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McIlroy edges bitter rival Reed for Dubai title



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GULF TIMESSPORT



TENNIS

The greatest? Djokovic may have settled the debate

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QNB STARS LEAGUE

Duhail beat Wakrah to go four points clear

Arabi's title hopes suffers a huge blow after they lost to Qatar SC for their second straight defeat



Al Duhail's defender Yousef Ayman (second left) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Al Wakrah during the QNB Stars League yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Yousef Ayman's early goal helped Al Duhail to a 1-0 win over Al Wakrah yesterday as the Red Knights extended their lead in the QNB Stars League to four points. Ayman scored in the third minute for Duhail as the leaders benefitted from second-placed Al Arabi's 2-3 loss to Qatar SC.

Ayman, who was left unmarked, made the most of opportunity as nodded the ball into the net after a pass from Khaled Mohamed following a

quick corner kick. Jolted by the early setback, Al Wakrah battled hard and had many chances, but they could not capitalize on them as the Blue Wave stayed at fourth place.

Duhail too were found wanting at crucial moments. In the 20th minute, striker Almoez Ali had a golden chance from a brilliant cross while in the centre of the box, but failed to beat an onrushing goalkeeper Saoud al-Khater.

Later, in the 38th minute it was Wakrah's Khaled Munir who could not control his shot when provided with a good chance in front of the goal. Almoez went close again in the 50th minute but his shot was saved by al-Khater.

Two minutes later, Wakrah's Mohamed Benyettou found the net but the goal was ruled out for off-side. Wakrah were more attacking in the second half, but lacked a good finish. Jacinto Dala was their most hard-working player and on one occasion even tried to essay a bicycle kick but couldn't succeed.

Duhail kept breaking through the rival defence in between and in the 69th minute, Michael Olunga took a long shot, but his ferocious kick sailed over the crossbar. The dying minutes of the match saw some frenetic action and Wakrah again had to rue their luck as Lucas Mendes' free-kick broke through the wall, but curled a bit too much to go



Qatar SC's Sebastian Soria (right) vies for the ball with Al Arabi's Yousuf Mufthah.

away from the right goal post.

Later, Arabi's title hopes suffered a huge blow after losing to Qatar SC for their second successive defeat. The win saw Qatar SC continue their winning run shown since the return of the league post the World Cup break. They led 2-1 at half time.

While Omar al-Emadi (13th minute), Nasir Peer Baksh (18th minute) and Ben Malango Ngite (69th minute) scored for Qatar SC, the goal-scorers for Al Arabi were Helal Mohamed (25th minute) and Aron Gunnarsson (82nd minute).

Gunnarsson's goal created a flutter, charging up Al Arabi and they tried their best to get an equaliser towards the end. The scamper for Qatar SC was intensified after Bashar Resan was shown red card in the 88th minute for a foul on Gunnarsson. The ten-man QSC then had to deal with another 7 minutes of added time. They even survived from scoring an own goal in the dying seconds of the match when a rebound from a defender rolled on and hit the left post before being collected by their goalkeeper Sataa al-Abbasi.

Eventually, Qatar SC were left to celebrate their third successive win which has now taken them to the third spot in the rankings with 19 points from 10 matches. Arabi are second from 11 matches with 22 points.

RAYYAN BACK TO WINNING WAYS

Al Rayyan returned to winning ways by beating Al Shamal 2-1, which moved them one place to 10th in the points table. Yohan Boli (14th minute) and Osama al-Tairi (42nd minute) scored for Rayyan, while Shamal's goal was scored by Loick Landre (45th minute).

Boli gave Rayyan the lead after slotting a home a pass from Mohamed Seraj. The Lions doubled the lead through al-Tairi. However, Al Shamal managed to pull one back in the last minute of first half through Landre's good shot from outside the penalty area.

In the second half, Rayyan were the better side despite some missed opportunities by Boli and young Tamim Mansour Mufthah. As the match wore on, Shamal could not do much in their bid for an equaliser, as they failed to repeat their excellent performance at the beginning of the season.

Messi says World Cup trophy 'called out' to him

Buenos Aires: Lionel Messi won the World Cup because the sparkling solid gold trophy picked him to lift it, the Argentine star said in a radio interview aired yesterday.



The 35-year-old inspired his country to World Cup glory last month by scoring two goals and a penalty in the South Americans' shoot-out triumph over previous holders France following a thrilling 3-3 draw in Qatar.

"The cup called out to me, it told me: come and grab me, now you can touch me," Messi told the Argentine Urbana Play radio station. "I saw it sparkling in that beautiful stadium and I didn't hesitate" to kiss it, he added, referring to the stunning Lusail Stadium, where the final was played.

Messi finally lifted the trophy in his fifth and final World Cup tournament, having lost in the 2014 final to Germany. He also played in three losing Copa America finals before finally clinching that trophy in 2021. "After so much suffering and lost finals, God kept it for me," said Messi of the World Cup.

He thus became the first Argentina captain since Diego Maradona in 1986 to lift the World Cup. "I would have liked Maradona to hand me the cup, so he could at least see Argentina champions."

Maradona died of a heart attack two years ago. "From up above he gave me strength, as did so many people who love me."

Many people expected Messi to retire, at least from international duty, after the Qatar triumph but he decided to continue so he could take to the field with his teammates as world champions.

However, he admitted that the end was close after a glory-laden career that saw him also win four Champions League titles and 10 La Liga crowns with Barcelona, and a Ligue 1 trophy with Paris Saint-Germain, as well as the Ballon d'Or a record seven times. "That's it, there's nothing left, I've achieved everything with the national team, with Barcelona, individually," he said.

Mol-Sorum, Hughes-Cheng pairs triumphant at Volleyball World Beach Pro Tour



Podium winners celebrate after the conclusion of the Volleyball World Beach Pro Tour champions at Aspire Zone beach courts on Sunday. Reigning world and Olympic champions Anders Mol and Christian Sorum of Norway won the men's title. Fifth seeds Michal Bryl and Bartosz Losiak of Poland finished runner-up, while sixth-seeded Italians Paolo Nicolai and Samuele Cottafova took bronze. First Vice-President of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) Mohamed Yousef al-Mana and Qatar Volleyball Association president Ali bin Ghanem al-Kuwari presented the trophies. Qatar will next host the West Asian Championship from February 21-25 at Al Gharafa Club, with the hosts fielding two teams in an event which will serve as qualifiers for the 2024 Paris Olympics.



The women's title was won by wild cards Sara Hughes and Kelly Cheng of the US. Reigning world champions Eduarda Santos Lisboa and Ana Patricia Ramos of Brazil settled for silver, while third seeds Katja Stam and Raisa Schoon of the Netherlands came third.

CRICKET

Australia's Green still in frame for India Test

Reuters
Melbourne

All-rounder **Cameron Green** has not been ruled out of facing India in the first of four Tests next month despite his finger injury, Australia coach Andrew McDonald said yesterday.

Green broke his finger in the home South Africa series at the end of last year and has not played a match since, raising questions over whether he would be fit for the start of the first Test in Nagpur on Feb. 9.

"He hasn't been ruled out," McDonald told ABC ahead of the team's departure today.

"We just want to make sure we set up all our players up for success and there isn't much time left from now to the four-week check-in around his finger to the start of that Test match. We'll see how he goes in the build-up and make that decision when we get on the ground in India."

While Green has provided a welcome fast-bowling option for Australia, McDonald has made it clear that he is valued foremost for his middle-order batting and could be selected on that basis alone.

McDonald said left-arm quick Mitchell Starc was still in a splint because of his damaged finger and will definitely miss the first test, as expected.

"Nothing's changed in terms of where he's at - he'll be available for the second Test match, assuming that all things go well," he said.

"But we can't accelerate that with the nature of the injury."

Australia are looking to win a Test series in India for the first time since 2004 and four spinners and six pacemen were named in the squad for the tour.

"We feel like when we get on that plane we'll have great options for the captain and the selectors to work through and put on the park," McDonald said.

After the opener in Nagpur,

Australia also play Tests in New Delhi, Dharamsala and Ahmedabad with a one-day international series to follow.

Run machine Smith wins fourth Allan Border medal

Australia run machine Steve Smith clinched his fourth Allan Border Medal yesterday, becoming only the third player, after Ricky Ponting and Michael Clarke, to achieve the feat.

Smith polled 171 votes, while nearest rival Travis Head managed 144, to claim Australian cricket's greatest individual honour which he had previously won in 2015, 2018 and 2021.

Former captain Smith racked up 1,524 runs, which included four hundreds, during the voting period and was crucial to Australia's rise to number one in the test rankings.

Such was his domination in the two other formats that it did not matter in the end that Smith did not poll a single vote in the T20 Internationals.

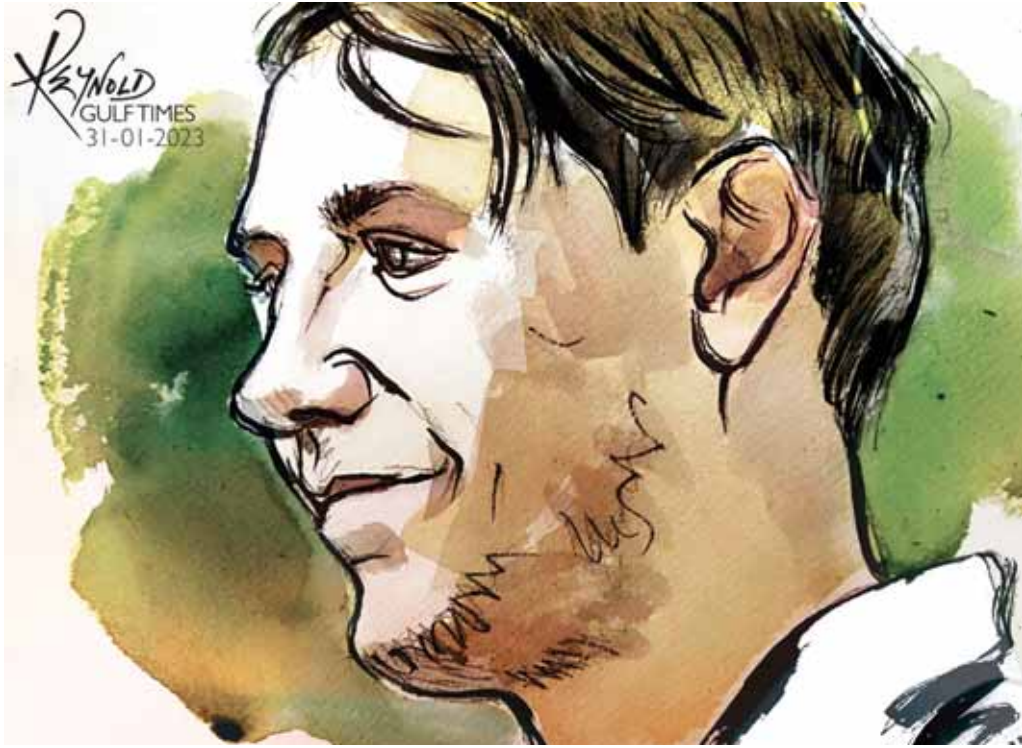
Smith will be one of Australia's key figures as they embark on a four-test tour in India where they hope to secure their place in the final of the World Test Championship.

The 33-year-old has been in strong form in 50-overs cricket too and famously quipped "I'm back, baby" during an ODI against England in November after a successful technique tweak.

He, however, lost the men's ODI player of the year award to David Warner on count-back, while Marcus Stoinis won the T20 honours ahead of Josh Hazlewood.

Opener Usman Khawaja claimed the Shane Warne award for the men's Test player of the year after a prolific 12 months during which he scored 1,020 at an average of 78.46.

Beth Mooney won her second Belinda Clark Award to be crowned Australia's best women's cricketer after delivering consistently across all three formats.



GOLF

McIlroy survives 'battle' to edge bitter rival Reed

'I JUST HAD TO REALLY CONCENTRATE ON FOCUSING ON MYSELF'

AFF
Dubai

Rory McIlroy prevailed in a nail-biting finish over Patrick Reed, the man he "prefers not to acknowledge" after a spat between the two, in the rain-delayed Dubai Desert Classic yesterday.

It was the first time McIlroy has won the first start of his new season and is his 15th DP World Tour victory in 231 starts.

His one-stroke victory was also his third Dubai Desert Classic success in 13 appearances.

He will remain world number one, after Spaniard Jon Rahm failed to win the Farmers Insurance Open on the PGA Tour on Saturday.

McIlroy and Reed went into the tournament after a row when Reed reportedly threw a tee towards McIlroy on the practice range in Dubai.

The incident, caught on camera, turned out to be a lot milder than reported but the two have been at odds since McIlroy criticised players, including Reed, who joined the rival Saudi-backed LIV Golf circuit.

Relations were not helped by McIlroy receiving a subpoena from Reed's lawyer on Christmas Eve to appear as a witness in a case.

McIlroy had fallen behind Reed after a bogey on the 15th hole but he made amends with birdies on the 17th and 18th in a round of four-under par 68.

The Northern Irishman finished on 19-under par, while Reed, starting the day four shots behind McIlroy, made a crucial bogey on the 16th and a par on the drivable par-4 17th hole in his round of 65.

"I think, mentally, today was probably one of the toughest rounds I've ever had to play because it would be really easy to let your emotions get in the way," said McIlroy, who won \$1.53mn for his effort.

"I just had to really concentrate on focusing on myself. I had to forget who was up there on the leaderboard, and I did that really well."

McIlroy blew his chances last year



Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland lifts the trophy after winning the final round of the Dubai Desert Classic 2023 Championship at the Emirates Golf Club in Dubai yesterday. (AFP)

when he hit his second shot into the water on the final hole - and he almost repeated the scenario with his tee shot on the 18th.

"Honestly, I feel I got lucky that my ball didn't go in the water. It's such an awkward tee shot for me," he said.

"Driver is too much and 3-wood is not quite enough. So I tried to hit a sort of easy driver and it came out really, really hot. I needed to lay up and try to get up-and-down that way.

"I said, 'fool me once and fool me twice,' but I wasn't going to get fooled a third time. It was nice to be able to play the percentages and make it pay off."

McIlroy said such an early first win was even sweeter as he was not playing his best golf through the week.

"It means a lot. It was a battle all day. Honestly, it's been a battle all week," said McIlroy.

"I really feel like I haven't had my best all week, but I just managed my game so well and played really smart."

Reed edged ahead by a shot when McIlroy made a bogey on the par-3 15th but gave it up on the next hole when his drive got stymied by a tree.

He then had to take a drop shot on the 17th from a small bush, and could not take advantage of the drivable par-4.

"I'm happy with that finish. I felt like we were probably almost playing for second going into the day," said Reed.

"I knew what I had to do early. I went out there and I put the pressure on him.

You know, being four back of a guy like Rory is not easy.

"Hats off to him, he played some great golf"

Australian Lucas Herbert, champion here in 2019, closed with a six-under par 66 to take solo third place at 16-under par 272.

England's Callum Shinkwin, who started with three bogies in his first six holes playing in the lead group with McIlroy, made six birdies after that to shoot a 69 and take solo fourth place at 273.

The DP World Tour stays in the United Arab Emirates for a fourth consecutive week and will head to the northern emirate of Ras Al Khaimah this week for the \$2mn RAK Championship.

SQUASH

Qatar's al-Tamimi rises to 18th spot in latest PSA rankings



QNA
Doha

Qatar's squash national team player **Abdulla al-Tamimi** moved to 18th place in the global ranking - his best ever, according to the latest ranking of the Professional Squash Association (PSA) issued yesterday.

Al-Tamimi became the first Qatari and Gulf player to reach this position, recording a new achievement in his career.

In Nov. 2022, al-Tamimi was ranked 20th in the world rankings, but he managed to advance two places after he presented good levels during the last season after reaching the quarter-finals of the QTerminals Qatar Classic 2022, in addition to winning the titles of the Atlanta Championship 2022 (challenger category), and the Qatar Professional Championship (challenger category).

The Qatari player also showed a good performance at the beginning of the current season by reaching the third round of the JP Morgan tournament held in the US state of New York, one of the strong tournaments on the PSA agenda.

In a statement today, al-Tamimi expressed his happiness saying 'it is the best way to start the new season'. He also thanked those who supported him.

Al-Tamimi turned professional in 2011. He claimed a place in the world's top 70 after two years and break into the world's top 40 for the first time in Nov. 2016.

Last year was a landmark for the national team player during which he stormed into the PSA's top 20.

A graduate of the Aspire Academy in 2012, Aal-Tamimi was one of the most important talents that the Academy was keen to support and develop to achieve good results in various international tournaments.

FOCUS

Vijay retires from international cricket

AFF
New Delhi

Indian opener Murali Vijay yesterday announced his retirement from international cricket.

The 38-year-old Vijay played 61 Tests, 17 one-day and nine T20 internationals during a decade-long stop-start career for India.

"Today with immense gratitude and humility, I announce my retirement from all forms of international cricket," Vijay wrote on Twitter.

"My journey from 2002-2018 has been the most wonderful years of my life for it was an honour representing India at the highest level of sport."

He made 3,982 Test runs in-

cluding 12 centuries and a best of 167 against Australia at Hyderabad in 2013, but could never cement his place in the Indian XI.

His last Test was in December 2018. A solid opening batsman with good technique, Vijay had successful outings in the Indian Premier League T20 tournament and won two titles with Chennai Super Kings in 2010 and 2011.

The Chennai-born player also had short stints with Essex and Somerset in the English county championship.

Vijay is set to start a new innings and said: "I am excited to announce that I will be exploring new opportunities in the world of cricket and the business side of it. I believe this is the next step in my journey as a cricketer and I look forward to the new chapter in my life."

LIV Golf tour announces full schedule for 2023, \$405mn up for grabs

London: The Saudi-backed LIV Golf tour announced its full 2023 schedule yesterday, including a return to five venues that hosted tournaments in last year's inaugural series. The new circuit, which has split the elite golf world by luring away top stars from the US PGA Tour and European Tour, completed its first season of 54-hole events in October. Centurion Club outside London, Trump National Golf Club Bedminster, Rich Harvest Farms near Chicago, Trump National Doral Golf Club in Miami and Royal Greens Golf and Country Club near Jeddah are all back on the list.

Seven tournaments had previously been announced, including venues in Australia, Spain and Singapore. The season begins with a Feb. 24-26 event in Mexico's Riviera Maya and ends with the team championship in the first week of November in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

LIV Golf includes individual and team elements. Twelve franchises will compete in the 14-event schedule for a record \$405mn in prize money.

"Last year helped lay the foundation for the future of golf at extraordinary courses that have hosted some of the world's top competitions," said LIV Golf CEO Greg Norman. "LIV Golf's schedule features fantastic venues and championship sites for our official league launch that will carry the sport into a new era."

The tour has signed up many big names including reigning British Open champion Cameron Smith of Australia, two-time major winner Dustin Johnson and six-time major champion Phil Mickelson.

Earlier this month LIV Golf announced its first broadcast deal in the United States, penning a "multi-year" agreement with The CW Network.

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SPOTLIGHT

Djokovic may have settled the GOAT debate in tennis

‘THE WAY HE’S TAKING CARE OF HIS BODY, THE WAY HE APPROACHES EVERYTHING, THE FOOD, IT’S AMAZING’

AFP
Melbourne

In drawing level with Rafael Nadal’s record 22 Grand Slam titles, Novak Djokovic reignited the debate about who is the greatest men’s tennis player of all time.

For some, the Serb settled it with his record-extending 10th Australian Open crown.

Certainly his vanquished opponent on Rod Laver Arena thinks so.

“He’s the greatest that has ever held a tennis racquet, for sure,” said Stefanos Tsitsipas after losing 6-3, 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (7/5).

It seems inevitable that Djokovic, who returned to world number one with his dominant victory in Sunday’s final, will win more Slams.

At 35 he is a year younger than great rival Nadal and except for hamstring trouble early on in Melbourne, he appears to be in excellent physical shape.

In contrast, Nadal’s battered body broke down again at the Australian Open and he limped out with defeat in the second round, his title defence over and the Spaniard in pain with a hip injury.

Roger Federer, the third of the “Big Three” who have dominated men’s tennis for the past 15 years, retired last year with 20 Grand Slam titles.

Federer will always be the “people’s champion” in the eyes of many because of the graceful way he played, but it is Djokovic

who looks primed to pull away with the record number of men’s major crowns.

Djokovic seems to thrive on pain and feed off adversity.

Two years ago he won in Australia despite tearing stomach muscles, this year it was a hamstring that did not allow him to practise between matches.

If not for Djokovic’s vaccine status, which saw him deported from Australia a year ago and prevented him competing at the US Open, he may well have already been on 23 or 24 Slam wins.

‘WE CREATED A MONSTER’

“Haha, I told you. We created a monster... Sat on my couch and enjoyed the entire show. Soak it all in,” Nick Kyrgios, beaten by Djokovic in the Wimbledon final last year, tweeted on Sunday.

Nadal, at 36, may be able to recover from his latest injury and even find the will to achieve another triumph on the clay of Roland Garros in May.

But he is a new dad and as the calls grow from family and friends to stop punishing his body, he could bow out sooner rather than later.

There is a theory that he could call it quits at this year’s French Open. It is his favourite tournament and a 15th title there would provide a story-book ending.

Djokovic only appears to be getting better with age and the “Next Gen” of young talent are still unable to get near him over five sets.

His coach, Goran Ivanisevic, believes there are a few more



Serbia's Novak Djokovic gets selfies with his supporters outside the Government House in Melbourne after winning the Australian Open final against Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas. (AFP)

years at the top – and more Slams – to come.

“Definitely two, three more years,” Ivanisevic told reporters after Sunday’s final.

“The way he’s taking care of

his body, the way he approaches everything, the food, it’s amazing. It’s unbelievable the level.”

Some tennis fans will always take convincing to accept Djokovic as the greatest, despite what

the number of Grand Slam titles says.

He polarises opinion, whereas Federer and Nadal are universally loved for how they are on and off the court.

There are those who see something too calculating in the intense, brooding Djokovic.

Controversy is never far away. Last year it was his Covid vaccination status.

This year it was his father Srđjan posing with a fan holding a Russian flag featuring Vladimir Putin’s face.

Before that, Djokovic’s infamous default from the US Open in 2020 for petulantly swiping a ball which hit a female line judge laid his character bare, said the critics.

But Djokovic supporters say those traits are what have driven him to glory.

Djokovic clearly felt impacted by the controversies this year and talked honestly about them, whereas before he may have just batted questions away.

It “hurts him and me” he said after they decided that his father would not be courtside to see him win the Australian Open. It was one of the reasons an emotional Djokovic called Sunday’s title “the biggest victory in my life”.

The Grand Slam numbers don’t lie. But gaining universal acceptance from tennis fans as “the greatest” may be an even bigger achievement.

Federer hails ‘incredible again’ Djokovic

Roger Federer hailed Novak Djokovic’s “incredible effort” in winning a 10th Australian Open and a record-equalling 22nd Grand Slam title on Sunday.

“Incredible effort, again! Many congratulations,” the retired Federer, who won 20 majors, wrote in a brief message on Instagram.

Former world number one Federer retired last year at the age of 41 after failing to recover from a knee injury.

FOCUS

Djokovic not sure on return after ‘perfect 10’ in Melbourne

AFP
Melbourne

New Australian Open champion Novak Djokovic said yesterday he hopes to return to action in a month’s time but is “not sure” how quickly his injured hamstring will heal.

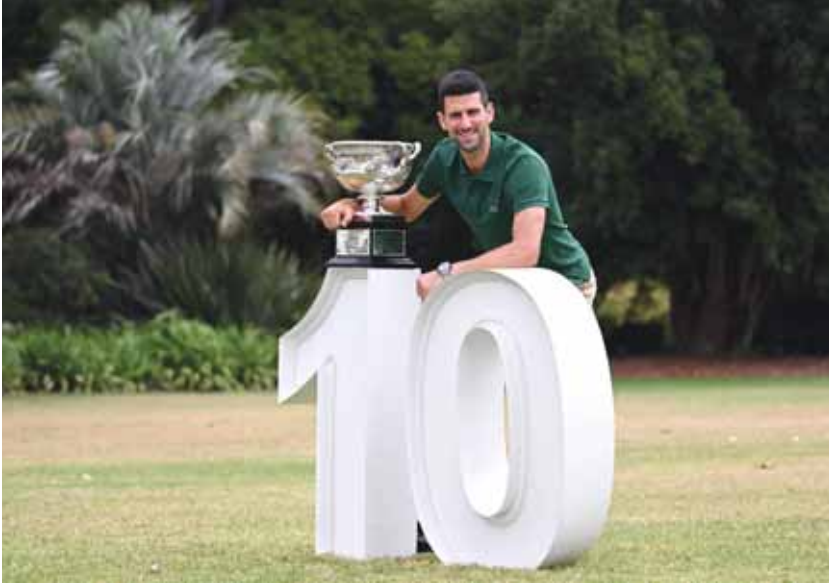
The Serb also revealed that he had not had time to properly celebrate winning a record-extending 10th Melbourne title on Sunday.

His 6-3, 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (7/5) victory over Stefanos Tsitsipas saw Djokovic equal Rafael Nadal’s men’s record of 22 Grand Slam tournament wins and go back to world number one in the rankings.

Djokovic was troubled throughout the competition by his left hamstring, although it improved as the Grand Slam went on.

While the 35-year-old paraded the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup around the gardens of Government House in Melbourne on Monday for a photoshoot, he was asked by AFP how his leg was and when he might play again.

“I’m not sure, I’m going to do some medical check-ups in the next few days,” he replied. “Then I’ll be able to talk about



Serbia's Novak Djokovic poses with the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup trophy in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

it a bit more and understand the situation.”

Djokovic pulled his hamstring before the Australian Open, having won a warm-up event in Adelaide, and was badly ham-

pered at times at Melbourne Park, particularly in the early rounds.

At one point he did not practise between matches.

“As it stands today I am still signed in

for the Dubai tournament, which is in a month’s time. I hope I’ll be able to come back to the courts in several weeks’ time,” he said yesterday.

“Let’s see, you know, I’ll speak to the medical team and then take it from there,” he added.

Djokovic’s coach, Goran Ivanisevic, said most players would not have played after a pre-tournament scan showed the extent of the hamstring injury.

“But not him – he is from outer space,” Ivanisevic told reporters.

“His brain is working different. He gave everything, 77 therapies a day. Every day was kind of better and better.”

Djokovic said there had not been time for any partying on Sunday night to mark his latest achievement.

Asked how he had celebrated the victory, he smiled: “With the media, and with doping control!”

“It was 3:00am when I went back to the accommodation and it was a long night, but of course a huge relief.

“Ending a tournament and the whole journey here to Australia with a Grand Slam win is always incredibly satisfying,” he added.

“I didn’t have yet the chance to really celebrate as much as I would like to. I guess that’s going to come in Europe.”

Djokovic reclaims top spot in ATP rankings

Paris: Novak Djokovic reclaimed top spot in the ATP rankings released yesterday after winning his 22nd Grand Slam title at the Australian Open. The 35-year-old Serbian rose four places to dislodge Spain’s Carlos Alcaraz, who missed the tournament through injury and dropped to second. Djokovic’s 10th Australian Open title means he is world number one for the 374th week since July 2011. Greece’s Stefanos Tsitsipas, who lost to Djokovic in straight sets in Sunday’s final in Melbourne, overtook Norwegian Casper Ruud in third place, matching a career-best ranking he first achieved in August 2021. Andrey Rublev of Russia, dominated by Djokovic in the quarter-finals, climbed to a career-best position of fifth. The shock elimination of Djokovic’s long-time rival Rafael Nadal in the second round saw the Spaniard drop four places to sixth. Karen Khachanov’s run to the semi-finals in Melbourne propelled the Russian up seven places to 13th. Tommy Paul of the United States, who also reached the final four, broke into the top 20 for the first time as he soared up the rankings by 16 places to 19th.

Final rankings (Players representing Russia, Belarus are banned from competing under the name or flag of their countries):

1. Novak Djokovic (SRB)	7070 (+4)
2. Carlos Alcaraz (ESP)	6730 (-1)
3. Stefanos Tsitsipas (GRE)	6195 (+1)
4. Casper Ruud (NOR)	5765 (-1)
5. Andrey Rublev	4200 (+1)
6. Rafael Nadal (ESP)	3815 (-4)
7. Felix Auger-Aliassime (CAN)	3715
8. Taylor Fritz (USA)	3410 (+1)
9. Holger Rune (DEN)	3046 (+1)
10. Hubert Hurkacz (POL)	2995 (+1)
11. Cameron Norrie (GBR)	2760 (+1)
12. Daniil Medvedev	2750 (-4)
13. Karen Khachanov	2515 (+7)
14. Alexander Zverev (GER)	2425 (-1)
15. Frances Tiafoe (USA)	2305 (+2)
16. Pablo Carreno Busta (ESP)	2285 (-1)
17. Jannik Sinner (ITA)	2195 (-1)
18. Lorenzo Musetti (ITA)	1925 (+1)
19. Tommy Paul (USA)	1835 (+16)
20. Nick Kyrgios (AUS)	1825 (+1)

BOTTOMLINE

Formula One tensions with FIA surface over ‘inflated price tag’ row

AFP
Paris

Formula One is never more than a chicane away from an unseemly spat as last week’s surfacing of tensions between the sport’s custodians the FIA and its owners Liberty Media demonstrated.

F1 is basking in a resurgence of popularity, fuelled by the exploits of its leading actors Lewis Hamilton and Max Verstappen, adrenaline-sapping wheel-to-wheel racing, and an expanding fanbase driven in part by the success of Netflix’s fly-on-the-pitlane-wall series Drive To Survive.

Yet purported Saudi interest in adding F1 to its growing sport-portfolio

beyond LIV Golf and the Premier League has triggered a row that threatens to act as a damaging backdrop to the 2023 season just weeks away from the opening race in Bahrain.

It was a tweet from FIA president Mohamed Ben Sulayem on Monday that ignited Liberty Media’s indignation.

Ben Sulayem described as “an inflated price tag being put on F1” a report in Bloomberg that Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund (PIF) had tried and failed to buy F1 for \$20bn.

Despite respected F1 media outlet motorsport.com suggesting a Saudi bid was “wide of the mark” Ben Sulayem’s intervention sparked an angry response from Liberty Media.

The Colorado-based company,

which took over the sports’ commercial rights holder for \$4.4 billion in 2017, called Ben Sulayem’s comments “unacceptable”.

A letter seen by various media to the FIA said the remarks “overstep the bounds of both the FIA’s remit and its contractual rights”.

It came with a threat – that the FIA “may be liable” for any damage to Liberty’s value. One senior paddock source quoted by motorsport.com suggested the letter spelt “open warfare” between the sport’s rulers and its commercial rights holder.

In his Twitter posts Ben Sulayem, a former rally driver who succeeded Jean Todt as president of the FIA in 2021, wrote that “any potential buyer is advised to apply common sense, consider

the greater good of the sport and come with a clear, sustainable plan – not just a lot of money”.

He added: “It is our duty to consider what the future impact will be for promoters in terms of increased hosting fees and other commercial costs (in the event of any such sale).”

Liberty hit back in what the BBC called “a dramatic escalation in the strained relationship between F1 and the FIA that has been evident during Ben Sulayem’s 13-month presidency”.

In blunt terms Liberty told him to stop meddling in affairs which did not concern him.

The letter, drafted by F1’s chief legal officer, pointed out that under the 100-year contract, F1 has “the exclusive right to exploit the commercial rights

in the FIA F1 World Championship”.

“The FIA has given unequivocal undertakings that it will not do anything to prejudice the ownership, management and/or exploitation of those rights,” it added.

And it sent a clear message to the Saudis or any other potential suitor that the FIA has no jurisdiction over an eventual sale.

“The circumstances in which the FIA would have any role in a change of control of the F1 group are very limited.

“Any suggestion or implication to the contrary, or that any potential purchaser of the F1 business is required to consult with the FIA, is wrong.”

The week’s clash, whilst by far the most serious, comes after a series of rifts between the two bodies since Ben

Sulayem assumed his role as the sport’s regulator in chief.

Among these was the FIA’s handling of the last lap drama of the 2021 season in Abu Dhabi where Verstappen controversially ended up champion over Hamilton, an apparent initial blocking of more sprint races this campaign, and the publishing of the record 23-race calendar without F1’s knowledge.

The row has evoked memories of the stand off between Bernie Ecclestone, F1’s former ring master and the FIA under Jean Jean-Marie Balestre in the 1980s.

Whatever happens, F1 followers will be hoping the flames are doused on this particular issue so that the only sparks flying in F1 come March are from cars negotiating chicanes.

LA LIGA

Remiro rocks boat as Madrid drop points in title race

‘Barca are doing very well, but the season is very long, January is complicated’

AFP
Madrid

Real Sociedad goalkeeper Alex Remiro made a string of fine saves to frustrate Real Madrid in a 0-0 draw on Sunday, leaving Barcelona five points clear at the top of La Liga.

After the Catalans beat Girona on Saturday, Madrid needed to win to stay three points behind their rivals in the title race, but Remiro ensured otherwise, keeping third-place La Real on the champions’ tail. Vinicius Junior had three good chances repelled by Remiro among other Madrid openings, as Carlo Ancelotti’s side sparkled but failed to find the goal their performance deserved.

The draw continues a mixed start to 2023 for Real Madrid, slipping further behind Barcelona in the league and losing against them in the Spanish Super Cup final, but reaching the Copa del Rey semis on Thursday with an extra-time win over Atletico Madrid.

“It was one of the best games we’ve played this season,” Ancelotti told reporters. “It’s true Barca are doing very well, but the season is very long, January is very complicated, but the team have progressed a lot in all areas, in defence, attack, physically. The players are starting to improve, the injured players (will return), so we are confident for the coming months, we can get stuck into it in the second half of the season.”

Madrid constructed some slick moves in the first half, with Brazilian wingers Vinicius and Rodrygo incessant threats. The former curled inches wide after a sensational nutmeg on Igor Zubeldia, while the latter teed up Karim Benzema with a backheel, but Remiro saved comfortably. Ancelotti started with Eduardo Camavinga playing out of position at left-back because of injuries elsewhere, and the former Rennes midfielder thrived. Vinicius should have opened the scoring before the break but his shot was well kept out by Remiro, the visitors’ last line of defence.

Remiro made another smart save from the Brazilian winger early in the second



Real Madrid’s Nacho Fernandez (left) looks at Real Sociedad’s goalkeeper Alex Remiro makes a save during the La Liga match at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium in Madrid on Sunday. (AFP)

half with his leg to keep his team level, while Fede Valverde hammered a shot wide from distance as Madrid flowed forward. Real Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois was called into serious action for the first time after an hour when Takefusa Kubo broke free on the right, but the Belgian got down well to deny him.

Vinicius was foiled once more by the excellent Remiro, who pushed away the Brazilian’s attempted lob after cleverly accelerating into the box. Remiro was booked for time-wasting in stoppage time as he eked out every second at a goal kick to clinch a hard-fought point for Real Sociedad, still three points behind Madrid.

Earlier Saul Niguez’s cool finish made the difference for Atletico Madrid as they held on to fourth place with a narrow 1-0 win at Osasuna. Out of the Champions League and Copa del Rey, and 13 points behind La Liga leaders Barcelona, Champions League qualification is Atletico’s key goal in the second half of the season.

The Rojiblancos were left fuming after their quarter-final cup elimination in midweek, unhappy with the refereeing, but had nothing to complain about as they snatched victory at El Sadar. Atletico took the lead after 74 minutes against the run of play, through midfielder Saul, on as a substitute. The Spaniard is no longer a key figure for Diego Simeone but took

his chance, reaching Rodrigo De Paul’s lobbed pass and finishing clinically. Simeone believes his team bounced back well from the team’s Copa del Rey elimination by Madrid.

“We have a way of thinking and working, and the club has a way of living that is to never give up, and always get up in the face of adverse situations,” the Argentine coach said. “There is no greater motivation than playing for Atletico Madrid.”

Iago Aspas’s goal helped Celta Vigo earn a 1-0 win over Athletic Bilbao, while a 90th-minute strike by Canadian debutant Cyle Larin helped Real Valladolid beat Valencia 1-0, moving a point clear of the drop zone.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Struggling Everton appoint Dyche as new manager

AFP
London

Relegation-threatened Everton announced yesterday they had appointed former Burnley boss **Sean Dyche** as their new manager to replace the sacked Frank Lampard. Dyche, who has agreed a two-and-a-half-year contract, has a tough first match – up against Premier League leaders Arsenal at Goodison Park on Saturday.

The 51-year-old said it was an “honour” to take over at the Merseyside club, who have not won any silverware since 1995. “I know about Everton’s passionate fan base and how precious this club is to them,” Dyche said in a club statement. “We’re ready to work and ready to give them what they want. That starts with sweat on the shirt, effort and getting back to some of the basic principles of what Everton Football Club has stood for for a long time. We want to bring back a good feeling. We need the fans, we need unity and we need everyone aligned. That starts with us as staff and players.”

Everton chairman Bill Kenwright said: “He quickly convinced me that he has exactly the right attributes to make himself a great Everton manager - and a man who could inspire our fan-base.”

Lampard was sacked last week after a run of nine defeats in 12 Premier League matches, with a dismal loss at relegation rivals West Ham proving the final straw in his troubled reign. Lanquishing second from bottom of the Premier League, Everton are battling to avoid playing in the second tier of English football for the first time since 1954.

Former Leeds manager Marcello Bielsa had also been in the running to become Everton’s eighth permanent manager since Farhad Moshiri took ownership of the club in 2016. Dyche, who also previously managed Watford, was sacked by Burnley last April before the club’s relegation from the Premier League.

He was sometimes criticised for his style of football at Turf Moor but over-achieved on a tight budget during his 10-year reign, leading them to promotion from the Championship twice



and keeping them in the Premier League for several years.

Dyche also guided Burnley to their first European qualification in half a century after a seventh-place finish in the 2017/18 season.

In a sign of the turmoil enveloping Everton, club directors were earlier this month ordered to stay away from Goodison Park due to perceived security risks. Hampered by the sale of Brazil forward Richardson to Tottenham in the close season, Everton have managed only three wins in 20 league games this term against a backdrop of mounting fan fury.

There have been widespread protests against the board at recent games. Supporters staged a sit-in demonstration after the recent loss to Southampton, with Everton defender Yerry Mina and team-mate Anthony Gordon confronted by fans when they left Goodison Park in their cars.

Former youth-team player Gordon, 21, joined high-flying Newcastle on Sunday for a fee that could reportedly rise to £45mn (\$56mn).

Responding to Lampard’s sacking last week, Everton fans’ group NSNOW called for Moshiri to “stop the rot”.

Majority shareholder Moshiri last week said he was not walking away from the crisis-hit Premier League club but the British-Iranian businessman is seeking outside investment to help fund the completion of Everton’s new 53,000-capacity stadium.

LIGUE 1

Ten-man PSG held as Balogun strikes late for dogged Reims

AFP
Paris

On-loan Arsenal striker Folarin Balogun ran through to score a remarkable 96th-minute equaliser as Reims held 10-man Ligue 1 leaders Paris Saint-Germain to a 1-1 draw on Sunday. It looked like Neymar’s strike early in the second half would be enough for PSG to take all three points despite substitute Marco Verratti being sent off shortly after that goal.

But an impressive Reims side got the draw they richly deserved when Balogun broke away to fire home right at the death. The result sees the club coached by 30-year-old Belgian-born Englishman Will Still extend their unbeaten run to 14 games between league and cup.

They remain in mid-table but have now drawn with the Parisians twice this season, their collective strength allowing a team of hungry young players to hold their own against PSG’s superstars. PSG have now dropped points in three of their four league games in 2023, and while they remain three points clear of Lens at the top of the table, their form is a concern with the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie against Bayern Munich now little over two weeks away.

“Overall we obviously can’t be satisfied with our performance. It is not a question of being worried but we need to get back to winning ways quickly and play much more as a team than we are at the moment,” coach Christophe Galtier said. “To concede a goal after 95 minutes with the number of experienced players we have – it is damaging for us in terms of the



Reims’ Folarin Balogun (left) celebrates after scoring against Paris Saint-Germain during the French Ligue 1 match in Paris. (AFP)

points dropped but it is also very surprising.”

Galtier fielded Lionel Messi, Kylian Mbappe and Neymar all together in his starting line-up for the first time since the World Cup as PSG took to the field wearing their fourth kit with players’ names in Mandarin to mark the Lunar New Year.

In fact PSG lined up in a 4-2-4 formation at the start with Carlos Soler joining the superstar attacking trio and playing on the right wing. Yet they sorely missed Verratti in midfield with the Italian left on the bench in the first half as Reims looked the more dangerous side. He came on at the break and they took the lead in the 51st minute as a Messi shot came off Achraf Hakimi and fell to Neymar, who duly converted his 17th goal of the season.

However, PSG were reduced to 10 men shortly after amid much confusion. Reims were initially awarded a penalty for a foul by Marquinhos on Balogun in the

box, but a VAR intervention led to the referee sending-off Verratti for a dangerous tackle on Junya Ito in the build-up and then cancelling the penalty for an offside.

PSG then saw Sergio Ramos head off the bar before Hakimi had a goal disallowed for offside. It looked like they would hold on for the victory but, with the allotted five added minutes having been played, Kamory Doumbia sent Balogun away and the England Under-21 striker rounded Gianluigi Donnarumma and finished emphatically for his 11th Ligue 1 goal this season.

“We played like a team, a team that was ready, proud and who were not afraid to play here,” said Still, who has not lost a game since being promoted to the role of head coach following the departure of Oscar Garcia in October. “We had no complexes. I think the goal we conceded was a bit annoying but that is part of the game and we held on in there, maintained hope and were rewarded at the end.”

SERIE A

Reuters
Milan

A superb first-half goal from **Victor Osimhen** and a late decider from Giovanni Simeone gave Napoli a 2-1 home win against Roma on Sunday as they took another step closer to ending their 33-year wait to win the Serie A title. Napoli are alone at the top of the league with 53 points from 20 games, 13 ahead of second-placed Inter Milan.

Roma are in sixth with 37 points. Kim Min-Jae came close to an own goal for Napoli after 12 minutes when he misjudged keeper Alex Meret’s position and headed the ball just to the right of the open goal.

Osimhen, Serie A’s top scorer, put Na-

poli ahead after 17 minutes when he chested down a cross inside the box and sent the ball into the roof of the net with a volley. The 24-year-old Nigerian has netted 14 times in Serie A this season.

Meret was forced into a full-stretch save to stop Bryan Cristante’s header after a corner in the 61st minute. Roma keeper Rui Patricio saved a shot from a Napoli counter-attack three minutes later.

Roma equalised in the 75th minute when substitute Stephan El Shaarawy broke free from his marker and tipped in a cross from an acute angle.

Four minutes before stoppage time, Simone got the ball at the edge of the box, turned round and put it into the upper right corner, sending the fans at Diego Armando Maradona Stadium into a frenzy.



Real Madrid, Barcelona to meet in Copa del Rey semis

Madrid: Real Madrid will take on Clasico rivals Barcelona in the Copa del Rey semi-finals while Athletic Bilbao will face Osasuna following yesterday’s draw. The reigning Spanish champions will host Barca before visiting the Camp Nou, in the only round of Spain’s national knockout competition held over two legs.

Carlo Ancelotti’s side reached the last four after overcoming local rivals Atletico Madrid 3-1 in extra time in the quarter-finals, while Barcelona defeated Real Sociedad 1-0. “It’s a huge game, not only for the Copa del Rey, it’s a big game across the world,” Barcelona’s sporting director Jordi Cruyff said.

Athletic Bilbao – who have reached the Copa del Rey semi-finals for four seasons running – gained their place in the final four with a 3-1 victory over Valencia in the last round. Their opponents Osasuna knocked out Sevilla in the quarter-finals with a 2-1 win after extra time. Real Madrid’s trip to Morocco next week to compete in the FIFA Club World Cup will clash with the usual date for the semi-final first legs and forced a rescheduled calendar. The first legs will be played on February 28 and March 1, while the return fixtures will be held between April 4 and 6. Seville’s La Cartuja stadium is due to host the final on May 6.

FANS TO BE PUNISHED FOR RACIALLY ABUSING REAL MADRID’S VINICIUS Spain’s High Council for Sport (CSD) said that more than 10 Real Valladolid fans who racially insulted Real Madrid star Vinicius Junior in a La Liga game last month will be punished. Some home fans hurled abuse at the Brazilian winger during Madrid’s 2-0 win at Valladolid on December 30, prompting La Liga to file a complaint to the local courts.

The CSD said in a statement that its Commission against Violence, Racism and Xenophobia in sport has “initiated proceedings for the proposed punishment of more than 10 supporters” over the incidents. Police are collecting data before recommending punishments, which could include fines of 4,000 euros (around \$4,300) and a one-year ban from sports stadiums for any person identified, the statement added.

La Liga made a complaint about the fans to the police and said they had provided video and audio recordings they had gathered. The commission also held an extraordinary meeting on Monday to discuss another incident involving the 22-year-old Brazilian. A dummy dressed in a Vinicius shirt was strung up near Real Madrid’s training ground before last week’s Copa

del Rey quarter-final against local rivals Atletico with a message reading “Madrid hates Real.”

The CSD said police had begun an investigation to identify those behind the “despicable acts” using traffic cameras and images published on social media.

ARNOLD EXTENDS CONTRACT AS COACH OF AUSTRALIA

The coach of the Australian men’s football team announced he will lead the side’s next World Cup campaign, after masterminding a shock top 16 finish in Qatar.

Graham Arnold faced the axe as the Socceroos struggled through World Cup qualifying, but tightened his grip on the top job with upset wins over Denmark and Tunisia in the tournament’s group stages.

The Australians defied low expectations to reach the last 16 for only the second time in their history, where they lost a thrilling tussle against eventual winners Argentina, who beat France in final.

Arnold said he had signed a four-year extension, and would lead the team’s quest to qualify for the 2026 World Cup in North America. Arnold won 56 caps for the Socceroos as a player, and has coached the team since 2018.