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## India top ODI rankings after 3-0 sweep of New Zealand



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## Azarenka and Tsitsipas surge into Australian Open semis



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**VOLLEYBALL**

## Qatar's Cherif and Ahmed gear up for World Beach Pro Tour Finals

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### QNB STARS LEAGUE

# Wakrah cruise past Sailiya, Qatar SC stay in top four

AL RAYYAN RALLY TO HOLD AL GHARAF A TO A 2-2 DRAW THANKS TO A FINE BRACE FROM BOLI

By Sports Reporter

Doha

**A** rampant Al Wakrah slammed five goals past Al Sailiya to consolidate their third position in the QNB Stars League, while Qatar SC beat Umm Salal 4-1 to stay third yesterday. In another match, Al Rayyan rallied to hold Al Gharafa to a 2-2 draw.

Wakrah raised their points to 18 after a brace from defender Lucas Mendes (37th and 52nd minutes), and a goal apiece from Mohamed Benyettou (64th), Khaled Munir (67th) and Jacinto Dala (74th) saw them to a comfortable win. Wakrah went into the match after losing to Al Arabi. On the other hand, Sailiya, who were going through a bad patch, themselves compounded their woes as they were rooted to the bottom of the league table.

Wakrah went ahead after Sailiya goalkeeper made a mistake in pushing the ball away following a corner kick from the right side and Mendes made no mistake in finding the target. In the second half, Al Wakrah continued their superiority and soon added the second goal, again through Mendes.

Al Wakrah did not have to wait for long for their third goal as Benyettou scored with an individual effort past the hour mark. Munir and Dala then rounded off the tally to present themselves a well-deserved victory.

At the Al Gharafa Stadium, Qatar SC made it three a row as they moved to 16 points after victory over Umm Salal. Qatar SC, who swung into big action right from the word go, led 2-1 at half-time. Sebastian Soria (2nd minute), Moataz Majed Bostami (18th minute), Badr Benoun (55th minute) and Ben Malango (60th minute) did the scoring for the winners, while Jonathan Kodjia pulled one back for Umm Salal in the 27th minute of the match.

Displaying excellent form, Qatar SC scored within minutes of the start, with captain Soria dipping in for a header that beat the rival goalkeeper at the left post. Soria was fed by a perfect cross from Nasir Peer Baksh after the move was initiated from a superb back heel



Al Wakrah's Lucas Mendes (right) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Al Sailiya in the QNB Stars League yesterday.

pass of Malango. It was not long before Bashar Resan produced a superb free-kick for midfielder Bostami to judge and head Qatar SC's second goal.

Pushed back by Qatar SC's attacking play, Umm Salal looked for an offensive and midway through the first half their French-born skipper Kodjia scored a wonderful goal picking on a long ball – first on to his chest before sending in a rasping drive from a tight angle on right side of the box which flew over a diving Qatar SC goalkeeper Sataa Al Abbasi.

Umm Salal, however, could not succeed in scoring more whereas Qatar SC returned to pump in two more goals in the second half.

Benoun added to Qatar SC's tally with the third strike as he latched on to

a long set-piece kick taken by Bashar Resan. With the ball landing right in the centre of the box, Benoun lunged ahead to score with his left foot.

Qatar SC's fourth and final goal of the match followed five minutes later when Joao Teixeira sent in a sailing corner kick and Malango jumped high, despite being marked, to head the ball past an outstretched left hand of Umm Salal goalkeeper Khalifa Ababacar.

In the 63rd minute of the game, Qatar SC's Ibrahim Majed was shown a second yellow card for a tackle reducing the side to 10-man. They, however, held on well to ensure no damage even as Umm Salal tried in vain suffering their fourth loss of the league.

Later, Al Rayyan striker Yohan Boli

struck twice after Al Gharafa were leading on both the occasions. The teams were locked 1-1 at half-time. While Mehdi Tahrat (12th minute) and Ishak Belfodil (52nd minute) scored for Gharafa, Boli hit the net in opening half's added time (45+1) and in the 83rd minute.

With a fourth draw in their 10 matches, Gharafa are seventh in the table with 13 points, while Rayyan are 11th after their second draw with five points.

It was an exciting contest which gave lots of thrill to the good crowd, but both teams also had their fair share of missed chances. Strengthened by the return of their players Amro Seraj, Homam Al Ameen and Ahmed Alaaeldin, The Cheetahs were in an attacking mood.



Al Rayyan striker Yohan Boli (left) vies for the ball with Al Gharafa defender Islom Tukhtakhujaev yesterday.



Qatar SC's Moataz Majed Bostami celebrates after scoring against Umm Salal.

And they struck early too when Tahrat battled for the ball before sending in a superb left-footer from well outside the box.

Rayyan kept up the battle and in the 33rd minute Boli had a good chance off a free-kick, but his right-foot kick saw the ball go well over the bar. Gharafa hit back and in the 30th minute Belfodil had a clear chance but while trying to

steer clear of Rayyan goalkeeper Ivanildo Rodrigues, the Algerian striker sent the ball just wide of the left post.

Boli then levelled the terms for his side, connecting a good cross from Mohamed Abdelfatah just before the half time whistle. On return, Gharafa soon went up again as Belfodil moved in from the left and into the box going past defenders for a fine solo goal.

### FOCUS

# QMMF announces second rounds of FIA and FIM Baja Cups

By Sports Reporter

Doha

**T**he 2023 Qatar International Baja will be a counting round of both the FIA World and Middle East Cups for Cross-Country Bajas and round two of the FIM Bajas World Cup. The Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) has announced the event will take place on March 15-18.

The Baja will be based close to the QMMF offices at Lusail Sports Arena. The customary service park will be located nearby and the venue will also host administration checks and technical scrutineering.

The 2023 Baja will again run under the chairmanship of QMMF President Abdulrahman al-Mannai, QMMF's Executive Director Amro al-Hamad and board member Abdulrazaq al-Kuwari. Subject to FIA and FIM approval, the event will run over two legs of 251.18km and 239.43km. After a Prologue stage of

10.02km, which will take place around 16km north of the service park close to the Al Bayt Stadium, on Thursday afternoon (March 16th) from 15.00hrs, FIA competitors will attend the ceremonial start from 20.00hrs.

They will then tackle two competitive sections of 120.43km and 120.73km on Friday, March 17th. FIM competitors will tackle a single selective section – the two FIA stages run in reverse order – for a total of 248.19km.

Saturday's single selection section of 239.43km will be divided into four competitive sections of 34.44km, 29.03km, 44.15km and 125.27km by transfer zones to complete a total route of 836.14km, including liaison sections. The podium finish will take place from 19.00hrs. Final details for the revised FIM event will be released in due course.

The Baja was a counting round of both the FIA Middle East and FIM series' for the first time in 2022. Nasser Saleh al-Attayah and Mathieu Baumel won the car category for the seventh



Nasser Saleh al-Attayah won the car category in 2022.

time together in a Toyota Hilux, while young Pole Konrad Dabrowski domi-

nated the motorcycle category and Saudi Arabian rider Abdulmajeed al-

Khulaifi topped the quad class.

T3 and T4 success in the FIA event

went to WRC star Kris Meeke and local driver Khalifa Saleh al-Attayah in their respective Can-Am's.

Entries are now open and close on Wednesday, March 1st. The QMMF is offering generous concessions to competitors who pass both administration and scrutineering checks. Entrants in the FIA car, T3 and T4 categories from the GCC will be offered a shipping allowance of \$3,000, with international entrants receiving \$6,000. GCC motorcycle and quad riders will be eligible for \$1,500 and \$3,000 will be offered to international riders.

In addition, entry fees will be returned to competitors who pass technical checks and are included in the official start lists.

Early bird competitors registering before Wednesday, February 15th will receive an additional QR1,000.

The QMMF will also book economy class return tickets for drivers and co-drivers after entry fees have been paid and a twin hotel room with breakfast will be offered for five nights.



SKIING

# Shiffrin eyes more wins after making history

AFP  
Paris

**M**ikaela Shiffrin, one of the most recognisable stars in wintersports, earned a record-breaking 83rd win on the women's World Cup circuit when she swept to glory in the giant slalom at Kronplatz in Italy yesterday.

It has always been a question of when, and not if, Shiffrin would become the circuit's most successful woman skier after she drew level with her now-retired American compatriot Lindsey Vonn earlier this month.

Next in her sights is the overall record of 86 victories, held by Swedish legend Ingemar Stenmark, who dominated the men's slalom and giant slalom disciplines for a decade from 1975 before retiring in 1989.

Vonn bowed out of competition after the 2019 Are world championships at the age of 34. Shiffrin is still only 27, and fitness and form notwithstanding, the American stands on the cusp of re-writing the record books for generations to come.

Nothing, however, has been achieved without hard work and

family support, her destiny as one of the world's best-ever skiers having been set out from an early age.

Shiffrin, who donned her first skis aged three in Vail, Colorado, where she grew up, gave an indication of the route her racing would take when asked after winning her breakthrough slalom gold at the 2013 Schladming worlds as a 17-year-old.

"It's been 17 years in the making. Everyone says it comes so fast, but it seems like it's been forever for me," she said at the time.

## Trophy cabinet

Pushed by her parents and a desire to copy her ski-racing brother, Shiffrin left Vail at the age of eight to join Burke Mountain Academy, a private school specialising in ski racing, before making her World Cup debut in March 2011.

"Ever since she was little, she would go until the sun went down," Eileen Shiffrin said of her hard-working daughter.

"She can do a lot of runs. She just keeps going."

The ensuing statistics are truly incredible. She went on to win three more world slalom titles

in 2015, 2017 and 2019 as well as the 2014 Olympic slalom title before claiming giant slalom gold and combined silver at the Pyeongchang Games in 2018. She claims to keep them wrapped in socks in a draw at home.

Shiffrin, a four-time overall champion, has now racked up 51 victories in the slalom as well as winning the giant slalom (18), combined (one), parallel slalom (two), city event (three), downhill (three) and super-G (five), making her the only skier, male or female, to have won in all FIS disciplines.

Shiffrin's three-season streak as overall women's World Cup champion ended with a horrible season marked by the sudden death of her father Jeff in February 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic and a back injury as she went winless for the first time since her debut campaign, 2011-12, when she was 16.

After her father's death she returned home to Colorado and spent more than 300 days off the piste. It was a year, she said, that "felt like 20 years".

Shiffrin eventually rebounded with four podium finishes, including combined gold, at the 2021 world championships in



USA's Mikaela Shiffrin (also inset) competes in the second run of the Women's Giant Slalom in Plan de Corones (Kronplatz), Dolomites Mountains, as part of the FIS Alpine World Ski Championships. (AFP)

Cortina d'Ampezzo. But disaster struck at last year's Beijing Ol-



ympics as the American returned home from China with nothing

to show from what she dubbed an "epic under-performance". Not

only did Shiffrin fail to even finish the slalom, giant slalom and alpine combined – three events in which she had been a keen favourite – she did not get close to the podium in either the super-G or downhill either.

Her failure to add to her two Olympic golds, which she said had left her feeling "like a joke", has not replicated on this season's World Cup circuit.

Astonishing as her race-winning figures may be, they are lost on Shiffrin herself – she argues that statistics and numbers "dehumanise the sport and what every athlete is trying to achieve".

"My goal has never been to break records for most World Cup wins, points or most medals at world champs," she maintains.

It is that esoteric approach to skiing that is sometimes difficult for onlookers to grasp: she derives as much pleasure from a well-executed turn in training as she does from collecting another medal.

"I don't feel like I'm the face of skiing," Shiffrin insisted in Are after Vonn had retired from the sport.

"In my own head I'm thinking about what I'm going to have for lunch!"

CRICKET

# India become No. 1 in the ODIs after beating Kiwis 3-0

Rohit Sharma, Shubman Gill and Devon Conway hit sparkling centuries in Indore

AFP  
Indore

**B**lazing centuries from skipper Rohit Sharma and Shubman Gill powered India to a 3-0 series sweep of New Zealand and go top of the one-day international rankings yesterday.

The hosts hammered the Kiwis by 90 runs in the third match in Indore after Rohit (101) and Gill (112) put on 212 for the opening wicket to guide the hosts to 385-9 in Indore.

In reply, Devon Conway's 138 was in vain as India bowled out New Zealand for 295 in 41.2 overs for their second successive whitewash.

The victory takes India to the top of the ODI rankings ahead of World Cup holders England and New Zealand who slip from second to fourth behind Australia.

Qualification for the World Cup in India later in the year is unaffected, however, as the Kiwis have already qualified.

But Rohit, who recorded his first ODI century since January 2020, and Gill stood out in the highest opening partnership by any team against the Kiwis in the 50-over format, surpassing the 201-run stand of Virender Sehwag and Gautam Gambhir in 2009.

"In the last six games we've done most things right in ODIs," said Rohit, whose side whitewashed Sri Lanka in three matches before this.

"We're consistent in our approach with the bat and ball."

Fast bowler Shardul Thakur was named man of the match for his three wickets and crucial 25 runs batting down the order.

"Shardul has been doing it for a while," said Rohit. People call him magician in the squad and he came and delivered."

New Zealand's bowlers hit back after the pair's departure as India slipped to 293-5 before Hardik Pandya took charge, boosting the total with a 38-ball 54.

It all started with Gill smashing Lockie Ferguson for four fours and a six in a 22-run eighth over and Rohit joined the party with a few big hits over the fence.

Gill recorded his third 100-plus score in his last four ODI innings, taking off his helmet and basking in applause from the stands when he reached the milestone.

Michael Bracewell bowled Rohit and Blair Tuckner sent back Gill in the next over and India soon lost regular wickets, despite a brisk 36 from Virat Kohli.

The left-handed Ishan Kishan was run out after a mix-up with Kohli, who soon fell to Jacob Duffy. Pandya put on 54 for the seventh wicket with Thakur.

## Eye on World Cup

In reply, New Zealand lost Finn Allen on



India's players pose with the trophy after winning the third and final one-day international against New Zealand at the Holkar Cricket Stadium in Indore yesterday. (AFP)



New Zealand's Devon Conway celebrates after scoring a century during the third and final ODI against India in Indore yesterday. (AFP)

the second delivery of their chase after Pandya bowled the opener for nought.

Conway stood firm to add 106 for the second wicket with Henry Nicholls, who hit 42, and 78 for the third with Daryl

Mitchell (24). The left-handed Conway fought hard as wickets fell at the other end as he raised his third ODI hundred with a six off leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal. Thakur dented New Zealand's chase

when he struck twice with successive deliveries, Mitchell caught behind and then skipper Tom Latham caught at mid-off. Conway, who smashed 12 fours and eight sixes in his 100-ball blitz, looked unstoppable until tearaway quick Umran Malik got the batsman caught at mid-wicket. Bracewell, who hit 26, and Mitchell Santner, who made 34, attempted to keep up the fight but Bracewell's wicket off Kuldeep Yadav, who picked three wickets, spelt the end for the Black Caps.

Latham, a wicketkeeper-batsman, said the experience would help them in the World Cup.

"It's our last experience in India before the World Cup so the guys are exposed to these conditions in the three games and hopefully it'll be helpful in October," said Latham. The two teams will now play three Twenty20 internationals starting Friday in Ranchi.

## BRIEF SCORES

**India 385-9 in 50 overs** (S. Gill 112, R. Sharma 101; H. Pandya 54; B. Tilkner 3-76, J. Duffy 3-100) **beat New Zealand 295 all out in 41.2 overs** (D. Conway 138, H. Nicholls 42; S. Thakur 3-45, K. Yadav 3-62) **by 90 runs.**  
**Series:** India win three-match series 3-0.

NBA

# Green scores 42 points as Rockets end losing streak



Houston Rockets guard Jalen Green (right) is greeted by Minnesota Timberwolves center Rudy Gobert (left) and forward Kyle Anderson following the game at Toyota Center. (USA TODAY Sports)

AFP  
New York

**J**alen Green scored 11 of his career-high 42 points in the fourth quarter and the Houston Rockets held on for a 119-114 home victory over the Minnesota Timberwolves on Monday, snapping a 13-game losing skid.

After missing 10 of 13 shots and committing six turnovers in a loss at Minnesota on Saturday, Green was electric down the stretch in the rematch.

The Timberwolves trailed by 11 early in the fourth quarter, but Anthony Edwards pulled them within 100-99 on a 3-pointer with 5:06 left.

Green responded with a driving layup, a 3-pointer, an elbow jumper and a blocked shot in succession. He answered another Edwards trey with a 3-pointer of his own for a 112-103 lead with 41 seconds left. Green added a free throw with 10.7 seconds left.

Green shot 15 of 25 from the floor, including 6 of 12 from behind the arc. Alperen Sengun added 21 points, seven rebounds and seven assists as Houston ended a 10-game homecourt skid.

## Bucks 150, Pistons 130

Milwaukee scored 49 points in the first quarter and reached a season high in points while overwhelming host Detroit.

Giannis Antetokounmpo, who missed the previous five games due to left knee soreness, scored 20 first-quarter points and finished with 29 points and 12 rebounds. Brook Lopez had 21 points, Bobby Portis logged 18 points and 10 rebounds and Jevon Carter also scored 18 points for the Bucks.

Bojan Bogdanovic led the Pistons with 33 points.

## Trail Blazers 147, Spurs 127

Damian Lillard recorded 37 points and 12 assists and moved into seventh place on the all-time 3-pointers list while leading Portland past visiting San Antonio.

Lillard's seventh and final trey

of the night was the 2,283rd of his career, moving him past Jason Terry. Lillard is just seven triples behind sixth-place Vince Carter. Anfernee Simons scored 26 points and Jusuf Nurkic added 25 points, 11 rebounds, seven assists and three steals as the Trail Blazers snapped a three-game losing streak.

Keldon Johnson scored 20 points and Jeremy Sochan had 18 for the Spurs, who lost for the 10th time in the past 12 games.

## Kings 133, Grizzlies 100

Domantas Sabonis recorded a triple-double and hist Sacramento took advantage of the absence of Ja Morant to pull away from Memphis.

In a matchup with defensive ace Jaren Jackson Jr., Sabonis recorded 14 points to complement game-highs in rebounds (10) and assists (11). His sixth triple-double of the season and second in the past three outings helped the Kings win for the seventh time in their last eight games.

## Magic 113, Celtics 98

Paolo Banchero scored a team-high 23 points and Wendell Carter Jr. finished with 21 points and 11 rebounds to lead Orlando to a home victory over Boston.

It was the Magic's third victory over the Celtics in four tries this season.

It also ended Boston's nine-game winning streak. Jayson Tatum and Jaylen Brown each scored 26 points for the Celtics, who committed 18 turnovers.

## Bulls 111, Hawks 100

DeMar DeRozan scored 26 points, Zach LaVine added 20 and Nikola Vucevic posted a double-double of 14 points and 17 rebounds as host Chicago defeated Atlanta.

Chicago stretched its winning streak to three games, matching a season high, while sending the Hawks to their second straight defeat.

## Jazz 120, Hornets 102

Lauri Markkanen scored 25 points and grabbed 11 rebounds to lead Utah to a victory over Charlotte in Salt Lake City.



SPOTLIGHT

# Azarenka, Tsitsipas surge into Australian Open semis

Azarenka beats Pegula to stay in hunt for third Grand Slam title; Tsitsipas sets up clash against Khachanov

Reuters  
Melbourne

Victoria Azarenka showed glimpses of the form that took her to the 2012 and 2013 Australian Open titles with a vintage display to reach the semi-finals yesterday, before Stefanos Tsitsipas continued his march towards a maiden Grand Slam title.

Twice Grand Slam winner Azarenka meets Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina in the last four, but it was the end of the road for Sebastian Korda, whose dreams of emulating his famous father ended in pain and disappointment earlier in the day.

Having been beaten in the opening round by Jessica Pegula two years ago, Azarenka gained revenge by dismantling the in-form American third seed 6-4 6-1 to reach the semi-finals at Melbourne Park for the first time in a decade.

"We had so many rallies and I wanted to try to stay there, take opportunities because she was going to take everything if I don't try to win myself and I'm very proud that I executed my game plan really well," said Azarenka.

The 33-year-old from Belarus was aggression personified in the match but conceded that it was "nerve-racking" to play in front of Rod Laver, the Australian great after whom the main showcourt is named.

"I feel like you want to show your best tennis in front of the best and I hope I did that and you guys enjoyed watching me because I really tried my best," she added.

Former French Open runner-up Tsitsipas also showed some of his best form, sealing a 6-3 7-6(2) 6-4 win over Jiri Lehecka, and said he was happy to have all the answers to the questions the unheralded Czech posed. "I can say it was a fair dinkum type of performance," Tsitsipas said, once again bringing out the Australian slang that has become the feature of his post-match chats in the tournament this year.

"It felt different from any oth-



Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas celebrates after victory against Czech Republic's Jiri Lehecka in the Australian Open quarter-final in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

er type of match but I found the solution in the end."

Korda tried in vain to find an answer and continue playing against Karen Khachanov but threw in the towel in their quarter-final match while trailing 7-6(5) 6-3 3-0 due to a wrist issue.

The retirement followed two medical timeouts and dashed the American's hopes of emulating his father Petr's 1998 Melbourne Park triumph.

Khachanov, who had also reached the last four of the 2022 US Open, said it felt great to be back in a Grand Slam semi-final after reinventing himself.

"Obviously not the way you want to finish a match," said the 18th seed, who will face third seed Tsitsipas. "I think until a certain point, it was very competitive, very good battle."

"Sebastian beat one of my friends Daniil Medvedev in three sets and Hubert Hurkacz in five

sets I guess, he was playing great tennis.

"I'm feeling really good, to be honest, really happy with my level and how I compete and I'm looking forward to the semi-finals here in Australia the first time."

Rybakina also booked her place in the semi-finals for the first time, the Kazakh 22nd seed beating Jelena Ostapenko 6-2 6-4 in a match that was played under the roof after a rain shower

halted play. "I'm super happy," said Rybakina. "Of course, I was nervous, particularly in the last game, but I'm happy that I managed my emotions. I played really well today."

Having started her campaign on one of the outer courts at this year's championship, Rybakina was every bit the star on Rod Laver Arena with a dominant display in which she sent down 11 aces to quell 2017 Roland Garros champion Ostapenko.



Belarus' Victoria Azarenka celebrates her victory against USA's Jessica Pegula in the quarter-final yesterday. (AFP)

## RESULTS

### Men's singles - Quarter-finals

Karen Khachanov (RUSx18) bt Sebastian Korda (USAx29) 7-6 (7/5), 6-3, 3-0 ret  
Stefanos Tsitsipas (GREx3) bt Jiri Lehecka (CZE) 6-3, 7-6 (7/2), 6-4

### Women's singles - Quarter-finals

Elena Rybakina (KAZx22) bt Jelena Ostapenko (LATx17) 6-2, 6-4  
Victoria Azarenka (BLRx24) bt Jessica Pegula (USAx3) 6-4, 6-1

## AZARENKA SAYS NEWFOUND CONFIDENCE A RESULT OF CONQUERING ANXIETY

**Melbourne:** Victoria Azarenka said changing her mindset and conquering her anxiety had paved the way for her return to the semi-finals of the Australian Open after a dominant victory over third seed Jessica Pegula yesterday.

The 2012 and 2013 champion was at her aggressive best on Rod Laver Arena to beat her American opponent 6-4 6-1 and said later that she had been dealing with a fear of failure in the last few months and the problem had started to escalate. "I was at the point where I couldn't find anything I feel good about myself, not even one sentence. I broke a few racquets after my match in Ostrava (in October). That was a tough moment for me," Azarenka told reporters.

"From then, I tried to take it more simple. I started with not trying to be positive, just trying to be neutral, not to go negative. Accepting the anxiety that I have. Accepting the fear that I have. Working through it. That was step by step.

"I kept trying to go a step forward, another challenge. I learned how to start to build a process that is step by step instead of jumping to conclusions in the situation... which is pretty hard to do.

"But I'm pretty happy that the process I'm going through makes me feel confident about myself, happy about myself, and helps me to be more open, be more accepting, be compassionate. 'Compassionate' was a hard word for me to understand."

Azarenka was asked if going through the process of dealing with her anxiety helped her

understand her problems in 2013 when she had to fend off accusations of gamesmanship after her semi-final win over Sloane Stephens at Melbourne Park.

The Belarusian had taken a near-10 minute medical timeout after blowing five match points and denied the charge following her win, saying she needed treatment for a rib injury that had affected her breathing during a tense phase of the match. "It was one of the worst things I've ever gone through in my professional career," Azarenka said.

"The way I was treated after that moment, the way I had to explain myself until 10:30 p.m. because people didn't want to believe me.

**'We're regular human beings'**

"There's sometimes an incredible desire for a villain and a hero story that has to be written. But we're not villains, we're not heroes, we're regular human beings that go through so many things.

"It didn't matter how many times I said my story, it didn't cut through. Actually it's funny that you're saying that because I was thinking about it. It took me 10 years to get over it. I'm finally over that."

Azarenka faces Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina in the last four - a battle between the last two Grand Slam champions left in the draw.

"She's powerful. Big serve. She's in the semi-final, so she's playing amazing. She had tough wins," Azarenka said after her match.

"It's going to be a big challenge. I'm excited about that."

## PREVIEW

# Anyone but Djokovic: Rublev eyes first Grand Slam semi-final



Reuters  
Melbourne

Novak Djokovic remains on track for his 10th Australian Open crown after returning to his imperious best and although Andrey Rublev is not looking forward to today's quarter-final clash, he is still hoping to stop the Serbian's title charge.

In a moment of disarming honesty after his five-set win over Holger Rune, Rublev conceded he was not relishing the opportunity to face 21-times Grand Slam champion Djokovic on his favourite court.

"No one wants to face Novak," Rublev blurted out with a laugh on Rod Laver

Arena, albeit prematurely as Djokovic had yet to play his own fourth-round match. "I prefer to be in any other part of the draw - but not Novak."

Rublev's alarm was probably justified later when Djokovic steamrolled home favourite Alex de Minaur 6-2 6-1 6-2 to earn his 38th straight win on Australian soil. He has not lost at Melbourne Park since the fourth round in 2018.

By contrast, fifth seed Rublev pipped Rune courtesy of a net cord on match point, having rallied from the brink before securing a 6-3 3-6 6-3 4-6 7-6 (11-9) win. He acknowledged that luck would not cut it against Djokovic.

"The only chance I have is if I play my best tennis, just fight for every ball, and that's it. That's the only chance," Rublev



told reporters later. Djokovic has been thriving on his return to Melbourne, a year after his shock deportation, and appears to have overcome the hamstring injury that looked the biggest hurdle in his quest for a record-equalling 22nd Grand Slam title.

"He's an established top-five, top-10 player already for a few years," Djokovic said of Rublev, who has now reached a Grand Slam quarter-final seven times but never cracked the final four.

"Incredible firepower, especially from the serve and forehand corner. Just a very explosive player - little bit like De Minaur, so hopefully the result will be the same."

The other men's match today features unseeded Americans Ben Shelton and Tommy Paul, with both reaching their

first Grand Slam quarter-final to continue the success of the US men this year.

The surprise matchup between Shelton, 20, and Paul, 25, will be the first Slam quarter-final between two American men since 2007, when Andy Roddick beat Mardy Fish in the Australian Open, and will assure the US of its first men's semi-finalist in Melbourne since Roddick in 2009.

There is also a fresh face in the women's draw, with Poland's Magda Linette playing in her first major quarter-final aged 30 and taking on former world number one Karolina Pliskova. Fifth seed Aryna Sabalenka has yet to drop a set in 2023 and will aim to reach her first Australian Open semi-final when she faces unseeded Croatian Donna Vekic.



FOCUS

# Cherif and Ahmed gear up for Beach Pro Tour Finals

Both men’s and women’s winners will receive prize money of \$150,000

Agencies  
Doha

Qatar’s Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan have played several international beach volleyball events in Doha and have even won medals at some of them, but the biggest of those events is now on the horizon. The Tokyo Olympic bronze medallists are one of the ten men’s teams set to compete at the Volleyball World Beach Pro Tour Finals, which will take place at the Aspire Zone from tomorrow till January 29 and will bring the historic inaugural season of the Tour to a close.

The tournament will be the highlight of a busy period of competition in Doha for the Qatari duo, who played in the King of the Court Finals from January 11-14 and will also participate in the opening event of the 2023 Beach Pro Tour season, an Elite16 tournament to be held from February 1-5. “It’s really good that the season will start here in Doha,” Cherif said. “And we’ll have three tournaments in a row. We’ll just stay home, work hard and get ready for those events.”

While playing at home obviously adds an extra level of incentive, it typically also fosters higher expectations and a desire to please home fans, especially if, as will be the case for Cherif and Ahmed, they are the only representatives of the host nation. The Qataris have thrived in Doha before, taking gold at an FIVB World Tour one-star event in 2021 and bronze at a World Tour tournament in 2018, and feel they are prepared to handle the expectations of their supporters during the Beach Pro Tour Finals.

“People expect a lot from us, but so do we,” Cherif said. “As Olympic medallists, everybody expects us to take gold in every tournament we play, or at least make it to the semi-finals. We consider it fun, but at the same time, it adds some pressure. But I think we know how to handle it, especially because we have this mindset of just going and getting it.”

The recipe they use to cope with pressure is the same as they use to succeed when competing at the top international tournaments around the world. Although they do expect certain results from themselves, they are actually more focused on doing everything in their power to perform at the best possible level. With that,



Top seeds Cherif Younousse (left) and Ahmed Tijan face stiff competition from the likes of reigning Olympic and World champions from Norway Anders Mol and Christian Sorum.

they believe, they will be in a position to accomplish their goals no matter what.

And in 2022, the Qataris undoubtedly played very well. Set to enter the Finals as the top-seeded men’s duo, Cherif and Ahmed currently rank second in the FIVB World Rankings and won as many as four medals in the ten tournaments they played at last year. The Qataris were the first men to win gold at an Elite16 event with their victory in Rosarito and went on to win silver (Jurmala) and bronze (Cape Town) in two other events at the same level. At the Challenge level, the Qataris won the event in the Maldives. Perhaps most importantly, they were in the top ten at each event they played at and got top-five finishes six times.

“It was a tough season, but we consider it a positive one,” Cherif reflected. “We

started the season as the world’s number one team, but had some ups and downs and lost some spots. Near the end of the year, we got to second place and that was good. We couldn’t win every time, but we were always among the best and that’s the most important thing. The level is so high now that a pool phase match could easily be the final of a tournament. Next season is going to be a big one with Olympic qualification. It’s going to be interesting.”

The teams trying to prevent Cherif and Ahmed from winning the Beach Pro Tour Finals at home will be Norway’s Anders Mol/Christian Sorum, the Netherlands’ Alexander Brouwer/Robert Meeuwssen, Brazil’s Andre Loyola/George Wanderley and Vitor Felipe/Renato Lima, Poland’s Michal Bryl/Bartosz Losiak, Italy’s Paolo Nicolai/Samuele Cottaflava and Adrian

Carambula/Alex Ranghieri, the Czech Republic’s Ondrej Perusic/David Schweiner and Chile’s Marco Grimalt/Esteban Grimalt.

The women’s event is headed by Brazilian World champions Eduarda ‘Duda’ Santos Lisboa and Ana Patricia Silva Ramos, who won five Elite16 medals in 2022, including gold in Gstaad and Uberlandia.

The duo will have competition from compatriots Barbara Seixas and Carolina Solberg, arguably one of the most consistent teams on the tour in 2022, as well as another team who scooped two Elite16 titles during the season, Katja Stam and Raisa Schoon from the Netherlands. The winners of the Finals will each be crowned 2022 Beach Pro Tour champions and receive an equal prize money of \$150,000 of the overall \$800,000 prize purse.

PREMIER LEAGUE

## Kane ignored illness to earn share of Spurs goal record

AFF  
London

Harry Kane revealed he shook off a fever to move level with Jimmy Greaves as Tottenham’s joint record scorer with his 266th goal for the club in Monday’s 1-0 win at Fulham. The England captain netted on the stroke of half-time with a clinical strike from the edge of the penalty area at Craven Cottage.

Greaves’ Tottenham record had stood since 1970, but Kane’s first goal in his last three appearances gave him a share of the milestone. However, Kane played after ignoring the lingering effects of an illness which gave him a sleepless night on Sunday.

“Last night was a tough night, up every couple of hours. A bug or virus. I have three kids, but I have a day off tomorrow,” Kane said. “To get the goal and equal the record was a nice feeling.”

Tottenham boss Antonio Conte hailed Kane’s desire to play through his illness. “I want to underline that Harry played with a fever. He was not so good but he wanted to play because he understood the moment, he understood that he is a point of reference for us, for me and the other players,” Conte said.

Kane could have broken Greaves’ record in the second half, but his close-range header was superbly saved by Bernd Leno. “I wasn’t thinking about the record but whenever I miss a chance that I expect to score I’m disappointed,” Kane said. “I knew it would have broken the record but he made a good save.”

The 29-year-old is now one short of becoming the third player to net 200 Premier League goals, after Alan Shearer (260) and Wayne Rooney (208). Kane is also level with Rooney as England’s joint record goalscorer after bagging his 53rd international goal in the World Cup quarter-final defeat against France in December.

Showing his selfless nature, Kane was more relieved that Tottenham ended a damaging run of two successive league defeats. Their victory at Fulham closed the gap on fourth placed Manchester United to three points, with Kane admitting a meeting among Conte and the squad had helped produce the improved performance.

“A really important win for us, especially after the last couple of games,” Kane said. “We are little bit behind where we want to be but tonight was important. We had a good talk amongst our-



Tottenham Hotspur’s Harry Kane celebrates after scoring against Fulham during the Premier League match. (Reuters)

selves, just to get back to what we are good at, clean sheets and hard to break down.”

Yet to win a major trophy for club or country, Kane has been linked with a close-season move to Manchester United. But he insisted he is not thinking about his future with so much at stake at Tottenham this season. “I am concentrating on this season. There will always be talk about my future, I just want to focus on my job on the pitch,” Kane said. “There is a long way to go, a lot to play for like the Champions League, FA Cup and that is what my focus is on.”

Greaves, who died aged 81 in 2021, is regarded as one of the most natural goal scorers in football history. A member of England’s 1966 World Cup-winning squad, who netted 44 times for his country, Greaves is the highest scorer in English top-flight history with 357 goals.

Kane’s share of the Tottenham record drew praise from the club’s former striker Gary Lineker. “What an incredible achievement for Harry Kane to equal the great Jimmy Greaves as all-time top scorer for Spurs,” Lineker tweeted. “And, yes, before you start, I know he’s not won anything. Also, that fact doesn’t make him any the less of a footballer.”

ROUND-UP

## Mane returns to training with Bayern

Bayern Munich forward **Sadio Mane** returned to training yesterday, as the Senegalese international continued his recovery from a leg injury which forced him out of the World Cup. In a video published on the club’s Twitter page, Mane appeared on the snow-covered pitch at Munich’s Saebener Strasse training ground, telling the cameras “Hey, it’s a good feeling, after a long holiday, to be back.”

Mane, 30, injured his right leg during Bayern’s 6-1 home win against Werder Bremen on November 8 and underwent surgery, ruling him out of Senegal’s World Cup campaign. Bayern coach Julian Nagelsmann said in early January that Mane, who arrived last summer from Liverpool, could be in line for a return for the second leg of their Champions League last-16 clash against Paris Saint-Germain on March 8. “If everything goes really well, he may be able to play again against Paris,” Nagelsmann said, telling the media there’s only a “small chance he plays the first leg”.

**TEN-MAN INTER SLIP TO DEFEAT AGAINST EMPOLI**  
Inter Milan missed the chance to go second in Serie A when they slipped to a 1-0 defeat at home to Empoli on Monday.

Inter, who had won their last nine league games against Empoli, began the day in third but their hopes of climbing above city rivals AC Milan into second



were hampered five minutes before half-time when Milan Skriniar was dismissed for a second yellow card.

The Slovak defender, who has been linked with a move to Paris Saint-Germain, was booked for obstruction in the 25th minute before being shown the red card for a nasty tackle. The only goal came after 66 minutes when Nedim Bajrami provided the assist for 19-year-old Tommaso Baldanzi to fire home off his left foot for his third goal of the season. Inter remain third, a point behind AC Milan who play at Lazio on Tuesday, and level on points with Roma. Napoli are the runaway leaders, 12 points clear at the top.

FRENCH CUP

## Mbappe scores five in PSG rout of amateur minnows

AFF  
Paris

Kylian Mbappe became the first Paris Saint-Germain player to score five times in one match as the Ligue 1 giants crushed sixth-tier amateur minnows Pays de Cassel 7-0 in the French Cup on Monday night.

Mbappe, who scored a hat-trick in France’s defeat by Argentina in the World Cup final just over a month ago, netted a hat-trick in the first half here as PSG led 4-0 at the break against their regional league opponents. He struck twice more after the restart, with Neymar and Carlos Soler scoring PSG’s other goals in the last-32 tie. The Qatar-owned club, who have won the French Cup 14 times, more than any other team, will now play away to bitter rivals Marseille in the last 16 early next month. That match is scheduled for the week beginning February 6, just a week before PSG host Bayern Munich in the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie.

Mbappe was given the captain’s armband while Neymar also started, but Lionel Messi was rested, allowed to sit out this tie played before a full house at the



Paris Saint-Germain’s Kylian Mbappe jumps over Pays de Cassel’s goalkeeper Romain Samson on his way to scoring during the French Cup round of 32 match. (AFP)

38,000-seat Stade Bollaert-Delelis in Lens. Pays de Cassel are a tiny club representing a handful of villages inland from the port town of Dunkirk in France’s far north, but their remarkable run to this stage of the tournament stoked the inter-

est of the whole region.

They performed admirably in the early stages against the Ligue 1 leaders, but their resistance was broken just before the half-hour mark when Mbappe turned in a Nuno Mendes cutback, the ball taking

## FORMER PORTUGAL BOSS SANTOS NAMED AS POLAND COACH

**Warsaw:** Fernando Santos, who was the Portuguese national team’s manager until last month, was yesterday named as Poland’s new coach. “From today, I am Polish. I am one of you,” Santos declared at the official ceremony in Warsaw. “It is an honour to continue my work as a trainer here,” he added.

“I am convinced that we will work hard to give the Poles a lot of joy. I am sure that we will achieve success,” Santos told

journalists at the press conference called to announce the nomination. Santos, 68, succeeds Czeslaw Michniewicz, who was sacked last month following a last-16 elimination at the World Cup in Qatar.

Poland finished second in their group, beating Saudi Arabia, drawing with Mexico and losing to eventual champions Argentina. In the last 16 for the first time in 36 years, they went out after a tame 3-1 defeat at the hands of eventual runners-

up France. Lisbon-born Santos quit as Portugal coach in December, following the team’s shock World Cup quarter-final loss to Morocco. Appointed coach of Portugal in September 2014, Santos won the country’s first major title at Euro 2016 and followed it up with the 2019 Nations League.

However, his time in charge also saw last-16 exits at the 2018 World Cup and Euro 2020. Santos also coached the

Greece national team from 2010-2014. “The choice was difficult but we have chosen the best,” said Cezary Kulesza, head of the Polish football federation. “Our first objective is to qualify for the European Championship” which will take place in Germany in 2024, he added.

When he first revealed the new coach’s name, Kulesza misspoke, calling him “Felipe” instead of Fernando, drawing ridicule from local media.