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Brown reels in Spratt to win Tour Down Under



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# GULF TIMES SPORT



TENNIS

Djokovic back in old routine, Murray wins epic as weather disrupts Aussie Open

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## FOOTBALL

# Ronaldo-Messi rivalry set for new chapter in Riyadh

Two superstars will face off on the pitch tomorrow for the first time since Dec 2020 when Juventus beat Barcelona



Al Nassr's Cristiano Ronaldo will play his first match in Saudi Arabia tomorrow.

Reuters  
Riyadh

A new chapter in the celebrated rivalry between Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi will unfurl tomorrow when they meet in an exhibition match as the Portugal forward gears up for his first game in Saudi Arabia since joining Al Nassr. After a glittering career in Europe that saw him win four Champions League titles with Real Madrid and two Scudettos at Juventus, Ronaldo signed for Al Nassr, describing it as the “right moment” to share his experience in Asia.

The Saudi club is the latest stop in Ronaldo's career that began in 2002 at Sporting CP before the forward spent two spells at Manchester United, the last of which ended on a bitter note as he exited following his acrimonious split with the club.

Ronaldo and Messi, who have dominated football's debate about the greatest of all time (GOAT) for the best part of 10 years, will face off on the pitch tomorrow for the first time since December 2020 when Juventus beat Barcelona 3-0.

Ronaldo will lead Riyadh ST XI, a team made up of players from Al Hilal and Al Nassr, against Messi's Paris St Germain in the exhibition contest where nothing is at stake, but fans are still excited by the prospect of watching the two stars clash. The highly anticipated showdown, which will take place at the King Fahd Stadium in Riyadh, reportedly had more than 2mn online ticket requests. The bidding for a VIP “Beyond Imagination” ticket to the match has already topped 10mn riyals (\$2.66mn) in an auction that was set to end later last night.

The game has also captivated fans as it comes just over a month after Messi helped Argentina win the 2022 World Cup, the missing piece in his vast trophy collection. Ronaldo also made headlines during the tournament, becoming the first player to score in five World Cups, but he ended up in tears

### Qatari referees to officiate Riyadh Season Cup match

**Doha:** The Qatari international refereeing crew led by the FIFA international referee Abdulrahman al-Jassem will take charge of the friendly match between French champions Paris Saint-Germain, who will face off against the stars of Al Hilal and Al Nassr for the Riyadh Season Cup, scheduled to be played in Riyadh tomorrow at King Fahd International Stadium, after receiving an invitation by the Saudi Arabian Football Federation.

This is consistent with the structure for collaboration between the two federations in refereeing that already exists.

The rest of the panel is as follows: Taleb Salem al-Marri (first assistant referee); Saoud Ahmed Saoud (second assistant referee); Khamis Mohamed al-Marri (video assistant referee).

after Portugal were knocked out in the quarter-finals by Morocco.

While the friendly will be Ronaldo's first in Saudi Arabia, the 37-year-old's first competitive appearance will come in the Saudi Pro League on Sunday when Al Nassr host Al Ettifaq. Last month, he signed a two and a half year contract with Al Nassr, estimated by media to be worth more than 200mn euros (\$216.28mn), but has had to wait to play because of a two-match ban by England's FA for knocking a phone out of a fan's hand in April.

The exhibition game will also feature other key PSG players such as Kylian Mbappe, Sergio Ramos and Neymar, while Saudi internationals Salem al-Dawsari, who scored in the shock group-stage win over Argentina, and Saud Abdulhamid will play too. French newspaper *L'Equipe* reported on Monday that PSG will earn just over 10mn euros for the game.



PSG's Lionel Messi in action during a training session in Paris.

## SPOTLIGHT

# Small stadiums, high temperatures: what Ronaldo can expect in Saudi

AFP  
Riyadh

After lighting up football's biggest stages, Cristiano Ronaldo faces a very different reality in Saudi Arabia with smaller stadiums and less exalted teams – and some very high temperatures. Ronaldo, 37, says he's embracing the “challenge” of the Saudi Pro League, a step into the unknown for a player who is more used to Real Madrid's heaving Santiago Bernabeu stadium or the “Theatre of Dreams”, Manchester United's Old Trafford.

The transition has been eased by the combined 400mn euros he'll receive in wages from his new team, Al Nassr, and a separate payment to act as an ambassador for an expected Saudi World Cup bid, according to sources close to the club. But it will be a big adjustment for the five-time Ballon d'Or winner,

who will soon be running out at modest venues including the 6,000-seater Al Batin Stadium.

After an exhibition appearance against his great rival Lionel Messi's Paris Saint-Germain in the Saudi capital Riyadh tomorrow, Ronaldo will make his Saudi Pro League debut for Al Nassr on Sunday. The 16-team league will take Ronaldo from Dammam on the Gulf coast to Jeddah on the Red Sea, as well as desert-bound provincial cities such as Majma'ah and Hofuf, a hub for Saudi Arabia's date industry.

While Al Hilal and Al Ittihad, the giants of Saudi football, play in 62,000-capacity home grounds, a handful of Pro League teams have small venues for less than 10,000 fans, and some pitches are surrounded by running tracks. “Sometimes the stadiums are not in the best condition,” Moqbel al-Zabni, editor-in-chief of the *Al Riyadiah* newspaper, said, cautioning that empty seats are a common sight. “The attendances that Ronaldo



Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr jersey is displayed at Al Nassr Cafe in the Boulevard entertainment city in Riyadh yesterday. (AFP)

is used to will not exist. We are not used to seeing stadiums full to capacity,” he said.

Ronaldo's home ground will

be Al Nassr's 25,000-capacity Mrsool Park, which lies on a university campus in Riyadh and was packed for his gala unveiling

earlier this month. Chartered planes will ferry the superstar and his team-mates to away games, club sources said, sparing

him long coach trips through the desert landscape. The Pro League season runs from August to May, avoiding the worst of the fierce summer heat when temperatures routinely top 40C. Even the evenings, when many games are played, can remain above 30C in August and September, and from March until the end of the season.

“The weather will pose a challenge to Ronaldo... but I think he will adapt and excel,” said Saleh al-Khalif, *Al Riyadiah's* deputy editor-in-chief. Saudi Arabia is a leading force in Asian football with six World Cup appearances, including a famous victory over Messi's Argentina at the recent edition in Qatar.

Al Hilal and Al Ittihad have won six AFC Champions League titles between them. With Ronaldo, Al Nassr will have hopes of qualifying for this year's competition and joining their great rivals as Asian champions. Although the Pro League's standards cannot match the heights of

England, Spain and Italy, where Ronaldo has spent his career so far, it is a competitive division.

The Saudi league was launched in 1976 but in the 14 years since the Pro League became the top tier, there have been six different winners. Khalif said the league's “strength and diversity” were comparable to English football, insisting it would be no “walk in the park” for Ronaldo.

The Pro League is packed with 128 foreign players from 48 countries, with each team allowed to sign eight. At Al Nassr, coached by Frenchman Rudi Garcia, Ronaldo's team-mates include Colombia and ex-Arsenal goalkeeper David Ospina and Brazilian midfielder Luis Gustavo, formerly of Bayern Munich.

Ronaldo's first task will be to keep Al Nassr on top of the league and secure their first title in four years. But the other teams will be highly motivated to stop him. “Ronaldo is a legend... and all teams will play to beat Ronaldo,” said Khalif.



CYCLING

# Brown beats Spratt to clinch women's Tour Down Under

'I AM REALLY PLEASED. THE TEAM DID AN AWESOME JOB TODAY'

AFP

Adelaide

Australia's Grace Brown surged home to overhaul compatriot Amanda Spratt at the finish of the third stage and win the women's Tour Down Under yesterday in scorching conditions.

Brown, the world time trial silver medalist, reeled in three-time TDU winner Spratt on the seven-kilometre (4.3-mile) descent off the punishing Corkscrew climb to claim the final stage and become the first World Tour winner of the event.

Spratt, who was bidding to add to her 2017-19 TDU wins, held a 20-second gap over Brown after a draining climb up the brutal 24.5 percent gradient of the Corkscrew.

But she couldn't hold off the sprinter Brown in the downhill dash to the finish line outside Adelaide.

"I am really pleased. The team did an awesome job today," Brown said.

"They led me out into the final climb and I knew Amanda was going to be really good on the Corkscrew.

"But I just kept her within distance, knowing that I could potentially catch her on the descent, and was able to do it."

Brown, leading the French FDJ-Suez team, won the general classification by 10 seconds from Spratt (Trek-Segafredo) with New Zealand's Georgia Williams (EF Education-Tibco-SVB) on 19 seconds.

Spratt, fighting back from a condition which narrows the artery and restricts blood flow to the legs, was rated the one to beat in the gruelling final stage because of her hill-climbing reputation.

And Spratt, who trailed Brown by six seconds going into the final day, looked on course to win the stage and take the ochre leader's jersey with her commanding lead at the top of the Corkscrew.

But she succumbed to Brown's superior sprinting qualities. "We sure are making women's cycling exciting, aren't we?" Spratt said. "I don't have many regrets. "My team rode amazingly well, we had a plan, they positioned me perfectly for the Corkscrew and I attacked it the way I wanted. It's never nice when you know that Grace Brown is chasing you on a downhill like that, I was hoping I would get there, but she was too strong at the finish!"



Australian Grace Brown from French team FDJ-SUEZ celebrates winning the Women's Tour Down Under in Adelaide yesterday. (AFP)

perior sprinting qualities. "We sure are making women's cycling exciting, aren't we?" Spratt said. "I don't have many regrets. "My team rode amazingly well, we had a plan, they positioned me perfectly for the Corkscrew and I attacked it the way I wanted. It's never nice when you know that Grace Brown is chasing you on a downhill like that, I was hoping I would get there, but she was too strong at the finish!"

Overnight race leader Alexandra Manly (Team Jayco-AlUla) dropped well back on the unforgiving climb and finished 40 seconds behind to lose her chance of making the final race podium.

#### Results from the third and final stage

1. Grace Brown (AUS/FDJ-Suez) 2hr 37min 11sec, 2. Amanda Spratt (AUS/Trek-Segafredo) at 0sec, 3. Georgia Williams (NZL/EF Education-Tibco-SVB) 13sec, 4.

Danielle De Francesco (AUS/Zaaf Cycling Team), 5. Ruby Roseman-Gannon (AUS/Team Jayco-AlUla).

#### Overall standings

1. Grace Brown (AUS/FDJ-Suez) 8hr 3min 29sec, 2. Amanda Spratt (AUS/Trek-Segafredo) at 10sec, 3. Georgia Williams (NZL/EF Education-Tibco-SVB) 19sec, 4. Ruby Roseman-Gannon (AUS/Team Jayco-AlUla) 28sec, 5. Krista Doebel-Hickok (USA/EF Education-Tibco-SVB) 29sec.

FOCUS

## Concern over lack of air-con in Paris 2024 Games village

AFP

Paris

The lack of air conditioning in the rooms of the athletes' village for the Paris 2024 Olympics is raising concerns from some federations and athletes, sources told AFP yesterday.

The Olympic Village, based in Saint-Denis seven kilometres north of central Paris, will accommodate nearly 14,000 athletes and staff members during the Olympics in the French capital in July and August 2024.

The Games organisers have promised the global event will be carbon neutral, with the use of materials chosen for their energy performance. After the Games, the Olympic village will be converted into housing.

Yesterday Nicolas Ferrand, head of Solideo which has been chosen to construct the Olympic buildings, said there was no problem to address.

"We are building rooms where it will be six degrees cooler than the outside temperature," during the French summer, he assured during a press conference.

If the Olympic Games organising committee later demands air-conditioning, "there will be air-conditioning," he added,

while cautioning that the carbon footprint would be affected.

"It's a question for society. Do we collectively accept being at six degrees less and having an excellent carbon footprint, or do we say it's not okay, and we're ready to downgrade the carbon footprint," Ferrand said.

The possibility of another scorching summer, with temperatures in excess of 40C, has been taken into account, the organisers assured last year. But the reassurances have not appeased everyone.

"Imagine several days in a row at more than 40C, in rooms at 34C. It's still pretty crazy that these scenarios have not led to any changes," said a high-ranking French sports official.

The Olympic organisers have chosen to make the 2024 event "an ecological project", said another sporting figure.

"But in the event of a heat wave, the well-being of the athletes is not taken into account."

Some sports federation are already looking for solutions, including finding accommodation elsewhere.

"If they continue like this, they will empty the village," he added.

Paris-2024 organisers are considering their options, including using floor fans.

"It's still a work in progress," they said.

RECOVERY

## Indian cricket star Pant thanks 'heroes' after horror crash

AFP

New Delhi

Indian cricket star **Rishabh Pant** has thanked "two heroes" who helped get him to hospital after his car crashed into a road divider and caught fire.

In his first public comments since the accident, Pant said he would be "forever grateful and indebted" to Rajat Kumar and Nishu Kumar, posting a photo of the duo at his hospital bed.

"I may not have been able to thank everyone individually, but I must acknowledge these two heroes who helped me during my accident and ensured I got to the hospital safely," Pant said on Twitter late Monday.

"Rajat Kumar & Nishu Kumar, Thank you. I'll be forever grateful and indebted."

The flamboyant wicketkeeper-batsman crashed his Mercedes SUV north of New Delhi before dawn on December 30.

He suffered multiple injuries when the car rammed into a crash barrier, flipped over and caught fire.

The 25-year-old was rushed to a local hospital in Dehradun before being airlifted to Mumbai for further treatment and surgery.

The Indian cricket board said that Pant suffered several injuries including a damaged ligament in his right knee, a hurt wrist and ankle, and abrasions on his back.

Pant tweeted Monday that



his "road to recovery" had now begun and that an operation - reportedly on his knee - "was a success"

He also thanked the Indian cricket board and government authorities for their "incredible support"

Pant, who is the captain of Delhi Capitals side in the Indian Premier League, is set to miss the cash-rich tournament due to start in late March or April.

He was also left out of the squads for the first two Tests of Australia's upcoming tour of India in February and March, when the arch-rivals will play four Tests.

Pant is a mainstay of the Test squad and has played a key role in some of India's most memorable wins in the last three years.

This includes his brilliant 88 not out in the fourth and final Test in Australia in 2021 that helped India win the match and the series.

SPOTLIGHT

## Cavendish gets Tour record shot by signing for Astana

AFP

Paris

Veteran British road cyclist **Mark Cavendish** has signed a one-year contract with Astana, who as a World Tour team are slated for July's Tour de France.

The 37-year-old Briton holds the joint all time record of 34 Tour de France stage wins with Belgian great Eddy Merckx, and the 2023 Tour route is packed with sprint chances.

"He is the best sprinter of all times, and I am happy to welcome Mark in Astana Qazaqstan Team," said his new sports director Alexandr Vinokurov.

"As always, the objective will be for us to stand on the top podium," said Cavendish.

"I'm looking forward to being part of a successful team, whether working with the team for wins, crossing the line first

myself, or cheering on my teammates," he said. Cavendish parted ways with the Belgian Quick Step team in December after missing out on a Tour de France slot to Dutch ace Fabio Jakobsen, 11 years Cavendish's junior.

The previous season however Cavendish rolled back the years to win four stages on a roller-coaster 2021 Tour, drawing level with Merckx's long-standing record.

Cavendish was present at the route reveal for the 2023 Tour de France and said the course in itself was an inspiration.

I think the start is going to be the hardest I've seen in my career," he said of the Basque Country rolling hills that host the 2023 Grand Depart.

"There's maybe seven or eight sprint opportunities. It's a lot, you know. Real sprint opportunities."

As the 2022 British road race champion, Cavendish will wear a red, white and blue Astana shirt instead of the usual pale blue.



## INDIA'S IYER RULED OUT OF NEW ZEALAND ODI SERIES WITH BACK INJURY

**New Delhi:** A back injury has forced India batsman Shreyas Iyer out of the one-day international (ODI) series against New Zealand, the country's cricket board said yesterday. Rajat Patidar will replace Iyer in the squad from today's opener in Hyderabad, under the leadership of Rohit Sharma. Iyer "will be heading to the National Cricket Academy (NCA) for further assessment and management", the Board of Control for Cricket in India said in a statement. It is learned that Iyer reported a stiff back immediately after the final ODI of the series against Sri Lanka on Sunday. Keeping in mind he is part of the Test squad for the series against Australia in February, BCCI's medical staff quickly decided to ask him to head to the National Cricket Academy in Bengaluru as a precautionary measure. As it stands Iyer, who reached

NCA on Monday, is scheduled to rejoin the India squad in Nagpur for a preparatory camp ahead of the first Test against Australia on February 9. Iyer made scores of 28, 28 and 38 batting at No 4 in India's 3-0 victory in the ODI series against Sri Lanka. He is India's second highest run-scorer in ODIs since 2022, after Shubman Gill, scoring 818 at an average of 51.12 and strike rate of 92.95. His replacement in the ODI squad, Patidar, is yet to make his international debut. Patidar, 29, was part of the squad for the ODI series in Bangladesh last December but did not get a game. He has 1648 runs in 51 List A games at an average of 34.33 and strike rate of 97.45. Iyer's absence could give Suryakumar Yadav the chance of a consistent run in the ODI side. Suryakumar played only the third ODI against Sri Lanka, scor-

ing 4 off 4 balls at No 6. India's first ODI against New Zealand is on January 18 in Hyderabad, followed by games in Raipur (January 21) and Indore (January 24). The Rajiv Gandhi International Stadium in Hyderabad - the venue of the first match - is known to favour teams that chase because of both dew and a fast outfield. There wasn't much dew yesterday evening, though, as India's players went through their drills on the main ground and had a net session at an adjacent facility around 6pm. Still, the dew remained a talking point, even among the visitors with New Zealand captain Tom Latham saying that it was a problem not just in India but all over the world. "I haven't given a huge amount of thought to the change of match timings, but I think you see around the world at night time in different conditions

where the ball does dew up or the ground does dew up," Latham said yesterday during a press conference. "And sometimes it can get hard to hold onto the ball and it does get a little bit slippery, but that's something we're presented with in international cricket. "You've got to be able to be flexible to bowl with the wet ball or field in those conditions," Latham said. "You got to ride with whatever conditions you're faced with and that's adapting to the conditions as best as possible," he added.

#### India's updated ODI squad

Rohit Sharma (capt), Shubman Gill, Ishan Kishan (wk), Virat Kohli, Suryakumar Yadav, K S Bharat (wk), Hardik Pandya, Rajat Patidar, Washington Sundar, Shahbaz Ahmed, Shardul Thakur, Yuzvendra Chahal, Kuldeep Yadav, Mohamed Shami, Mohamed Siraj, Umran Malik.



India's cricket captain Rohit Sharma is seen playing football during a practice session at the Rajiv Gandhi International Cricket Stadium in Hyderabad ahead of their first ODI against New Zealand. (AFP)



AUSTRALIAN OPEN

# Djokovic back to old grind as Murray beats Berrettini

World Number 5 cruises into second round on Melbourne return as Murray clinches five-set classic in hot conditions

Reuters  
Melbourne

**N**ovak Djokovic returned to the Australian Open nearly 700 days since winning the title for a ninth time and continued exactly where he left off at the Grand Slam he has dominated with a commanding first-round win yesterday.

After regular Melbourne adversary Andy Murray conjured some old magic to stop last year's semi-finalist Matteo Berrettini in a five-set classic, Djokovic was cheered on to Rod Laver Arena to complete a manic day with scorching heat and drenching rain.

Deprived of a tilt at a record-extending 10th title last year after being deported on the eve of the tournament for not having a Covid-19 vaccination, the Serbian showed his class as he glided past Spain's Roberto Carballes Baena 6-3 6-4 6-0.

Welcomed like a returning hero by the evening crowd, many sporting Serbian flags, the 35-year-old Djokovic was imperious throughout and rattled off the third set for the loss of four points to seal an 83rd win at the tournament.

"It was an unbelievable atmosphere," fourth seed Djokovic, who has now won 22 matches in a row in Melbourne since his last loss in 2018, said on court.

"Thanks for the welcome and the reception that I could only dream of. Very happy to be back," he said.

After the bitter memory of last year when Djokovic was confined to a hotel housing asylum seekers while awaiting his fate, his return was incident-free as he showed no sign of the hamstring niggle



Serbia's Novak Djokovic poses for a selfie with fans after winning his first-round match against Spain's Roberto Carballes Baena at Melbourne Park in Australia yesterday. (Reuters)

that had cast a cloud in the build-up. It was far from routine earlier, however, as five-time runner-up Murray rolled back the years and saved a match point to beat Berrettini 6-3 6-3 4-6 6-7(7) 7-6 (10-6) in a near five-hour slog and former world number two Alexander Zverev edged Peruvian lucky loser Juan Pablo Varillas in another five-setter.

**THREE-HOUR STOPPAGE**  
Organisers had their work cut out as extreme heat forced a three-hour stoppage on the outside courts. As night fell, a storm brought heavy rain, leaving 11 matches unfinished, including nine which did not even start.

Under the Rod Laver roof, second seed Ons Jabeur was given a scare by Tamara Zidansek before

winning 7-6(8) 4-6 6-1.

Coming off a big pre-season, Murray channelled his halcyon days of 2016 as he raced to a two-set lead against the 13th-seeded Berrettini, who beat him at the US Open last year.

Berrettini stormed back though and missed an easy backhand on a match point before Murray sealed victory in the de-

ciding tiebreak with a cruel net cord. "I just got a bit lucky there at the end with the net cord," said 35-year-old Murray.

"Right now I'm just unbelievably happy, just proud of myself." Twelfth seed Zverev had a huge scare against world number 103 Varillas but the German steadied himself to win a four-hour dog-fight 4-6 6-1 5-7 7-6(3) 6-4 at



Britain's Andy Murray celebrates winning his first-round match against Italy's Matteo Berrettini in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters)

the Margaret Court Arena.

It was Zverev's first win since tearing ankle ligaments in last year's French Open semi-final against Rafa Nadal.

Top 10 seeds Andrey Rublev and Taylor Fritz eased into the second round earlier yesterday with Russian Rublev beating former finalist Dominic Thiem of Austria 6-3 6-4 6-2 as temperatures nudged 36 degrees Celsius.

#### EXTREME HEAT

Women's seeds Aryna Sabalenka and Caroline Garcia earlier enjoyed the relative cool on Rod Laver Arena before the rising mercury sent fans scurrying for shade as organisers invoked the Extreme Heat Policy and halted play on outside courts without roofs.

Fifth seed Sabalenka, who opened the year by winning the Adelaide title without losing a set, kept up her fine form with

an emphatic 6-1 6-4 victory over Tereza Martincova.

Fourth seed Garcia, who won the WTA Finals last season, was equally convincing with a 6-3 6-0 win over Canadian qualifier Katherine Sebov.

Garcia will face another Canadian in 2021 US Open finalist Leylah Fernandez, who beat Alize Cornet 7-5 6-2, her first win in the main draw at Melbourne Park.

Rublev and Sabalenka, like all Russian and Belarusian players, are competing at the tournament without national affiliation as a result of last year's invasion of Ukraine.

Tennis Australia yesterday morning banned fans from bringing flags of either nation into the Melbourne Park precinct after a Russian tricolour was hung on a bush next to a court where Ukrainian Kateryna Baindl was playing on Monday.

#### FOCUS

## Raducanu faces Gauff in 'next generation' battle

Reuters  
Melbourne

**E**mma Raducanu taking on Coco Gauff in the second round of the Australian Open is not a match one would have predicted a year ago when the two prodigies were in the top 20, but such is the unforgiving nature of a highly-competitive pro Tour.

Raducanu was playing at her peak and riding a wave of unprecedented success after breaking through in 2021 and clinching the US Open while Gauff was making strides and reaching the second week of Grand Slams.

But Raducanu failed to find consistency last year as she was ravaged by injuries and underwent several coaching changes to fall to 77th in the rankings, while Gauff reached her first Grand Slam final at Roland Garros and now sits at number seven.

Gauff and Raducanu are seen as the torch-bearers of a new era of women's tennis following the retirements of Ash Barty and Serena Williams, with the organisers scheduling their clash for the prime-time slot in the night session at Rod Laver Arena.

Such is their star attraction at such a young age that top seeds Iga Swiatek and defending champion Rafa Nadal's matches have been relegated to the day session.

"I'm really looking forward to this match, I'm very up for it. Coco has obviously done a lot of great things and she's playing well," said Raducanu, who overcame an ankle issue to advance.

"She's a great athlete with some big weapons... I think we're both good, young players, we're both coming through, part of the next generation of tennis really. It's going to be a great match."

While the entire hopes of a nation rest on Raducanu as the lone Briton left in the women's draw, Gauff said she is not under the same pressure as the 20-year-old with several Americans in Melbourne to share the load.

"Being from the UK, the first British person to do something in a long time, probably is a lot more pressure than what I'm used to being an American," 18-year-old Gauff said. World number one Swiatek takes on



Britain's Emma Raducanu arrives for a training session surrounded by fans at Melbourne Park yesterday. (Reuters)

Camila Osorio, who became the first Colombian woman in 15 years to win a match in the main draw in Melbourne while American third seed Jessica Pegula faces Aliaksandra Sasnovich.

Nadal looked rusty in his four-sets victory over Jack Draper but he was glad to get his first win of the season ahead of his match against Mackenzie McDonald, who came through a punishing five-setter against compatriot Brandon Nakashima.

"I am not playing bad, you know? Just need to hold the positive level for longer time," Nadal said. "I am in a moment that I am more up and down. But as I said, it's part of the business."

The night session wraps up with third seed Stefanos Tsitsipas taking on local hope and 21-year-old wildcard Rinky Hijikata.



USA's Coco Gauff celebrates her victory against Czech Republic's Katerina Siniakova on Monday. (AFP)

### SHAKY JABEUR SURVIVES FIRST-ROUND TEST AT THE AUSTRALIAN OPEN

**Melbourne:** Second seed Ons Jabeur's quest for a maiden Grand Slam title at the Australian Open began with a shaky 7-6 (10/8), 4-6, 6-1 victory over Tamara Zidansek littered with unforced errors yesterday. The Tunisian was runner-up at both Wimbledon and the US Open last year but had to grind past the Slovenian world number 98 under the roof on Rod Laver Arena in a 2hr 17min battle.

Jabeur has set herself the twin targets in 2023 of becoming the first Arab and African woman to win one of the four tennis majors and topping Iga Swiatek from the number one ranking. But the 28-year-old, who had strapping on her left knee, suffered early nerves as she took to Melbourne Park's centre court for the night session on day two. Jabeur dropped her opening service game but broke back straight away. Further breaks were exchanged before the powerful Jabeur eventually outlasted the Slovenian 10-8 in an attritional



Tunisia's Ons Jabeur in action during her first-round match against Slovenia's Tamara Zidansek. (Reuters)

tiebreak at the end of a first set that lasted 68 minutes. Serving at 3-4 in the second, Jabeur was broken for a third time and Zidansek took advantage to level the match. But after the extended interval between sets, Jabeur cleaned up her play, made fewer errors and sped away to victory. "I just tried to follow what my coach told me to do," she said of

her turnaround in the third set. "I wasn't really doing that and he's going to kill me after the match," she joked.

Jabeur committed 49 unforced errors during her stuttering opening match, but only six came in her much-improved third set. "I just tried to be more patient. It's a tough sport and you definitely don't want to play three sets here."

In the end Jabeur did just enough to set up a second-round meeting with either Alison Riske-Amritraj of the United States or Czech Marketa Vondrousova in round two. Jabeur, who missed last year's Australian Open with a back injury, won Madrid and Berlin trophies last year in a breakout season which propelled her to second in the rankings. Jabeur reached her first Grand Slam quarter-final at Melbourne Park in 2020 and has now won 11 of her last 12 opening-round matches at majors, the only loss coming to 52nd-ranked Magda Linette at Roland Garros last year.

#### BOTTOMLINE

## Italy's Giorgi denies seeking fake Covid vaccine certificate

Reuters  
Melbourne

**I**taly's Camila Giorgi yesterday denied seeking a fake Covid-19 vaccine certificate after a doctor in Italy alleged she had never administered the vaccine to the player.

Italian media reported that doctor Daniela Grillone was charged by Italian police last February and is being investigated for allegedly administering false Covid vaccines and providing fake vaccination certificates.

In an interview with Italian newspaper *Corriere del Veneto*,

Grillone identified Giorgi as a patient, alleging that the player had not been vaccinated by her and that she had sought falsified documents of vaccination against Covid.

Giorgi reached the third round of last year's Australian Open, where proof of vaccination was a requirement for entry into the country. Novak Djokovic was deported for not being vaccinated.

"No, not at all," Giorgi told reporters in response to a question on whether she had sought a false vaccination certificate from Grillone. "I did vaccination with different places. This needs to be very clear. It's not my

problem, it's her (the doctor's) problem. I just did vaccination with her once, and the other ones I did with other doctors. The problems are on that doctor, not on me. The doctor has been investigated, and she had troubles in this year with the law a few times."

Giorgi, 31, said she was fully vaccinated. She did not clarify whether she had used documents provided by Grillone to enter Australia last year.

"I did the vaccination, thank you," Giorgi said when pressed on the topic. "I did everything what they ask, the Australia government."



SPOTLIGHT

# Dakar champion al-Attiyah leads Oman Rally entry list

**Agencies**  
Muscat

The Oman Automobile Association (OAA) has announced an impressive line-up of international drivers and national entries for the Oman International Rally, round one of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC), taking place on January 26-28.

Fifteen international crews and 10 teams taking part in a national event grace the entry list announced by the organising committee. The field includes individuals from nine countries and is headed by the global motor sport stars of the moment, Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and his Andorra-based co-driver Mathieu Baumel.

On Sunday, the duo secured al-Attiyah's fifth success in the world-renowned Dakar Rally and a fourth triumph for his co-driver. The Qatari makes the switch from that all-con-

quering Toyota Hilux to join forces with Autotek Motorsport in a bid to begin another defence of his regional rally title in a Volkswagen Polo GTI.

Al-Attiyah has seven wins under his belt in the Sultanate of Oman and is a clear favourite for victory next week over the 13 gravel stages that make up the challenge in Oman.

Four Rally2 cars grace the entry list, with local hopes resting on the shoulders of the Oman Rally Team's Abdullah al-Rawahi and his Jordanian co-driver Ata al-Hmoud in their Škoda Fabia. Al-Rawahi finished fourth in last year's championship.

Qatar's Nasser Khalifa al-Atya - the runner-up in the regional series back in 1993 - again teams up with Giovanni Bernacchini to drive a Ford Fiesta R5. His Italian co-driver took part in the Dakar Classic event in Saudi Arabia over the last two weeks.

Completing the Rally2 line-up will be Petr Kacirek in his Duck Racing Skoda Fabia. The Czech finished sec-

ond overall behind al-Attiyah in Oman last year with Vaclav Kopacek. Václav is replaced by Petra Cihakova on this occasion, with whom KaCirek has taken part in numerous Czech events in the past.

Kuwait's Meshari al-Thefiri is a multiple former MERC2 champion and will drive a Mitsubishi Evo X in Oman, where he lines up against 10 other Group NR4 cars on the entry list to compete in the MERC2 category.

The defending champion Issa Abu Jamous returns to defend his title in a Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX and lines up against fellow Jordanians, Ihab al-Shorafa, Shadi Shaban, Sheikh Bader al-Fayez and Shaker Jweihan, in addition to Kuwait's Mohamed al-Zafiri and Yousef al-Dhefiri, Lebanon's Ahmad Khaled and Oman's Abdullah al-Zubair and Zakariya al-Aamri.

Local drivers dominate the entry for the Oman national event: Haitham al-Zadjali and Ghaith al-Qasmi wheel out a pair of Mitsubishi's and there are two

Subaru Imprezas for Faisal al-Rashdi and Jarah al-Touqi. UTVs are becoming popular across several FIA motor sport disciplines and rally organisers have received entries from three crews driving Yamaha YXZs - Oman's Mohamed al-Mazrui and Mutasim al-Balushi and Lebanon's Alain Nawfal. There are also national entries from Abdullah al-Toqi, Musab Soomar and Salim al-Toqi.

The former will be partnered by a famous Austrian female co-driver from the FIA World Rally Championship (WRC): Ilka Minor has partnered drivers of the calibre of Manfred Stohl and Henning Solberg to eight podiums and 25 stage wins in the WRC since she made her WRC debut with Achim Mörthl in Corsica in 1997. Her best results were a pair of second-placed finishes with Stohl at the 2005 Cyprus Rally and Wales Rally GB in 2006. The 2023 Oman International Rally gets underway with a ceremonial start and a timed super special stage on Thursday, January 26th.



Qatar's Nasser al-Attiyah has seven wins under his belt in Oman.

FOOTBALL

# Club needs to explain strategy, not just me: Spurs boss Conte

Tottenham have picked up only four points from last four league games



Tottenham Hotspur's Italian head coach Antonio Conte. (AFP)

**Reuters**  
London

Explaining the current malaise at Tottenham Hotspur should not be his job alone, according to head coach Antonio Conte as he attempts to halt the club's Premier League slide. Tottenham have picked up only four points from four games since the Premier League resumed after the World Cup and face champions Manchester City away tomorrow.

Sunday's 2-0 home defeat by leaders Arsenal showed how far they have fallen behind their north London rivals this season and raised doubts about Conte's future at the club.

An early own goal from Hugo Lloris and a fine Martin Odegaard strike helped Arsenal complete a first league double over Tottenham since 2013-14, with the Gunners winning away at Spurs for the first time in the league since March 2014. The Italian has been at pains to lower expectations at Tottenham, claiming after a New Year's Day defeat at home to Aston Villa that he performed a miracle by steering them to a top-four finish last season.

Addressing the media yesterday, Conte questioned why other members of the Spurs hierarchy were not being asked about the direction the club is heading. "In England I think there's a bad habit that it's only the coach talks and explains. I've never seen the medical department coming here to explain. I've never seen the club or the sporting director coming here to explain the strategy or vision of the club," Conte, whose side are fifth, told reporters.

"In Italy, before every game there's a person from the club that goes to speak to the media. I think for us it could be really better, otherwise there is only one face to explain the situation that I think is better

for the club to explain.

"I think it could be good for the club to be present in the media. Not every week, but at least every 15 days or once a month. I think it could be more simple for you to understand, otherwise it can seem (as) if something is a criticism or negative and it's not the case."

Conte's regular gripes and his public statements about the ability of his squad to challenge for silverware have worn down the patience of fans but he says he finds the criticism of his methods hard to understand. "If there is criticism then we have to accept (it) but it's difficult to understand because we are doing everything we can in this situation in our possibility," he said. "The mentality of this team is very strong, but it's not only about the mentality."

Despite his suggestion, Conte knows Spurs chairman Daniel Levy, Levy rarely speaks to the media and the Italian said he had no plans to ask the club to implement his idea. "I am not going to ask anything," he said. "In this type of situation, it's a risk to speak always to explain this type of situation. The coach has to stay silent and accept the situation."

Tottenham did the double over Manchester City last season and need a positive result to revive their fading top-four ambitions. They are five points adrift of both fourth-placed Manchester United and Newcastle United in third. Spurs will be boosted by the availability of Uruguay midfielder Rodrigo Bentancur, who has not played since being injured at the World Cup.

Bentancur has missed all five games since the season's resumption in December after picking up an injury on duty for Uruguay at the World Cup. In his absence, Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg was paired with three different central midfield partners in Yves Bissouma, Oliver Skipp and Pape Matar Sarr.

## Messi greater than Maradona, says Argentina coach Scaloni

**Madrid:** Lionel Messi has surpassed Diego Maradona as the greatest player of all time, Argentina's World Cup winning coach Lionel Scaloni has said. "If I have to choose one I choose Leo, I have something special with him. He is the best of all time although Maradona was also great," Scaloni told Spanish radio station Cope.

Argentina fans have long preferred Maradona over Messi but attitudes appear to be shifting after the Paris St Germain forward led the team to lift the World Cup last month for the first time since Maradona inspired them to win it in 1986.

Scaloni also revealed that he prioritised speaking to Messi when he was named Argentina coach in 2018, while the forward was taking a break from international duty following the disastrous World Cup in Russia.

"The first thing we did was have a video call with Messi. He said he was honoured and the first thing we said to him

was 'Come back. We'll wait for you'. That's what we did and eight months later he came and found an incredible group," Scaloni added.

"Coaching Messi is not difficult. You cannot correct him on a technical level but sometimes you can instruct him to press or to attack in a certain way. When he smells blood he is the number one."

Scaloni also defended his goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez after he was criticised for his overzealous celebrations following Argentina's triumph, such as making an obscene gesture when collecting the Golden Glove award and carrying a toy baby with Kylian Mbappe's face on it during the open-top bus parade.

"There are attitudes which he will not be happy with, but he is a spectacular guy. He is like a child. He is an incredible guy, his personality has given so much to the group," Scaloni added.

## Qatar's Awaida wins bronze at Arab Fencing Championship



Qatar's fencer Ali Turki Awaida yesterday clinched bronze medal at the Arab Fencing Championship in Manama, Bahrain. A total of eight countries are taking part in the event. Awaida had to be content with bronze after he lost to Egypt's Alaeeddin Abu al-Qasim 7-15 in the semi-finals. Seven other players including Khaled Aref Hussein, Abdullah Ismail Khalifa, Jaber Omar al-Fadaq, Mohamed Zaid al-Awlan, Abdul Rahman al-Jedrah, Mishaal Misfer al-Qahtani and Fadi Diab are representing Qatar in the event.

## F1 confirms 23-race season; Chinese GP won't be replaced

**London:** Formula One will have 23 races this season, still a record and one more than last year, with the sport facing a four-week gap in April after deciding not to replace the cancelled Chinese GP. The race in Shanghai, originally scheduled for April 16 as the fourth of 24 rounds, was axed last month for the fourth year in a row due to strict local measures to curb the spread of Covid-19.

Formula One had said then that it was assessing alternative options, with various venues touted in the media including Portugal's Portimao circuit that was used as a replacement in 2020 and 2021 for races cancelled during the pandemic.

That will leave a gap between round three, Australia's race in Melbourne on April 2, and Azerbaijan's Grand Prix in Baku on April 30. Sources said the Chinese GP organisers had sought a reinstatement after Beijing relaxed Covid controls but that was ruled out for



Lusail International Circuit will be hosting the very first sprint race at night on October 8.

logistical reasons. Bringing the race in Baku forward by a week was also considered. The 2023 calendar features the return of Qatar in October, a debut night race in Las Vegas in November and six sprint weekends.

Red Bull's Dutch driver Max Verstappen will be chasing his third championship in a row when the season starts in Bahrain on March 5 after pre-season testing at the Sakhir circuit in late February. The season ends in Abu Dhabi on Nov. 26.

**2023 FORMULA ONE SEASON SCHEDULE**

March 5: Bahrain, Sakhir  
March 19: Saudi Arabia, Jeddah  
April 2: Australia, Melbourne  
April 30: Azerbaijan, Baku  
May 7: Miami, Miami  
May 21: Emilia-Romagna, Imola  
May 28: Monaco, Monaco  
June 4: Spain, Barcelona  
June 18: Canada, Montreal  
July 2: Austria, Spielberg  
July 9: British, Silverstone  
July 23: Hungary, Budapest  
July 30: Belgium, Spa-

Francorchamps  
August 27: Netherlands, Zandvoort  
September 3: Italy, Monza  
September 17: Singapore  
September 24: Japan, Suzuka  
October 8: Qatar, Lusail  
October 22: United States, Austin  
October 29: Mexico, Mexico City  
November 5: Brazil, Sao Paulo  
November 19: Las Vegas, Las Vegas  
November 26: Abu Dhabi, Yas Marina

PREMIER LEAGUE

# Ratcliffe's Ineos declares interest in buying Man United

British billionaire **Jim Ratcliffe's** Ineos company officially joined the race to buy Manchester United yesterday. United's owners, the Glazer family, said they were willing to listen to offers for the Premier League club in November.

Boyhood United fan Ratcliffe, who made an unsuccessful £4.25bn bid to buy Chelsea last year, has long been linked with the Old Trafford outfit.

"We have formally put ourselves into the process," an Ineos spokesperson told the BBC. After failing with his Chelsea takeover after Roman Abramovich sold the Blues to American tycoon Todd Boehly and his consortium, Ratcliffe is back in the hunt for a Premier League giant.

United have yet to comment on the news of the 70-year-old's interest in taking over from the United States-based Glazers.

But, born in Failsworth, Greater Manchester, Ratcliffe is one of Britain's richest men and might be more palatable to the United support than the Glazers, who have experienced numerous fan

protests during their troubled reign since buying the club in 2005. United sit fourth in the table after beating arch rivals Manchester City 2-1 on Saturday.



## FAN CHARGED WITH ASSAULT ON ARSENAL KEEPER RAMSDALE

A spectator has been charged with assaulting Arsenal goalkeeper Aaron Ramsdale following last weekend's north London derby against Tottenham Hotspur, the Metropolitan Police said yesterday. Joseph Watts, 35, has been accused of assault by beating, going onto an area adjacent to the playing area and throwing a missile onto a football playing area at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium following Premier League leaders Arsenal's 2-0 win.

Watts, of Hackney, north London, was charged and is due to appear at Highbury Magistrates' Court on February 17. Following Sunday's incident, England's governing Football Association "strongly condemned" the incident, while Spurs insisted "violence in any form has no place in football".