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TENNIS

Sabalenka wins Australian Open for first Slam crown

Hard-hitting Belarusian collapses to the court in tears after beating Wimbledon champion Rybakina 4-6, 6-3, 6-4

AFP
Melbourne

An emotional Aryna Sabalenka said it will take a "few more days" to sink in after battling from a set down to win a maiden Grand Slam title at the Australian Open yesterday.

The hard-hitting Belarusian collapsed to the court in tears after winning 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 against Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina in a high-quality 2hr 28min arm-wrestle on Rod Laver Arena. The 24-year-old Sabalenka wiped away tears before getting a warm hug from Moscow-born Rybakina, who played a full part in a thrilling match between two of the most powerful hitters in the women's game.

Sabalenka, the fifth seed and form player in 2023, then ran to her player's box to celebrate with her team. "Thank you, my team, the craziest team on the tour. We've been through a lot of, I would say, downs last year," Sabalenka said, addressing her team after receiving the trophy.

Turning to beaten 22nd seed Rybakina, she added: "You're such a great player and of course we are going to have many more battles, hopefully in finals of the Grand Slams."

Asked by reporters if it was the greatest match she had ever played, Sabalenka said: "I would say it was. She played unbelievable tennis. I fought so hard to win this one. I think the tennis was great... I really enjoyed this battle."

Sabalenka will now rise to second in the world rankings behind Poland's Iga Swiatek, equalling her career high, having triumphed in her first Grand Slam final. The finale was a captivating match of brutal groundstrokes, precision serving and wonderful rallies from two players at the top of their game.

It was a fitting end to two weeks of drama and shocks at Melbourne Park.



Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka (left) of Belarus celebrates with the Daphne Akhurst Memorial Cup after her win over Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina in the women's singles final in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

"I need a few more days to realise what just happened," Sabalenka said. "Oh my god, I'm speechless, to be honest." Rybakina cruised through the first set in 34 minutes but Sabalenka scrapped her way back in a 57-minute second set

to take it to a nervy decider. It was then a case of which of the big servers would blink first in a toe-to-toe battle.

At 3-3 Rybakina - who represents Kazakhstan - could not find enough first serves and though she saved two

break points, a third was too much, and Sabalenka had the finish line in sight. Another ace took her to 5-3 but the 23-year-old Rybakina held to force Sabalenka to test her nerves and serve for the championship.



Aryna Sabalenka gets emotional after her win over Elena Rybakina.

She was up to the challenge, but needed four nerve-shredding match points after a display where she hit an astonishing 51 winners and 17 aces. She remains unbeaten in 2023. "I just kept telling myself that nobody said this is going to be easy. She's going to fight, this is the final, just work for it," Sabalenka said afterwards, describing how she got through those four match points.

"Take a deep breath and just work. I was just super happy that I was able to handle all the emotions in the last game, it was super tough for me," added Sabalenka, who had reached three Grand Slam semi-finals before this year but never gone farther.

She suffered nerves in the past and struggled badly with her serve last year. "They were really tough matches and

I just couldn't understand until right now that I really needed that to understand what I have to change," Sabalenka added, casting her mind back. "I now know what else I have to work on and I'm just super happy right now to break through this wall."

Rybakina will have the consolation of breaking into the top 10 for the first time, after reaching her second Grand Slam final in seven months. She was awarded no ranking points for her Wimbledon win because of the ban on Russian and Belarusian players there.

"I don't think tomorrow I'm going to feel different just because of the ranking now," said a disappointed Rybakina, who is projected to rise to 10th from her current 25th when the new rankings are published tomorrow.

QNB STARS LEAGUE

Sadd face Markhiya, aim for third successive victory

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Sadd will look to continue their resurgent run when they take on Al Markhiya in the QNB Stars League today. The defending champions have bounced back in great style with two successive wins over Al Rayyan and Al Arabi and are sixth with 13 points, with two games in hand.

The return of their international stars post-World Cup have seen Sadd back at full force. The likes of Santi Cazorla, Andre Ayew and Jung Woo-Young, the return of Brazilian midfielder Guilherme Torres from injury, and the presence of stars Akram Afif, Hassan al-Haydos and Boualem Khoukhi have made them the team to beat.

For Al Markhiya, who are ninth, it will be a rough test. They would, however, be inspired by the fact that they edged Sadd 4-3 in the first leg match played at the Khalifa International Stadium, which Wolves coach Juan Manuel Lillo Juanma was eager to point out yesterday.

"Al Markhiya are a team that has great strength and has been built very well. They were recently promoted from the second division, but have shown excellence. I think we played well in our opening match of the league against them. In that match, for example, we had approximately 35-40 minutes but we lost 4-3," Juanma said.

"I am happy with the return of all our players who were with the national team. We have become stronger and we hope to continue working to achieve more victories," he added.



Al Sadd coach Juan Manuel Lillo Juanma speaks at a press conference yesterday.

Al Markhiya coach Abdullah Mubarak said his team needs to put more efforts and focus against reigning champions. "We are playing against a champion side and refreshed team after their victory over Al Arabi, as they seek to make a comeback into the competition strongly, so this

confrontation match our team to be ready at all technical, tactical and mental levels. We will work to present a good level and it is a match that needs double efforts and concentration," he said.

In another match, Al Saliya will take Al Gharafa in what is crucial match for both sides having lost

their previous matches. Saliya need to work their way to move away from the realms of relegation since they are now bottom placed with only four points. Considered as the one with the second weakest attack, Al Saliya have scored only eight goals in their 10 matches. Their defence too has been found wanting, having conceded 23 goals.

Al Saliya recently signed up Moroccan midfielder Ismail Javi to enhance their attack line and they will hopes that the 22-year-old will help them save relegation.

On the other hand, Gharafa fell to seventh spot after being in the top four and will aim to shore up. They earned only one point in their last three matches having lost to Al Duhail and Qatar SC, and played out a 2-2 draw with Al Rayyan 2-2. Since Portuguese Pedro Martins took over as Al Gharafa's coach, the team is yet to taste a win.

"In our last round against Al Rayyan, we deserved to win as we created many goal-scoring opportunities. We have to be more effective when we have such opportunities. Although we controlled the game, we couldn't gain the three points which were very important to us," Martins said.

Meanwhile, Al Ahli face Umm Salal today. Ahli are fifth with 14 points, while Umm Salal are 10th with seven points.

Led by their Montenegrin coach Nebojsa Jovic, Ahli will face a tough contest against Umm Salal, who are guided by coach Wesam Rizik.

The teams' battle will revolve around the coaches aiming to achieve the valuable three points and to gain a motivational push ahead of the start of the second division matches of the league this season.

Al Sadd to take legal action against Hassan

Doha: QNB Stars League side Al Sadd SC yesterday said it will take legal action against Abdelkarim Hassan after the defender joined Al Jahra SC of the Kuwait Premier League. The club said, in a statement posted on their website, that Hassan had "unilaterally early terminated his employment contract with Al Sadd FC without any just cause and/or valid reason."

The statement added: "Al Sadd FC has therefore already given mandate to their lawyers to take all the relevant legal actions against the player/Abdul Karim Hassan and any third club for protecting their own image and interests."

Sadd had in a tweet on December 21 announced that Hassan was 'excluded from the team permanently'.

Hassan, the 2018 Asian Footballer of the Year, has reportedly signed a one-year contract with Kuwait's Al Jahra as the club unveiled him last week. The 29-year-old has found himself in hot waters after the FIFA World Cup, with the Qatar Football Association earlier this month suspending him indefinitely and also deducting 50 percent of his salary besides a fine of QR200,000.

DUBAI DESERT CLASSIC

Bland shares lead as McIlroy heads for driving range

'I THINK EVERYBODY UNDERSTANDS MY POSITION AT THE AGE THAT I'M AT'

AFP
Dubai

England's Richard Bland moved into a share of the lead at the Dubai Desert Classic yesterday as Rory McIlroy headed to the driving range after an inconsistent round.

With heavy rain forcing a Monday finish Bland, who lost in a play-off last year, added a second straight five-under-par 67 to top the midway leaderboard with Belgium's Thomas Pieters (67) and American amateur Michael Thorbjornsen (64).

Sweden's Marcus Kinhult (65), Scotland's Connor Syme (67) and Spain's Adri Arnaus (68) were tied for fourth at nine-under par on a day when the sun was finally shining.

But the 60-odd millimetres of rain dumped over the past few days had made the conditions soft and the preferred lies rules were still in play, abetting the low scores.

World number one McIlroy was not best pleased with his round of two-under-par 70.

He moved to eight-under par to be tied for seventh, but headed straight to the driving range to sort out an erring driver.

The round was helped by an eagle on the 13th hole, where he drained a putt from 34 feet. Otherwise, he just had one birdie and a bogey on an easy scoring day.

"Just a little rusty. Yeah, need to go do a little work," he said.

"I think it's nice when you're not feeling on your game you have a short game to sort of bail you out, and I think that's the reason why I'm still not too far



England's Richard Bland registered a second straight five-under-par 67 at the Dubai Desert Classic.

away from the lead." - Bland out to make amends - Bland, who lost out 12 months ago to Viktor Hovland, made just one bogey in the 36 holes

and was delighted with his own form.

"The conditions were a lot easier. The ball wasn't going too far this morning. So that was

kind of one of the things you just had to be wary of," he said.

"It's just nice to play with the sun on your back which we're used to in Dubai," added the

winner of the British Masters in 2021.

On his allegiance with LIV golf, and the acrimony it has generated with players and officials resorting to verbal attacks, Bland said he just wanted to keep his focus on playing golf.

"I think everybody understands my position at the age that I'm at and the opportunity put in front of me," commented Bland, who turns 50 next week.

For Pieters, it was a round of two halves. He was two-over after making three bogeys on the more difficult front nine, but putted beautifully on the back nine to make seven birdies.

"The front nine, I was a bit scruffy. I made two bogeys with a wedge. Coming off the ninth, I was not in a good head space," said world number 39 Pieters, who missed the cut as the defending champion in Abu Dhabi last week.

Stanford junior Thorbjornsen, ranked second in the world amateur golf rankings, made an eagle on the 18th and five birdies in his front nine after starting from the 10th tee.

"I enjoy playing professional golf a lot and I'm still an amateur," he said.

"Just the golf courses that we play, the crowd out there, it's what I'm dreaming of ever since I was five or six years old. It just feels good to be out there."

LIV players Patrick Reed and Ian Poulter are also alongside McIlroy in a group of eight men on eight-under.

Luke Donald will play with Henrik Stenson, whom he replaced as Ryder Cup captain after the Swede was sacked for joining LIV, in Sunday's third round.

GOLF

Rahm closes in on leader Ryder at Torrey Pines

AFP
Los Angeles

Jon Rahm, chasing a third straight US PGA Tour title and a possible return to number one in the world, piled the pressure on Farmers Insurance Open leader Sam Ryder on Friday.

Spain's Rahm, ranked third in the world, fired a six-under par 66 that featured an eagle and five birdies on the Torrey Pines South Course to move within two strokes of Ryder's lead.

Ryder, who started the day with a three-shot cushion over Brendan Steele, needed all of his patience on the way to an even par 72 that included an early bogey offset by one birdie and left him on 12-under par 204. Rahm, who started the day eight adrift, said his goal was to "catch up as much as possible."

After following a birdie at the fourth with a bogey at the fifth, Rahm exploded to pick up five strokes in the space of four holes with birdies at the sixth, seventh and eighth and an eagle at the ninth, where he rolled in a 12-foot putt.

"I just kept giving myself pretty much the easiest putts," Rahm said. "Then on nine, put it in the fairway and was contender for best shot of the year for me already, which was the second shot into the green. I tattooed that five-wood and ended up having 10 feet for eagle."

Rahm added a 13-foot birdie at the 15th, but had to battle to save par at the last two holes after finding fairway bunkers at both. Even with some disap-

pointing shots, Rahm said, he "never really lost composure."

"I stayed really patient out there and took advantage of the holes I could take advantage of and played what I would say was very smart throughout the round," said the Spaniard, who won the first of his nine US PGA Tour titles at Torrey Pines in 2017 and captured his first major on the course in La Jolla, California, at the US Open in 2021.

Rahm, who opened the year with a victory at the Tournament of Champions in Hawaii and won the American Express in La Quinta, California, last week, is seeking to become the first player since Dustin Johnson in 2017 to win three straight PGA Tour starts.

LEADING THIRD-ROUND SCORES

- (USA unless noted, par-72)
- 204-Sam Ryder 64-68-72
- 206-Jon Rahm (ESP) 73-67-66
- 208-Tony Finau 73-71-64
- 209-Im Sung-jae (KOR) 68-74-67
- Collin Morikawa 67-72-70
- Max Homa 68-70-71
- Sahith Theegala 66-72-71
- 210-Kim Seong-hyeon (KOR) 67-74-69
- 211-Keegan Bradley 70-73-68
- Rickie Fowler 72-72-67
- Joseph Bramlett 69-71-71
- An Byeong-hun (KOR) 68-72-71
- Sam Stevens 66-72-73
- Brendan Steele 65-70-76
- 212-Ryan Palmer 71-71-70
- Xander Schauffele 72-71-69
- Hideki Matsuyama (JPN) 70-73-69
- Lanto Griffin 67-75-70
- Taylor Moore 72-68-72
- Jimmy Walker 69-71-72
- Callum Tarren (ENG) 71-69-72
- Adam Schenk 71-73-68
- Jason Day (AUS) 68-71-73



Jon Rahm lines up a putt on the 13th hole during the third round of the Farmers Insurance Open. (USA TODAY Sports)

OPEN BLITZ CHESS

Rawlinson triumphs

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Open Blitz Chess Tournament organised by the Qatar Chess Training Center under the supervision of the Qatar Chess Association (QCA) concluded with 94 players taking part in the event.

The competition was held in the blitz chess method according to the Swiss system of nine rounds of three minutes and two seconds per move, in the presence of Mohamed al-Mudahka, president QCA.

The Philippines' Loyola Rawlinson claimed the title garnering 8.5 points ahead of runners-up Syed Abdul Qadir of India. Argentina's Christian came third while Egypt's Mahmoud Badr finished fourth.

Ryan Mendouza was 5th, Algeria's Jamal Verhi 6th while India's Albin Sajjan and Syria's Mohamed Ptaah ended 7th and 8th respectively.

Mudahka said the tournament witnessed great excitement among the participants, and this began clearly with



Players ponder a move as QCA president Mohamed al-Mudahka looks on.

the convergence of points at the end of the competitions, pointing out that the tournament had a large participation.

He said, "the establishment of such various activities and events on an ongoing basis has several positives, including expanding the game further in Qatar and preparing a conscientious chess generation that is able to honourably represent our national teams in international events stressing that the coming period will witness many important and powerful tournaments that will organised by QCA."



The winners celebrate with their trophies on the podium of the Open Blitz Chess Tournament.

Perth Scorchers overcome Sydney Sixers to secure BBL final berth

Perth: The Perth Scorchers managed to blunt an in-form Steve Smith and choke the Sydney Sixers yesterday, advancing directly to the Big Bash League (BBL) final by way of a seven-wicket victory at home. The four-time champions restricted the Sixers to 151-8 before replying with 154-3 in 18.3 overs. Skipper Ashton Turner led from the front with a powerful 84 not out from 47 balls.

Sydney Sixers must now win a knockout final on Thursday against one of Brisbane Heat or Melbourne Renegades to return to Western Australia for the Feb. 4 decider. "We know the blueprint to success here in Perth," Turner told reporters.

"A positive brand of cricket is the only way to approach just about every situation out here."

The Scorchers opened their run chase in disastrous fashion, reduced to 22-3 after Sixers' seamer Sean Abbott (3-25) repeatedly induced catching opportunities. Turner and opener Cameron Bancroft then partnered sensibly in the middle overs, regularly working singles and judiciously looking for boundaries. But they did take some risks, and Bancroft (53 not out) survived one bizarre scare when he skied a ball which neither the keeper nor point fielder chased after, both expecting the other to move into position.

Turner accelerated towards the end of the chase, bludgeoning nine fours and a six as he scripted a victory which delighted the strong crowd of 41,116. The reigning champions have continued their domination this season with 12 wins from 15 matches despite the unavailability of many first-choice players. All-rounders Mitchell Marsh and Cameron Green sustained injuries prior to the tournament, fast bowlers Jhye Richardson and Matthew Kelly were recently sidelined, and spinner Ashton Agar is preparing for Australia's test tour of India. Earlier, the Sixers had a shaky start themselves when pacer Jason Behrendorff (2-17) delivered two wickets in

the first three overs. Kurtis Patterson departed for six courtesy of a spectacular one-handed catch at mid-on by Aaron Hardie, who spilt a simple chance soon afterwards to give 33-year-old opener Smith a life on 12. Smith has been on a scintillating run of form, including back-to-back centuries, since joining the BBL after his international obligations. English import David Payne (3-33) held a sharp caught-and-bowled, however, to send Australia's premier batsman packing on 18 leaving captain Moises Henriques (58) and Jordan Silk (47 not out) the ultimately unsuccessful task of rebuilding the innings.

CRICKET

Fast and furious Proteas triumph as England collapse

AFP
Bloemfontein, South Africa

Fast bowlers Sisanda Magala, Anrich Nortje and Kagiso Rabada earned South Africa a dramatic 27-run win in the first one-day international against England at the Manga Oval in Bloemfontein on Friday.

England seemed headed for a comfortable win as Jason Roy and Dawid Malan put on 146 for the first wicket inside the first 20 overs of England's reply to South Africa's 298 for seven. Roy went on to score a thrilling 113 off 91 balls but the rest of the batting collapsed.

Magala made the crucial breakthrough when Malan mistimed an attempted pull against a short-pitched ball and was caught for 59. He followed up by trapping debutant Harry Brook leg before wicket for nought. Magala took three for 46 and was named man of the match, while Nortje (four for 62) and Rabada (two for 46) were irresistible as the match reached a climax. Five of the wickets fell to short-pitched bowling.

"The pitch was a bit two-paced and it made the bouncers effective," said Magala. England captain Jos Buttler said he was disappointed that his side had not maintained the aggressive intent shown by



South Africa's Sisanda Magala celebrates with teammates after the dismissal of England's Moeen Ali (not pictured) during the first ODI in Bloemfontein. (AFP)

Roy and Malan. "South Africa came back really well but I thought we could have kept trying to take it on and put pressure on them," he said. Although he finished on the losing side, Roy gave an emphatic answer to critics who have questioned his place in the team after a poor run of form since he helped England win the World

Cup in 2019. He had made only one century since the World Cup, against second-tier Netherlands, and his previous eight innings had yielded only 160 runs with a highest score of 43. But Roy was in dominant form from the start of his innings, reaching his fifty off 45 balls and his century off 79 deliveries. He hit 11 fours and

four sixes. Rassie van der Dussen hit a contrasting century to enable South Africa to post a challenging total. Van der Dussen made 111 off 117 balls, hitting only six boundaries. He held the innings together as England's bowlers came back strongly after an opening stand of 61 off 52 balls between Quinton de Kock and captain Temba Bavuma. England fast bowler Jofra Archer was expensive in his first one-day international since September 2020, taking one for 81 in ten overs. But the rest of the England bowlers made the batsmen work hard for their runs on a slow pitch.

South Africa's total was only 12 runs higher than the average first innings total on a ground known for high scoring. Left-armers Sam Curran took three for 35 in nine overs, mixing up his pace and making good use of the bouncer - a formula which later worked well for the South Africans. The three-match series is part of the World Cup Super League and the win was a boost for South Africa, who have yet to earn automatic qualification for the World Cup in India later this year.

BRIEF SCORES: South Africa 298-7 in 50 overs (R. van der Dussen 111, D. Miller 53, S. Curran 3-35) **bt England 271 in 44.2 overs** (J. Roy 113, D. Malan 59, A. Nortje 4-62, S. Magala 3-46) **by 27 runs.**

QATAR GRAND PRIX FENCING

Egypt's Mohsen only Arab qualifier into next round

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The preliminary rounds of the men's event of the Qatar Grand Prix Fencing Championship 2023 were successfully concluded at the Aspire Dome yesterday, with Egypt's Mahmoud Mohsen, the world No. 181, emerging as the only Arab qualifier into the round of 64.

The 27-year-old Cairo resident Mohsen will be joining World No. 16 Houssam Elkord of Morocco, who like all the top-32 fencers got a bye into the round of 64, as the two Arab representatives at the three-day epee competition on the final day today.

Just like the women's event on Friday, almost all the top-ranked

male fencers advanced into the next round of the one-series, nine-city International Fencing Federation (FIE)-organised senior competition at the expense of their lower-ranked counterparts.

The Qatari team, led by world No. 883 Jaber al-Fadaa, gave a good account of itself despite not advancing into the next round.

Al-Fadaa, the highest-ranked Qatari fencer in the competition, had the best result for the hosts on the day, and he came close to a round of 64 qualification after defeating India's Udair Singh 15-9 in the first round, only for him to suffer defeat by the same scoreline at the hands of Hong Kong's Ho Tin Ng in the next round, dashing his hopes of advancement.

His teammates Mohamed al-Oulan (ranked 903), Mohamed

al-Hazaa (ranked 904), Me-shaal al-Qahtani (ranked 915), Youssef Abdeltawab, Mohamed Abdulali, and Abdulrahman al-Jadra, however, also gave a good account of themselves despite suffering defeats at the hands of their higher-ranked opponents.

Speaking about the tournament, Khaled al-Suwaid, the tournament director, said the competition has witnessed great success on all levels, including the organisation and every technical aspect of it. "We've received great applause from the International Fencing Federation (FIE) for the good organisation and preparation of the competition, which has witnessed the participation of the best fencers in the world from 52 countries.

"We look forward to a grand finale on Sunday, and we believe

everyone will witness great performances from the athletes," he said.

Qatar Grand Prix Fencing Championship 2023 will come to a close today, with the final events in both the women and men categories. Starting with the round of 64 at 5:30pm (Qatar time), the competition will then advance from there into the finals, with the final of the men's category rounding up the three-day event.

Points collected from the \$22,000 total prize money event will count in the Olympic qualification race for the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. Winners in both categories get \$5,000 each, while the second-place finisher walks away with \$3,000. The semi-finalists will each earn \$1,500.



Qatar's Abdulrahman al-Jadra (left) in action during the Qatar Grand Prix Fencing Championship yesterday.

TENNIS / AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Djokovic riding high in pursuit of 22nd title and top ranking

'This is a very humbling opportunity for me, being in the finals here means a lot'



Stefanos Tsitsipas



Novak Djokovic

AFP
Melbourne

Novak Djokovic has won all nine of his previous Australian Open finals so confidence is sky-high as he bids to equal Rafael Nadal's Grand Slam record and return to world number one.

That makes the Serb heavy favourite but in Stefanos Tsitsipas his invincibility will face a major test when they meet in the Melbourne Park title match today.

While Djokovic is into a record 33rd Grand Slam final and bidding to equal Nadal's 22 major crowns, the Greek third seed will play only his second.

Adding spice to the showdown, the winner will become world number one, dethroning Spanish teenager Carlos Alcaraz.

That is added incentive for Djokovic, who last held the top ranking in June. "Winning Grand Slams and being the number one in the world are probably the two biggest peaks that you can climb as a professional tennis player," the 35-year-old said.

In Tsitsipas's only previous Grand Slam final, at Roland Garros in 2021, he fell to Djokovic in five sets after holding a 2-0 lead.

But the 24-year-old believes he has matured as a player and a person and is now better suited to the big stage in his quest to become the first Greek player to win a Grand Slam title.

"I couldn't be more ready for this moment," said Tsitsipas, the youngest man to reach the Melbourne final since a 23-year-old Djokovic in 2011. "This is a very humbling opportunity for me, being in the finals here means a

lot. "Having started here as one of my first junior Grand Slams and being now in the finals of the men's event is as important as my very first steps that I took on the tennis court.

"I'm going to grasp this opportunity."

In a sign of Tsitsipas's growing stature, he made the final after falling in the Melbourne semis three times previously.

Fourth seed Djokovic, who missed last year's event when he was deported over his Covid vaccination stance, said he was eager to see what his opponent would bring to the table.

"I'm of course very satisfied and pleased to be in another Grand Slam final. This is exactly what I've imagined and hoped will happen when I came to Australia," he said. "I think that the experience of being in this par-

ticular situation and circumstances before helps. "I think also the fact that I never lost the Australian Open final definitely serves as a great confidence-booster prior to Sunday."

BUOYANT TSITSIPAS

Djokovic is strong favourite given his vast experience on the Melbourne hardcourts and also holding a 10-2 career record over Tsitsipas.

But he has been struggling with a hamstring injury and off-court distractions after his father sparked a scandal when he was pictured posing next to a fan with a Russian flag featuring the face of Vladimir Putin.

Tsitsipas said he was ready to cause an upset. "I'm playing great tennis. I'm enjoying myself. I just see no downside or negativity in what I'm trying to

do out there," he said. "I genuinely believe in what I'm able to produce. That is more than enough."

Both players are unbeaten this season. Djokovic is on an 11-match win streak after lifting the Adelaide title prior to Melbourne while Tsitsipas is 10-0 following his exploits at the mixed teams United Cup.

Melbourne has big Greek and Serbian communities with both expected to be out in force to cheer on their idols. Djokovic is looking forward to a carnival atmosphere. "Serbian and Greek communities, are big, for sure. The Serbs and Greeks historically get along very well," said Djokovic, who won his first Slam at Melbourne Park in 2008.

"I just don't think there's going to be any conflict on and off the court in terms of the crowd."

MOTORSPORT

Al-Rawahi claims Oman International Rally for 2nd time

Agencies
Muscat

The Oman Rally Team's Abdullah al-Rawahi and Jordanian co-driver Ata al-Hmoud clinched victory in the Oman International Rally for the second time in three years yesterday.

After pre-event favourite Nasser Saleh al-Attayah crashed on the opening super special stage, al-Rawahi hit the front on the first of a dozen gravel stages in the Sultanate of Oman and stayed clear of major trouble, punctures aside, to guide his Skoda Fabia Evo to victory by the margin of 6min 35.6sec. The feat meant the Omani became one of only 15 drivers ever to win more than one round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship.

"It was a great feeling to win my home rally for the first time two years ago and to do it again is very special," said al-Rawahi.

"This is a perfect start to the championship for us and I would like to thank Ata for his efforts and the team for giving me such a strong car on what was a difficult rally."

The fastest time on the final stage enabled Petr Kacirek and Petra Rihakova to see off a late challenge from al-Attayah for second overall and the Czech crew duly sealed the runner-up spot in their Duck Racing Skoda Fabia.

Al-Attayah and Andorra-based co-driver Mathieu Baumel won 11 of the 13 special stages, but the costly error on the first stage damaged the Volkswagen Golf's radiator and a subsequent time penalty for a seat belt infringement meant the task was ultimately too much for the Qatari to challenge for the win.

Al-Attayah reached the finish at the Muscat Drift Arena in third overall to keep the defence of his regional title firmly on track. He may well have caught Kacirek and snatched second had he not suffered a rear right puncture and driven 17km on the shredding tyre to the finish of the final stage.

"After what happened on Thursday, I suppose I am happy enough with the result," said al-Attayah.

"But I am disappointed to have the puncture on the last

stage when second place was achievable. That's rallying. I drove for 17km on a rear right puncture."

Meshari al-Thefiri and his Qatari co-driver Nasser al-Kuwari were passed by al-Attayah on the afternoon's loop of stages but the Kuwaiti managed to finish fourth overall and confirm victory in the MERC2 category in his Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X. He had led the event outright on Thursday evening after winning the opening super special stage.

Al-Attayah's cousin Nasser Khalifa al-Atya teamed up with Giovanni Bernacchini to round off the top five in a Ford Fiesta R5, while the Jordanian duo of Shaker Jweihan and female co-driver Nancy al-Majali finished sixth and second in MERC2.

Kuwait's Yousef al-Dhefiri overhauled Jordan's Sheikh Bader al-Fayez to claim seventh overall and third in the show room category.

Jordanian Ihab al-Shorafa was deprived of a finish after stopping in the final stage. The Mitsubishi driver's demise lifted fellow countryman Shadi Shaban into ninth place and Lebanon's Ahmad Khaled rounded off the top 10. The Omani crew of Abdullah al-Zubair and Taha Soomar were the last of the finishers in 11th.

Ghaith al-Qasbi and Ahmed Salim sealed victory in the day's round of the Oman National Championship. The Mitsubishi crew beat Faisal and Yaqdhan al-Rashdi by 2min 15.8sec. Mutasim and Nofel al-Balushi came home in third place.

The previous day's winners, Issa Abu Jamous and Yazan Juma, missed out on second place after shedding time in the 12th stage. The Jordanian crew finished fourth, well clear of fifth-placed Abdullah al-Toqi and his Austrian co-driver Ilka Minor.

With the exception of Haitham al-Zadjali, nine national entrants began the one-day round of the Oman National Championship. Salim al-Toqi and Saif al-Harthi fell by the wayside after the eighth stage and Mohamed al-Mazroui retired his Yamaha on stage nine. Musab Soomar was the next retirement on SS11.

Action in the regional rally series continues in Qatar on February 16th-18th.



Oman Rally winners celebrate with their trophies on the podium.

Sprinting great Bolt says 'stressful situation' trying to recover lost millions

KINGSTON: World 100 and 200 metres record holder Usain Bolt said on Friday that it was a "stressful situation" trying to recover more than \$12.7m that has disappeared from his account with a Jamaican investment firm.

The 36-year-old Bolt earlier this month was informed that his account balance at Kingston-based Stocks and Securities Ltd (SSL) had inexplicably dwindled to just \$12,000, lawyer Linton Gordon told Reuters

on January 17. "It's tough you know, but I think through the years I've competed it has helped me to understand and focus on what matters," Bolt told reporters on Friday. He was speaking at the Gibson McCook Relays launch in Kingston where he was unveiled as the ambassador of the athletics meet, now in its 50th year. "I will leave the matter in my lawyer's hands and focus on my family, try not to think too much about it because it's

a stressful situation," the 11-time world champion added. SSL said in a Jan. 12 statement that it had become aware of fraudulent activity by a former employee and had referred the matter to law enforcement, adding it had taken steps to secure assets and strengthen protocols. The Jamaica Constabulary Force said its fraud and financial investigation teams were probing "alleged fraudulent activities at (SSL) which are said to have affected

the accounts of Mr. Usain Bolt among other individuals." Bolt's account was intended to serve as a pension for the eight-time Olympic champion and for his parents, Gordon said. Bolt retired in 2017 after dominating global sprinting for a decade, reviving a sport plagued by doping scandals and becoming a household name like Brazilian soccer great Pele and American boxing champion Muhammad Ali. (Reuters)

HORSE RACING

Mazur guides Karakoul to Wadi Sail Cup victory

By Sports Reporter
Doha

M.H.K. al-Attayah-trained Karakoul claimed the Wadi Sail Cup, the feature race of Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's (QREC) 11th meeting at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

Karakoul wrapped up a good day for Al Jeryan Stud with jockey Szczepan Mazur completing a double for the trio when taking a 1,200m contest for three to six years old for Thoroughbred Premium Maidens. The four-year-old gelding drew five and a half lengths clear.

Earlier, in the 1,300m Handicap (75-95) for four-year-old+ Purebred Arabians, trainer Jihad El Ahmad teamed up with jockey Soufiane Saadi to good effect as Injaaz Stud's Mubadir produced a smart turn of foot to clear away from the field and win in fine style by one and a half lengths.

The 1,300m Handicap (0-80) for three-year-old+ Thoroughbreds was taken by Wathnan Racing's Neat And Dandy, trained by Alban de Mieuille.

The four-year-old gelding skipped

away from the field under Ronan Thomas to record victory by a length and three quarters.

Trainer Jassim Ghazali and jockey Marco Casamento made it a double on the day in the 1300m Novice for three-year-old+ Thoroughbred Fillies and Mares as they teamed up with Injaaz Stud's Cotal Pearl to shoot clear and win by three lengths. In the 1,300m Maiden for four-year-old Purebred Arabians, Szczepan Mazur guided Al Jeryan Stud's AJS Anayid to success for trainer MHK al-Attayah as she took the race by a head from Ghazwah.

The 2,000m Handicap (0-85) for three-year-old Thoroughbreds saw a win by the same margin (1 1/4 lengths), but this time it was Khalifa bin Mohamed al-Attayah's Almirgab, who under jockey Hugo Besnier, did all his best work in the closing stages to win for trainer Hamad al-Jehani.

Opening the Wadi Al Sail Cup Day, Meshal bin Ali al-Attayah's Al Mustashar gave trainer Jassim Ghazali and jockey Marco Casamento one more winner this week as the six-year-old won well and easily by a length and a quarter in the 1,300m Maiden for three

to six years old Local Thoroughbreds.

RESULTS

(Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1-Wadi Al Sail Cup - Thoroughbred Premium Maiden (Class 6)
Karakoul, MHK al-Attayah, Szczepan Mazur
2-Purebred Arabian Handicap 75-95
Mubadir, Jihad El Ahmad, Soufiane Saadi
3 - Thoroughbred Handicap 0-80 (Class 4)
Neat And Dandy, Alban Elie de Mieuille, Ronan Thomas
4 - Thoroughbred Novice Plate (Fillies & Mares) (Class 5)
Cotal Pearl, Jassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento
5 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate (four-year-old only)
AJS Anayid, M.H.K al-Attayah, Szczepan Mazur
6 - Thoroughbred Handicap 0-85 (three-year-old only) (Class 4)
Almirgab, Hamad al-Jehani, Hugo Besnier
7 - Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate
Al Mustashar, Jassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento



Jockey Szczepan Mazur rides Karakoul to Wadi Sail Cup win at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

LA LIGA

Pedri earns Barca nervy derby win

Catalans open a six-point gap ahead of Real Madrid, who face Sociedad today

AFP
Girona, Spain

Barcelona midfielder Pedri Gonzalez earned his side a tense 1-0 Catalan derby victory at Girona yesterday, opening a six-point gap ahead of Real Madrid at the top of La Liga. With Carlo Ancelotti's side hosting high-flying Real Sociedad today, Barca put their rivals under pressure to get a result and keep up with them in the title race.

Pedri netted the only goal from close range after an hour at an icy Montilivi on his 100th appearance for Barcelona, after replacing the injured Ousmane Dembele. The French forward limped off in the first half, pulling up after a sprint and asking to be replaced, a blow for Barcelona considering his superb recent form.

Barca coach Xavi Hernandez said the winger appeared to have a quadriceps injury. Despite the narrow margin of victory, Xavi believes his team is significantly stronger than when he took over in November 2021. "We have to be self-critical and improve in many ways, but we are happy, we have to look at where we came from," Xavi said.

"The change to the team and a lot of players is big, we have many things to improve on, but we're on the right path. I think the (biggest difference) is the confidence of the players - when we arrived their confidence was on the floor."

Defensively the Catalans have been strong, conceding just six league goals this season and winning their last three matches 1-0 - they are unbeaten in 13 consecutive matches across all competitions. The league leaders were still without suspended Polish striker Robert Lewandowski, missing his final game after a three-match ban.

Girona created the first chance after just three minutes, Rodrigo Riquelme's smooth through ball feeding Yan Couto, whose shot was blocked. Dembele also



Barcelona's Spanish midfielder Pedri (second right) celebrates after scoring against Girona in the La Liga yesterday. (AFP)

had an effort deflected away at the end of the first incisive move Barcelona had put together all game.

The French winger, who fired Barcelona into the Copa del Rey semi-finals against Real Sociedad midweek, was forced off injured after 25 minutes. Dembele's first years at Barcelona were hampered by injuries but since Xavi's arrival, the forward had been able to stay fit and firing.

Xavi brought on Jordi Alba for Marcos Alonso at the break and it made the difference for Barcelona, who had been sluggish. The left-back set up Pedri's opener with a cross from the left, tapped

in by the Spaniard at the back post at the end of the first incisive move Barcelona had put together all game.

Pedri, whom Xavi had intended to rest, reached a century of appearances for Barca at just 20 years old and celebrated with his 15th goal for the club. "I know I have to improve in front of goal (but) right now they are going in for me," Pedri said.

Ronald Araujo headed a cross off his own goal line under pressure as Girona pushed for an equaliser, throwing men forward. Ivan Martin missed a fine chance in stoppage time for the hosts as Barcelona lost all control of the game but sur-

vived a nervy finale to earn the win.

Girona also appealed for a penalty as Eric Garcia tangled with Cristhian Stuani in the area. "There are situations in the box in which these tangles are given and sometimes not," said Girona coach Michel, who was sent off in stoppage time for complaining about a foul by Frenkie de Jong.

"Today, the final result is not due to the refereeing performance, I prefer to say these games are won by the players."

Earlier Cadiz climbed out of the relegation zone with a 2-0 win over Real Mallorca.

JUMA SCALPS OPEN CLASS WITH HURRY UP



Mohamed Abdulla Juma won the Open Class in the ninth round of Longines Hathab Qatar Equestrian Tour at the Longines Outdoor Arena at Al Shaqab yesterday. Juma secured the victory after a flawless routine astride his 10-year-old gelding Hurry Up in 58.41 seconds. Mira V/D Roshoeve, who had Khalid Mohamed al-Emadi in the saddle was second in 58.59 secs, while Khalid Ali al-Adba guided Curt Lele to third-place finish in 60.09 secs.



Longines Hathab Qatar Equestrian Tour Vice-President Omar al-Mannai presented the trophies to the podium winners.

Martinez fires Inter past Cremonese

Cremona, Italy: Lautaro Martinez shot Inter Milan into second place in Serie A with both goals in yesterday's 2-1 win at Cremonese who are still yet to win a league game this season.

Martinez made sure that Inter came back from David Okereke's wonder strike in the 11th minute with goals in each half.

The 25-year-old took his league tally for the season to

11 and moved Inter two points above champions AC Milan, who host Sassuolo today.

However Simone Inzaghi's side are still 10 points behind runaway league leaders Napoli ahead of tonight's clash with fierce rivals Roma. Cremonese remain bottom after failing to win any of their 20 matches in their first season in Italy's top flight since 1996.

Leeds, Leicester avoid FA Cup shocks

London: Leeds beat Accrington Stanley 3-1 to book their place in the fifth round of the FA Cup for the first time in seven years as Leicester also avoided a shock with a 1-0 win at Walsall yesterday. Jack Harrison's stunning long-range strike settled Leeds' nerves of an upset against the League One side at the Wham Stadium.

Jesse Marsch's men face a fight to survive in the Premier League, but are beginning to click as an attacking force with the return of Patrick Bamford and Luis Sinisterra from injury to complement new signing Georginio Rutter.

Bamford's brilliant reverse pass teed up Junior Firpo to double the visitors' lead just after the hour mark. Two minutes later, Sinisterra tapped home Harrison's cross to end the tie as a contest. But there was a moment to savour for Stanley as 18-year-old Leslie Adegoya pulled a goal back nine minutes from time.

Leicester were pushed even closer by League Two Walsall only to be bailed out by FA Cup specialist Kelechi Iheanacho. The Nigerian has scored more goals in

the competition than any other player since making his debut in 2016.

Iheanacho's 17th goal in 23 FA Cup appearances had some fortune as his strike from the edge of the box took a wicked deflection for the only goal 23 minutes from time. Full-back Romain Perraud scored twice as Southampton saw off a late rally by Blackpool to progress 2-1. Fulham are the only Premier League side that have failed to win so far on Saturday after they were held 1-1 by Sunderland at Craven Cottage. Jack Clarke fired the visitors into an early lead against a much-changed Fulham side. But Tom Cairney's equaliser on the hour mark sent the tie to a replay.

Four other ties will need replays to find a winner, including Championship leaders Burnley's clash with Ipswich after a 0-0 draw at Portman Road.

Manchester City were the first team into round five after they saw off Arsenal 1-0 on Friday night in a clash between the top two in the Premier League. Liverpool travel to Brighton in the pick of today's ties.

BUNDESLIGA

Bayern held to third straight draw as lead evaporates



Eintracht Frankfurt's Randal Kolo Muani celebrates after scoring against Bayern Munich in the Bundesliga in Freiburg yesterday. (Reuters)

Reuters
Munich

Bayern Munich stumbled to a 1-1 draw against visiting Eintracht Frankfurt yesterday to leave them with a slim, one-point Bundesliga lead after dropping points for the third game in a row with the same scoreline.

The German champions, who face Paris St Germain on Feb 14 in the Champions League Round of 16, took a first-half lead when Leroy Sane rifled in from a Thomas Mueller assist in the 34th minute.

Eintracht were largely anonymous until Daichi Kamada fed Randal Kolo Muani in the box and the forward beat France team mate Dayot Upamecano in a one-on-one to drill in a 69th-minute equaliser with his seventh league goal this season.

The Bavarians, chasing a record-extending 11th straight league title, had a treble chance to score before the equaliser but eventually ran out of gas against fellow Champions League club Eintracht.

They also drew their games against RB Leipzig and Cologne 1-1 following the restart of the sea-

son after the winter break and the result left them with a one-point lead over second-placed Union Berlin, who have 36 points after beating Hertha 2-0 in the Berlin derby. RB Leipzig are third on 35 following Friday's 2-1 win over VfB Stuttgart, with Frankfurt in fifth place on 32.

Berlin outplayed city rivals Hertha with their third straight victory of the year as they continued their remarkable season.

The visitors took the lead a minute before the break with Danilo Doekhi beating two defenders in the air to head in a free kick after Hertha had made a confident start.

With the hosts desperate for an equaliser, Union struck again in the 67th minute with a textbook break that ended with Paul Seguin tapping in for a two-goal cushion. Union keeper Frederik Rønnow then made two superb saves late in the second half to deny Hertha any chance of a late comeback, as the visitors secured their fifth straight league and German Cup win over their city rivals. Hertha's third straight loss of the year means they remain anchored in 17th place on 14 points.

Elsewhere, Freiburg beat Augsburg 3-1 at home to move into fourth place.