trained High And Wide emerged winner after a thrilling battle in Thoroughbred Handicap 65-85 with Tomas Lukasek in the saddle.

RESULTS

1. Athbah Cup - Purebred Arabian Premium Maiden
Sha'alan, Mohamed Ghazali, Hugo Besnier
2. Thoroughbred Handicap 65-85 (Class 4)
High And Wide, Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, Tomas Lukasek
3. Thoroughbred Handicap 0-75 (Class 5)
Black Granite, Khalifa Hamed Nasser al-Sawai, Saleh Salem al-Marri
4. Purebred Arabian Handicap 0-75
Jefred, Hamad al-Jehani, Arnaud De Lepine
5. Thoroughbred Maiden Plate (3yo only) (Class 6)
Al Muheeb, Bader al-Balushi, Soufiane Saadi
6. Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate (Fillies & Mares)
Manakel, Mohamed Ghazali, Hugo Besnier
7. Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate (3yo only)
Soomia, Alban Elie De Mieulle, Ronan Thomas


Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club Racing Manager Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi (centre) with the connections of Sha'alan.

WOMEN'S WORLD CUP

Lanning, Healy spearhead Australia squad

AFP
Sydney

Australia named a powerhouse squad yesterday to defend their women's Twenty20 World Cup title, spearheaded by Meg Lanning, Ellyse Perry and a fit-again Alyssa Healy.

The five-time champions are heavy favourites for the tournament in South Africa next month with their ranks boosted further by the return of leg-spinner Georgia Wareham after a long injury-related layoff. Wicketkeeper Healy has been struggling with calf problem suffered in December in India, but was also named in the 15-women squad and is expected to play

Australia crushed India by 85 runs in front of more than 86,000 fans at the Melbourne Cricket Ground to win the T20 World Cup in 2020. Lanning once again leads the side after ending an indefinite months-long break late last month, allaying fears that she had played her last international.

The record-breaking 30-year-old announced she was stepping away from the game in August, to "focus on myself" after leading Australia to a hectic string of successes. "It's always tough to narrow a squad down to just 15 players, but we're confident we've picked a well-balanced side," said national selector Shawn Flegler.

"Meg Georgia bring a wealth of experience to the group, which is always crucial during major tournaments. Georgia in particular, has had a tough run of injuries, but she's shown a great deal of resilience and her return is a real boost for the side."

Australia will begin their World Cup defence on February 12 against New Zealand before pool games against Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and South Africa. Australia will warm-up with home T20 and one-day series against Pakistan before travelling to South Africa.

Australia squad: Meg Lanning (capt), Alyssa Healy, Darcie Brown, Ashleigh Gardner, Kim Garth, Heather Graham, Grace Harris, Jess Jonassen, Alana King, Tahlia McGrath, Beth Mooney, Ellyse Perry, Megan Schutt, Annabel Sutherland, Georgia Wareham

QMMF teams to take part in 24H Dubai endurance


Six Qatari drivers, representing two teams, namely QMMF Thuraya and QMMF Suhail, will be in action at the 18th Hankook 24H Dubai endurance race at the Dubai Autodrome from January 14-15. The two teams are backed by Ministry of Sports and Youth, Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF), Porsche Center Qatar (Al Buraq) who are the exclusive agent for Porsche in the country, and Lusail International Circuit. Team QMMF Thuraya (includes Abdulla al-Khelaifi, Ghanim al-Ali and Ibrahim Abdulghani, while Abdullah al-Abbasi, Ibrahim al-Mannai and AbdulAziz al-Jabri will drive for QMMF Suhail. This year's race, the 18th edition of the prestigious endurance event, will flag off at 3pm on Saturday and will run uninterrupted until 3pm on the following day. More than 42 teams with 54 cars and 226 different drivers across the GT3, GTX and TCR categories will be in action during the event.

BEACH VOLLEYBALL

King of the Court from today at Aspire Zone


Qatari duo Ahmed Tijan and Cherif Younousse will defend their crown at the King of the Court.

For the second year in a row, the Aspire Zone will play host to the King of the Court Crown Series Finals from January 11-14 in Doha. The absolute best will be ready to chase the crown with Ahmed Tijan and Cherif Younousse defending their crown.

The field in the men's tournament is of regal stature. The defending champions Tijan and Younousse – one of the top teams in the world and bronze medal winners of Tokyo 2020 – will start as frontrunners. . In 2022, the duo never finished outside of the top-9 in any tournament – winning an elite-16 event, a challenge event and the Asian championships. It all started with the Crown Series Finals of 2021 in January, they're here to start the season once again on a high.

"It's going to be a good challenge for us. It's going to be tough, I don't know how many top teams will come. We're looking forward to be 100% and enjoy the lovely format, the atmosphere," Younousse said.

"You need to be the best server, you need to be the best side-outer. It's hard for everyone. The most important thing is the serving and side-out. For me it's tough to say who will win, the best servers, they will win the event for sure. There's no tactic, you can't study anything. Because you don't have time. You need to get in there and then learn quickly how the teams play. It's hard to say who is the best team, because in every King of the Court event since it started, there is a different champion. The champion of this event will not be the champions of the next. Everything is changing, it's hard to say who is the best," he added.

Secondly, the winners in Utrecht in 2021 and runners-up of the European Finals in Utrecht 2022 David Ahman and Jonatan Hellvig will want to better their third place from last year in Doha. Estonian Kusti Nolvak is ready to win another King of the Court medal, he chases the gold with Dmitri Korotkov. Alexander Brouwer and Robert Meeuwsen will be hoping for another spot on the podium and 2021 Hamburg King Bartosz Losiak has his sights set on a new crown as well.

In the women's, Isabel Schneider, who won last year in Qatar alongside Sandra Ittlinger, is participating with a new Julia Sude. Maria Belen Carro is the Utrecht 2021 champions and she teams up with Angela Lobato and 2022 Hamburg winner Pleun Ypma will be giving her all together with Emma Piersma. Anouk Verge-Depre will hunt the crown together with Mania Bentele again, with whom she reached the final in Utrecht this season.

FOOTBALL

FIFA Technical Experts Workshop kicks off

QNA
Doha

FIFA Technical Experts Workshop kicked off in Doha for the third year in a row, with the participation of 24 technical experts from the various national federations under the umbrella of the FIFA, to discuss the technical leadership development programs that FIFA will implement in 2023 and beyond.

Secretary-General of Qatar Football Association (QFA) Mansoor al-Ansari indicated that Qatar's hosting of these international events reflects its commitment to positively contributing to the development of technical expertise in the region and the world.

It also stresses that Qatar has become an important sports centre in the world of football, especially since it has previously succeeded in hosting many major events, the latest of which is the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, in addition to many FIFA workshops.

The workshop activities continue on a daily basis from 11am-7:30pm, and it is the third time in a row - in the history of FIFA - that Doha hosts the technical experts' workshop.

The workshop is attended by highly experienced coaches from the FIFA coaches and lecturers team, in addition to a group of technical managers and directors of football development in the continental federations, with the participation of a number of international coaches.

The workshop will last for 5 days.



The FIFA Technical Experts Workshop that is currently on in Doha.



TENNIS

Plucky Eubanks beats Humbert in Auckland battle

The tournament has returned after a two-year break due to Covid-19 pandemic

Reuters
Auckland

Ugo Humbert's three-year reign as Auckland Open champion came to an end yesterday as Christopher Eubanks defeated the Frenchman 7-6(4) 7-6(3) with sixth-seeded American John Isner also exiting the Australian Open warm-up tournament in the first round.

Humbert won the event, his first success on the ATP tour, when it was last played in 2020 but lost out to the American qualifier in a pair of tiebreaks.

"I was playing some pretty good balls throughout the course of the match and I think being comfortable and playing a lot of tiebreakers in a lot of my games showed a pretty good effect today, so I'm pretty happy," said Eubanks.

The Auckland Open has returned after a two-year break due to the Covid-19 pandemic but yesterday's matches were moved indoors and played without fans due to the impending arrival of Cyclone Hale.

The day opened with Isner, a semi-finalist at Wimbledon in 2018, crashing out when he lost in three sets to Gregoire Barrere. Barrere won the tie 6-7(3), 7-6(5), 6-3 to overcome the big-serving American, who was defeated despite firing down 56 aces.

Eubanks will next face Belgium's David Goffin while Barrere meets fellow Frenchman Constant Lestienne in the second round.

Meanwhile, Australia's Alex de Minaur continued his impressive early season form by defeating former world number three Dominic Thiem 6-4 6-4 in the Kooyong Classic exhibition event.

The win comes a week after de Minaur defeated defending Australian Open champion Rafa Nadal at the United Cup in Sydney.



Chris Eubanks of the US celebrates defeating defending champion Ugo Humbert of Farnce at the Auckland Open in Auckland yesterday. Eubanks won 7-6 (4) 7-6 (3).

THIEM SAYS BODY HAS HEALED

Dominic Thiem, the 2020 US Open champion, will play at the Australian Open, where he was a finalist in 2020, after gaining a wildcard entry as he continues his comeback from a wrist injury. "The body is good and has healed, last year was a good step in the right direction," said the Austrian, who pushed Novak Djokovic to five sets in the 2020 Australian Open final. "I hope I can continue in that direction this year, hopefully the Open is a good start."

The former world number three has shown encouraging signs on his return to the tour, rising from outside the top 350 to breach the top 100 this week after semi-final runs last year at Gstaad, Gijon and Antwerp. His rapid ranking rise meant he only narrowly missed directly qualifying for the main draw of the Australian Open, which starts in Melbourne on Monday. But he was handed a wildcard entry and after twice fighting back from a break down against De Minaur, remains optimistic about his chances.

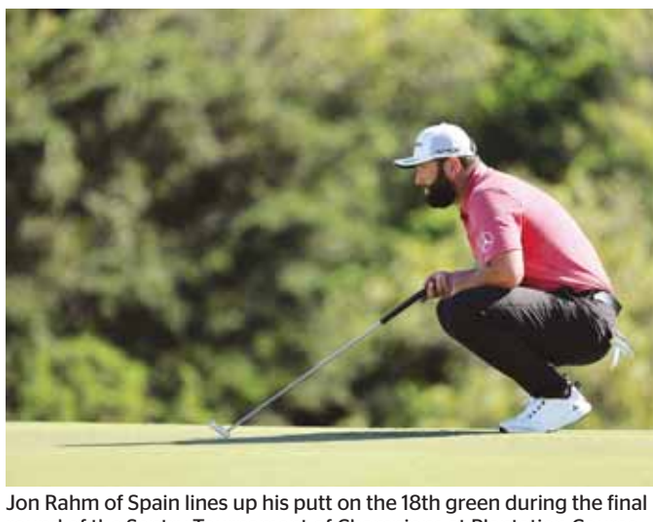
"I'm ready to go at the Grand Slam but I don't know how good I am at the moment," he said. "It's very difficult to go deep in a Slam, all of the players are on a high level. But I had a good preparation so I should be ready - we'll see."

He added that the injury was "an interesting experience, probably every top athlete will face at least one major injury during a career". "My wildcard is a big honour and also a big possibility (to do well). If I have the chance to make some damage, we will see if I can make that happen," he said. "I'm glad I've left my injury behind, the body feels good."


Dominic Dominic

GOLF

Spain's Jon Rahm questions rankings system after third win in five starts


Jon Rahm of Spain lines up his putt on the 18th green during the final round of the Sentry Tournament of Champions at Plantation Course at Kapalua Golf Club on Sunday in Lahaina, Hawaii. *(AFP)*

Reuters
Hawaii

Jon Rahm believes he is currently the "best player in the world" after a red-hot streak of three tournament wins in five starts, and has questioned the methodology of calculating the golf rankings where he remains number five in the world.

The former US Open champion won the Sentry Tournament of Champions in Hawaii over the weekend with a comeback for the ages when he overhauled Collin Morikawa's seven-shot lead in the final round.

Having also won the Spanish Open and DP World Tour Championship, former number one Rahm was hoping to at least move past Patrick Cantlay into fourth spot but still finds himself in fifth place.

"Since the pla-yoffs... I've won three times and I don't even get close to him. So I'm trying to understand what's going on," Rahm said.

"Had they not changed the world ranking points (system) I would have been pretty damn close (to world number one) right now. But in my mind, I feel like since August I've been the best player in the world.

"Earlier in the year clearly Scottie (Scheffler) was that player, then Rory (McIlroy) was that player, and I feel like right now it's been me.

"Anybody, any given year can get a hot three, four months and get to that spot."

Last year, Rahm had described the revamped world rankings system as "laughable" when priority was placed on the depth of the field rather than the ranks of the players involved.

McIlroy remains at the top of the rankings followed by Masters champion Scheffler, Open winner Cameron Smith and Cantlay.

Rahm still walked away pocketing $2.7mn from the $15mn purse in Hawaii.

LATEST WORLD RANKINGS

Rank	Country	Golfer	Earnings	Events
1	NIR	Rory McIlroy	$1,890,000	46
2	USA	Scottie Scheffler	$969,895	53
3	AUS	Cameron Smith	–	39
4	USA	Patrick Cantlay	$953,000	39
5	ESP	Jon Rahm	$3,162,000	45
6	USA	Xander Schauffele	$297,000	44
7	USA	Will Zalatoris	$292,500	45
8	USA	Justin Thomas	$251,763	46
9	ENG	Matthew Fitzpatrick	$558,506	51
10	NOR	Viktor Hovland	$940,430	53

FOCUS

Kyrgios has last laugh as Djokovic clash sells out stadium in minutes

Reuters
Melbourne

Nick Kyrgios took a cheeky dig at his critics after tickets for Friday's practice match with Serb Novak Djokovic sold out in 58 minutes, proving the Australian's huge box office draw.

Kyrgios had pulled out of the United Cup with an injury just minutes before his pre-tournament press conference, drawing the ire of Australian co-captain Lleyton Hewitt, his team mates and the media.

The 27-year-old has not played since October and an ankle injury forced him to skip warm-up tournaments in Adelaide as well, before Djokovic offered to play him in a practice match that will be played at Melbourne's Rod Laver Arena.

"Wow Nick Kyrgios is bad for the sport! Wow what a disgrace, a national embarrassment! How dare he sell out another stadium, the arrogance," Kyrgios said in a sarcastic tweet yesterday.

Former American player Noah Rubin questioned the timing of the exhibition match just before a Grand Slam to which Kyrgios responded: "Well to be fair it will bring more crowd than any of your matches."

Tickets for the match, a repeat of last year's Wimbledon final, were priced at A$20 ($14) each with the proceeds going to the Australian Tennis Foundation.

The Australian Open begins on Monday.

KREJCIKOVA SHAKES OFF THE RUST, KUDERMETOVA OUTLASTS AZARENKA

Former French Open champion Barbora Krejcikova made a stuttering start to her 2023 season in the opening round of the Adelaide International 2 yesterday, shaking off the rust in a 6-2 7-6(3) victory over Alison Riske-Amritraj.

The 27-year-old Czech, a quarter-finalist at the Australian Open last year, was one of the form players on the WTA Tour in the latter end of last season after she returned from an elbow injury to win titles at Tallinn and Ostrava.

The former world number two was clearly not at her very best against the American lucky loser and needed a tiebreak to finally finish off her opponent after being broken when serving for the match.

World number nine Veronika Kudermetova is another player who came into the new season with high expectations and she showed why when she rallied from 3-0 down in the second set tiebreak to beat Victoria Azarenka 2-6 7-6(4) 6-4.

Azarenka needed treatment on a sore neck in the third set but Kudermetova had to battle it out for nearly three hours in sweltering heat to beat the twice Australian Open champion.

"I am really happy with this win," said the 25-year-old Russian. "Vika is a Grand Slam champion and for me, it is very important to play that kind of player and beat them. With every win, I get a little bit more confidence."

The 2017 French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko had a less successful day, going down 6-3 6-4 to Russian qualifier Anna Kalinskaya. Spain's Paula Badosa, the 2021 French Open quarter-finalist, defeated Estonian Anett Kontaveit 6-4 6-3 and set up a last-16 meeting with Kaia Kanepi, who earlier beat Australian Storm Hunter.

Former Australian Open champion Sofia Kenin was in action at the other warm-up for the year's first Grand Slam and looked in good touch as she beat China's Zhu Lin 6-2 6-2 in the opening round of the Hobart International.

It was a bad day for two other former Hobart champions with French third seed Alize Cornet crashing out in a 6-4 6-2 loss to Elisabetta Cocciaretto and 2017 and 2018 champion Elise Mertens losing 6-4 6-4 to qualifier Maryna Zanevska.

QNB STARS LEAGUE

We will strive to be at our best, says Al Sadd coach Juanma

'From now on, we need to win all matches. The Qatar Clasico against Al Rayyan is the start for us and we have to win this match. There are no other options'





Al Sadd coach Juan Manuel Lillo Juanma (left) and his Al Rayyan counterpart Nicolas Cordova during two separate press conferences ahead of today's QNB Stars League clash at Al Gharafa Stadium.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Sadd coach Juan Manuel Lillo Juanma yesterday said his team will be aiming to deliver a winning performance against arch-rivals Al Rayyan today.

Juanma was speaking to the media ahead of their 2022-2023 season QNB Stars League Week 9 match against Al Rayyan (Qatar Clasico).

"Now we miss another large group of players who are with the national team in the Gulf Cup. The team must be stronger with the return of some players and we will strive to be at our best," Juanma said yesterday.

"Looking at the 2022 FIFA World Cup from our point of view, we were more enthusiastic and passionate because we had a large number of players in the tournament.

"Regarding training, we had to complete the team with young players for more than a month and a half and, despite that, I think it was good.

"We will face a good competitor with good players, it will be a very difficult match and we need to see what the situation of our team will be with the absence of many players who are still with the national team. At the same time, some have returned but at different times, so we have to see how the situation is.

Al Sadd player Jung Woo-Young said yesterday: "We will play in the upcoming matches of the league championship with full force after the return of most of the team members who represented their countries in the World Cup. Before the World Cup, we lost many points and now it is time to add points to our tally.

"From now on, we need to win all matches. The Qatar Clasico against Al Rayyan is the start for us and we have to win this match. There are no other options.

"Ahead of the World Cup, we did not have the services of Qatar national team players and many young players gained experience and this is a good thing for the team. Now, the national team players have returned and we can play in a better way like last season as we used to and we need to win all matches."

Al Rayyan coach Nicolas Cordova warned his players to be ready for a tough match.

"After winning, the work will be different and the most important thing is that we know that we will face a very strong competitor, one of the strongest teams in the league. And we must be in the best readiness to provide the best performance. We must know that the team is suffering especially on the front of professional players," Cordova said

"The winter transfer period is an opportunity to strengthen the team. We have a shortage of foreign professional players, especially in the offensive line, and we must include players. We also have a shortage at the level of local players and we need three players to strengthen the defence.

"We have an absence of players who are with Al Annabi in the Gulf Cup, four players in the player development project in Europe and some others in the youth team who are very important to us. We miss a large number of players, be they local or foreign professionals, and the lack of players was one of the reasons for the team's low position in the table and it is difficult to compete in their absence.

"Winning (over Al Sailiya) is a great incentive to prepare for the match in a better way. With accuracy and high quality in training and match, we hope that we will be ready for this match and win," said Cordova.

Al Rayyan goalkeeper Ivanildo Rodriguez said yesterday: "We are ready, and the team has prepared well, and we know that this match is very important. We will miss an important player in Dame Traore, but we hope to perform well in this game."

In other matches today, Al Duhail face Umm Salal (4:20pm) at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium while Qatar SC face Al Gharafa at the same venue (6:30pm).

INTERVIEW

I believe in my team, says Al Rayyan's striker Yohan Boli

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The 2022-2023 season QNB Stars League's Week 9 will witness the high-profile Qatar Clasico between Al Rayyan and Al Sadd, which always evokes great interest on and off the field. And Al Rayyan are strongly preparing for the contest.

Al Rayyan, under the tutelage of Chilean Nicolas Cordova, recorded their first league victory this season last week when they beat Al Sailiya 2-0. The big question now is 'will The Lions be able to build on it and earn a respectable finish in the QNB Stars League'?

Ivorian star **Yohan Boli**, who has been one of the lead attackers of Al Rayyan for a few seasons now, gave his takes on the QNB Stars League in general and Qatar Clasico in particular, in an Exclusive Interview.

Al Rayyan are in good form now, having resumed the QNB Stars League with a convincing win over Al Sailiya. How do you see it?

Yes, I believe in my team. We resumed the league competition after a long break, which saw Qatar hosting the FIFA World Cup. It's good that we started again in good fashion and now we're all focused on the next matches.

Do you think the team can maintain the momentum the rest of the season?

Yes, we can. We're capable of sustaining the momentum. Having registered our first league victory this season, we feel we can build on it and score more wins and points, which we need the most at this stage, starting from the Qatar Clasico.

How do you look forward to the Qatar Clasico against Al Sadd?

Like I said, we're focused on this game. We'll prepare for all games like a final, so Al Sadd or whoever the opponents, we try to win all games.

How do you approach the game, in terms of preparations?

Like in all weeks, we work hard to be ready for the next battle. We hope to translate our training and preparations into good performance on the pitch and thus make up for the lost points in the early rounds.

What're your expectations of this season's first Qatar Clasico?

Like in every season, this game is special. Obviously for so many reasons. It's a Clasico, so yes we've to win for ourselves and also for our passionate fans.

What makes this game more special than the other QNB Stars League games?

Because it's Qatar Clasico, it's simple like that. Fans are eagerly waiting for this game especially. It's a great motivation for the competing clubs, players and everyone involved.

What targets have you set for yourself and with Al Rayyan this season?

We couldn't start the season well, so we take it game by game. We hope to make progress as the season progresses and we've to see at the end of the season where we stand.

How do you feel representing a club like Al Rayyan, which has great tradition and achievements?

It's always an honour to be a part of this team and wear this special shirt in every game. It's true that we haven't had a good start to the season. But in the New Year, we really want to forget the first part of the season and give a smile to the entire Al Rayyan family with solid performances.



FOCUS

Messi set for first PSG tie since World Cup victory

AFP
Paris



Paris Saint-Germain's Argentine forward Lionel Messi attends a training session at PSG's training centre Le Camp des Loges in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, outside Paris, yesterday. *(AFP)*

Lionel Messi is expected to make his first appearance for Paris Saint-Germain since his World Cup triumph in a Ligue 1 clash at home against Angers today, as the Qatar-owned club look to tie the Argentine down to a new contract.

The 35-year-old took part in training with his teammates yesterday, a little over three weeks after inspiring Argentina to victory over France on penalties in an epic World Cup final in Qatar.

He was granted a two-week holiday back in his home country following the tournament, before returning to Paris and being given a guard of honour at PSG's training ground last Wednesday.

The seven-time Ballon d'Or winner, who scored 12 goals in 19 games this season for his club prior to the World Cup, did not take part in PSG's win at third-tier side Chateauroux in the French Cup at the weekend.

But he could start as the Ligue 1 leaders play host to an Angers side who are bottom of the table and have lost their last nine league outings.

How Messi approaches the second half of the campaign in France after a career-defining World Cup will be closely observed, with his initial two-year deal in Paris coming to an end.

However, the Qatar-owned club are in talks to extend his contract with coach Christophe Galtier insisting the former Barcelona star is settled in the French capital.

"I know there are talks and that the club has spoken to Leo but I don't know where they are at," Galtier told reporters yesterday.

"Leo seems to me to be happy in Paris and I think there is a real desire on behalf of the club to extend Leo's contract," added Galtier, who said that Luis Campos, PSG's football advisor, was in discussions with Messi's representatives along with president Nasser al-Khelaifi.

Kylian Mbappe, scorer of a hat-trick for France in the World Cup final, may again be rested for PSG's midweek game after missing their French Cup victory as he took a holiday in New York along with teammate Achraf Hakimi.

Neymar has been getting treatment on the ankle injury he suffered playing for Brazil at the World Cup, while Italy midfielder Marco Verratti is out for a PSG side who suffered their first defeat of the season in their last league outing at Lens on New Year's Day.

Nketiah double sends Arsenal into FA Cup clash with Man City



Arsenal's Eddie Nketiah celebrates scoring the third goal during their FA Cup third-round match against Oxford United at Kassam Stadium in Oxford on Monday. *(AFP)*

Oxford, United Kingdom: Eddie Nketiah scored twice as Arsenal set up an FA Cup fourth-round clash away to Manchester City after seeing off third-tier Oxford United 3-0 on Monday.

Mohamed Elneny's header opened the floodgates at the Kassam Stadium after the Premier League leaders failed to make the breakthrough for over an hour.

Nketiah then sealed the win by taking his tally to four goals in as many games since the World Cup break.

"We had to up the level as it wasn't good enough from us in the first half and I think we did that in the second," said Nketiah.

"It's not the best draw but we're up for it."

Mikel Arteta named a strong side featuring his preferred front three in the absence of the injured Gabriel Jesus as Bukayo Saka and Gabriel Martinelli flanked Nketiah in attack.

Arsenal were dominant in possession before the break but struggled to create any clear-cut chances and were further frustrated by the decision not to award a penalty for handball when Elliott Moore blocked Albert Sambi Lokonga's effort. Fabio Vieira was one of those not commonly in Arteta's starting line-up given a chance to shine and the Portuguese made his mark after the break with two assists.

The former Porto midfielder's inviting free-kick was headed in powerfully by Elneny for the Egyptian's first goal since 2021.

Nketiah then continued to make the most of his prolonged run in the side following Jesus' injury.

The all-time top goalscorer for England's under-21s coolly rounded Edward McGinty from Vieira's through ball to roll into an empty net.

"Every player wants to play," added Nketiah.

"I'm grateful for the opportunities and just want to keep helping the team."

Saka was then replaced after receiving treatment in concerning scenes for Arsenal, but there was some solace in the return of Emile Smith Rowe for the first time since September.

Nketiah added his second of the night with another cheeky finish as he dinked the ball over McGinty from Martinelli's pass 14 minutes from time.

A much tougher test awaits in the next round when the Premier League's top two will go head-to-head at the Etihad on the last weekend of January.