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Barca earn tense win at Betis to extend La Liga lead

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MOTORSPORT

Al-Attiyah leads after prologue stage of Saudi Baja-Hail



Qatar's Nasser al-Attiyah with officials at the start of the Saudi Baja-Hail yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Hail, Saudi Arabia

Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah, Jordanian rider Abdullah Abu Aishah and Emirati racer Abdulaziz Ahli set the quickest times in their respective car, motorcycle and quad categories on the short Prologue stage that got the competitive action underway at the 2023 Saudi Baja-Hail yesterday.

The short stage was increased to 4.08km in length and al-Attiyah and co-driver Mathieu Baumel moved into a 12-second lead in the cars with the fastest time of 2min 57sec.

Saudi driver Saleh al-Saif and his Qatari navigator Nasser al-Kuwari were second quickest and led the T3 lightweight prototype category in their Team Black Horse Can-Am Maverick X3, while defending FIA T4 champion Cristiano Batista and Fausto Moto finished the stage in third and topped the T4 standings in their South Racing Can-Am.

The opening round of the 2023 FIA World and Middle East Cups for Cross-Country Bajas, the FIM Bajas World Cup and the Saudi Toyota National Rally Championship attracted 26 starters in the FIA section, 26 FIM motorcycles and three quads. An impressive number of cars and bikes have also entered the national status event.

They were flagged away from the ceremonial start at Maghwat by Prince Khalid bin Sultan al-Abdullah al-Fais-

al, Chairman of the Saudi Automobile and Motorcycle Federation (SAMF), Prince Abdulaziz bin Saad bin Abdulaziz, Governor of the Hail Region, and Prince Faisal bin Fahd bin Muqrin, Deputy Amir of the Hail Region. Several leading drivers and riders had already attended the official pre-event press conference on Wednesday evening.

The stage times for the bikes and quads were multiplied by a co-efficient to give more of an incentive for riders to set a competitive time rather than relying on a tactical race strategy.

The talented young Jordanian rider Abdullah Abu Aishah got the better of his rival and friend Mohamed al-Balooshi to win the motorcycle section on his KTM Amman-Darwazah Motors Rally Team bike. His Emirati MX Ride Dubai rival came home in second place and Great Britain's Alex McInnes finished third. Local rider Abdulhalim al-Mogheera and SRG Motorsport's Emirati Abdullah Lanjawi rounded off the top five.

Abdulaziz Ahli beat the defending champion Haitham al-Tuwajiri to top the times in the quads. Hani al-Noumesri came home in third place. The Baja is being managed by the Saudi Motorsport Company, in conjunction with the Saudi Automobile and Motorcycle Federation (SAMF) and the Ministry of Sport and in partnership with Abdul Latif Jameel (ALJ) Motors.

Today, the first of two selective sections through the neighbouring deserts starts at Jubba in the morning and runs for 230km across rolling desert,

gravel tracks and some sand dunes. The first bike is scheduled to start the competitive section at 08.40hrs, with the leading car taking the start at 10.17hrs.

TOP 5 POSITIONS AFTER PROLOGUE STAGE

- Cars**
1. Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/ Mathieu Baumel (AND) Toyota Hilux Overdrive 2min 57sec
 2. Saleh al-Saif (SAU)/Nasser al-Kuwari (QAT) Can-Am Maverick (T3) 3min 09sec
 3. Cristiano Batista (BRA)/Fausto Mota (PRT) Can-Am Maverick XRS Turbo (T4) 3min 09sec
 4. Otavio Sousa (BRA)/Joao Ferreira (PRT) Can-Am Maverick X3 (T3) 3min 10sec
 5. Meshari al-Thefiri (KWT)/Oriol Vidal (ESP) Can-Am Maverick (T3) 3min 11sec

- Bikes**
1. Abdullah Abu Aishah (JOR) KTM EXC-F 450 28min 00sec
 2. Mohamed al-Balooshi (ARE) KTM 450 Rally 28min 40sec
 3. Alex McInnes (GBR) Husqvarna FE 450 29min 04sec
 4. Abdulhalim al-Mogheera (SAU) KTM EXC F 450 30min 00sec
 5. Abdullah Lanjawi (ARE) Husqvarna FE 450 30min 08sec

- QUADS**
1. Abdulaziz Ahli (ARE) Yamaha Raptor 700 28min 32sec
 2. Haitham al-Tuwajiri (SAU) Yamaha Raptor 700 28min 40sec
 3. Hani al-Noumesri (SAU) Yamaha Raptor 700 32min 56sec

FOOTBALL

PSG lose injured Mbappe for Bayern Champions League tie

FRANCE STAR WAS HURT DURING THE FIRST HALF OF WEDNESDAY'S 3-1 WIN AT MONTPELLIER IN LIGUE 1

AFP
Paris

Kylian Mbappe faces three weeks out with a thigh injury and will miss the first leg of Paris Saint-Germain's Champions League last-16 tie against Bayern Munich on February 14, his club announced yesterday. The France star was hurt during the first half of Wednesday's 3-1 win at Montpellier in Ligue 1 having earlier had two penalties saved.

PSG coach Christophe Galtier had initially suggested Mbappe had suffered a knock to the back of the knee rather than a muscle injury, but tests have since confirmed the true extent of the problem. "After undergoing tests, Kylian Mbappe suffered an injury to the left thigh at the level of the femoral biceps," said a club statement.

If he misses three weeks as expected, Mbappe can also expect to sit out next midweek's French Cup last-16 tie against Marseille and faces a race against time to return for a potentially pivotal Ligue 1 game away to the same opponents at the end of this month.

However, PSG will hope that Mbappe, who has scored 25 goals in 26 appearances for his club this season, will be fit for the second leg against Bayern in Germany on March 8. The news is a bitter blow for the French giants, who are desperate to avoid a repeat of what happened last season when they were knocked out of the Champions League in the last 16 by Real Madrid.

The Qatar-owned club have become used to injury crises involving their star players ahead of key Champions League games in recent years. A fractured metatarsal prevented Neymar from playing

a full part in a last-16 defeat to Madrid in 2018 and a similar problem ruled him out of their loss to Manchester United at the same stage a year later.

PSG are hoping to win European club football's most prestigious competition for the first time after over a decade of trying since the Qatari takeover of 2011. They have been eliminated in the last 16 in four of the last six seasons, although they reached the final in 2020, losing to Bayern in Lisbon, and were beaten semi-finalists a year later.

PSG convinced Mbappe to stay at the club last year and sign a new contract despite interest in him from Real as they hoped he would lead them to glory in Europe. Mbappe's injury comes just over a month after he starred at the World Cup in Qatar, finishing as the tournament's top scorer with eight goals including a hat-trick in the final, which France lost on penalties to Argentina.

The timing is even more of a blow for PSG after they endured a frustrating end to the January transfer window on Tuesday when they failed to process the paperwork to complete the loan signing of Hakim Ziyech from Chelsea. The Moroccan winger had already passed a medical and was set to add an extra option in attack for Galtier after the departure of another forward, Pablo Sarabia, to Wolverhampton Wanderers.

On Wednesday, PSG extended their lead at the top of Ligue 1 with a 3-1 win at Montpellier. Mbappe had an eighth-minute spot-kick saved by Montpellier's Benjamin Lecomte and then remarkably saw his second attempt turned onto the post by the goalkeeper after the referee ordered a retake.

After winning just one of their last four league games, Wednesday's awk-



Paris Saint-Germain's Kylian Mbappe lies on the ground after getting injured during the French Ligue 1 match against Montpellier on Wednesday. (AFP)

ward trip for PSG saw them also lose Sergio Ramos to injury and have two goals disallowed before Fabian Ruiz put them ahead 10 minutes into the second half. Ruiz then set up Lionel Messi to make it 2-0 with a deft finish in the 72nd minute, the Argentine scoring his 14th club goal of the season.

Sixteen-year-old midfielder Warren Zaire-Emery made sure of the win in stoppage time after Arnaud Nordin had pulled one back. PSG, who were without the rested Neymar, extended their

lead at the top of the table from three to five points after Lens lost 1-0 at home to Nice.

"It was a good performance in general," Galtier said. "There was an incredible scenario in the first half with the retaken penalty, we hit the post, had goals disallowed and two injuries because Sergio Ramos was involved in a collision and on falling he hurt his adductor, but apparently it is nothing serious."

Gaetan Laborde scored the only goal

of the game for Nice as Lens dropped points at home for the first time this season after winning all 10 previous matches there.

Marseille climbed above Lens into second place thanks to a 2-0 victory at Nantes earlier, secured by an own goal from Joao Victor and then a late strike by Azzedine Ounahi, the Moroccan World Cup star making his debut after signing in the January window.

Monaco in fourth beat Auxerre 3-2, while fifth-placed Rennes eased to a

3-0 win against struggling Strasbourg. On-loan Arsenal striker Folarin Balogun followed up his last-gasp equaliser against PSG at the weekend by netting a hat-trick as Reims came from two goals down to beat Lorient 4-2 and extend their unbeaten run to 15 games.

Bottom side Angers suffered a new French top-flight record 13th consecutive defeat as they conceded in stoppage time to lose 2-1 at home to Ajaccio. That result leaves them 11 points from safety.

FOCUS

'Smoothman' Gill: India's new run machine

'HE IS A THREE-FORMAT PLAYER AND AFTER VIRAT KOHLI HE IS THE NEXT BIG BATTER THAT'S GOING TO COME GOOD'

AFP
New Delhi

Shubman Gill's prowess as an opener was never in doubt, but his first Twenty20 ton has got people talking about him as the next Virat Kohli, an all-format run machine for India.

Gill scored 126 in just 63 balls in a crushing 168-run series-clinching win over a hapless New Zealand on Wednesday. It was just his sixth T20 appearance. Despite being gifted with all the shots, the 23-year-old has not yet cemented a place for India in all formats, playing no part in last year's T20 World Cup.

Gill hit a match-winning Test ton in Bangladesh in December and his maiden ODI double-hundred in January.

That knock gained him the moniker of "Smoothman Gill" - for his free-flowing shot-making - from batting great Sunil Gavaskar.

T20 skipper Hardik Pandya praised Gill after the pair put on 103 runs for the fourth wicket in India's 234-4, which paved the way for the biggest T20 win between two Test teams.

"He will achieve greater heights in his career for sure because of not what he did today but because of his work ethic and the honesty towards his game," Pandya told the Indian cricket board's website.

Gill's unbeaten knock, laced with 12 fours and seven sixes, was the highest T20 score by an Indian, overtaking Kohli's 122 not out.

Gill also became only the fifth Indian batsman - including Kohli and current captain Rohit Sharma - to record centuries across all three formats.

'COME OF AGE'
"He has come of age," former



India's Shubman Gill celebrates after scoring a century during the third Twenty20 against New Zealand in Ahmedabad. (AFP)

India opener Wasim Jaffer told ESPNcricinfo.

"There was no denying the fact that he had conquered Test (cricket) a little bit, One-Day for sure. Today's knock proves what a fantastic player India has found."

Jaffer added: "He is a three-format player and after Virat Kohli he is the next big batter

that's going to come good."

Gill had put New Zealand's bowling to the sword in the preceding ODIs as well, scoring 360 runs - the joint-most in a bilateral three-match series, alongside Pakistan skipper Babar Azam.

"When you are representing your country, I don't think there is any kind of fatigue," Gill said

after his T20 masterclass at the world's biggest cricket ground in Ahmedabad. "I always wanted to play for India and being fortunate enough to play all the three formats, it is a blessing."

Later in a chat with Pandya, the young batsman, who hails from a family of farmers in the northern state of Punjab, said he owed much of his success to his

father. "I think the way I practise and the way my dad made me practise... 90 percent of the credit should go to him because it was his vision," said Gill.

The batsman has played 13 Tests, 21 ODIs and six T20 matches for India since his first 50-over match against New Zealand at Hamilton in January 2019.

SPOTLIGHT

Jamieson back in New Zealand squad to face England

AFP
Wellington

Towering pace bowler Kyle Jamieson was named in the New Zealand Test squad to face England after a long spell on the sidelines with injury.

Jamieson took 72 wickets in 16 Test matches for the Black Caps before a back injury forced him out of the tour of England last June. After seven months out of action, he has been included in a 14-man squad for a two-match Test series against England starting in Tauranga on February 16.

Black Caps coach Gary Stead will give Jamieson, who is 6ft 8ins (2.03m) tall, the chance to prove his fitness when a New Zealand XI take on England

in a two-day warm-up match starting next Wednesday.

"Kyle is a very determined character," Stead said of the 28-year-old.

"Since he was forced from the field in Nottingham he's been very clear that he wants to get his body right to return."

"He's reported good progress since his return to professional cricket with Auckland and he will get the opportunity to play some long-form cricket."

SQUAD: Tim Southee (capt), Michael Bracewell, Tom Blundell (wicketkeeper), Devon Conway, Matt Henry, Kyle Jamieson, Tom Latham, Daryl Mitchell, Henry Nicholls, Ish Sodhi, Blair Tickner, Neil Wagner, Kane Williamson, Will Young.



New Zealand's Kyle Jamieson walks off the field after sustaining an injury during the second Test against England at the Trent Bridge in Nottingham on June 12, 2022. (Reuters)

SELECTION

Ahmed gets England white-ball call-up for Bangladesh tour

AFP
London

England picked teenage leg-spinner Rehan Ahmed in their white-ball squads for the first time yesterday ahead of next month's tour of Bangladesh.

The 18-year-old Leicestershire bowler became England's youngest men's Test cricketer against Pakistan in Karachi in December and marked his debut in style with a five-wicket haul. Ahmed had played just three first-class matches before making his Test bow, but has more experience in white-ball cricket, having appeared regularly for his county side.

Saqib Mahmood has been included in the one-day international squad for the first time since suffering a stress fracture of the back in May last year. But there was no place for Alex Hales, with the big-hitting batsman set to honour his contract to play in the Pakistan Super League after only returning to England duty last year.

Hales was a key figure in England's T20 World Cup triumph in Australia in Novem-

ber after a positive test for recreational drug use came to light on the eve of the 2019 50-over World Cup led to more than three years of international exile.

England will play three ODIs and three T20s in Bangladesh from March 1 to 14. The T20 fixtures are their first in the format since Jos Buttler's men became world champions, adding to their 50-over global title.

SQUADS
ODI: Jos Buttler (Lancashire, capt/wkt), Tom Abell (Somerset), Rehan Ahmed (Leicestershire), Moeen Ali (Warwickshire), Jofra Archer (Sussex), Sam Curran (Surrey), Saqib Mahmood (Lancashire), Dawid Malan (Yorkshire), Adil Rashid (Yorkshire), Jason Roy (Surrey), Phil Salt (Lancashire), Reece Topley (Surrey), James Vince (Hampshire), Chris Woakes (Warwickshire), Mark Wood (Durham)
T20: Buttler, Abell, Ahmed, Ali, Archer, Curran, Ben Duckett (Nottinghamshire), Will Jacks (Surrey), Chris Jordan (Surrey), Malan, Rashid, Salt, Topley, Woakes, Wood.

IPL will become world's biggest domestic sporting event, says Strauss

London: Former England captain Andrew Strauss forecast the Indian Premier League would eclipse American football's NFL to become "the biggest domestic sporting event in the world" as he praised it for sparking one of cricket's "great steps forward".

He also said the recent creation of a women's IPL would "accelerate" the growth of the female game in spectacular fashion. A highly lucrative franchise T20 event backed by wealthy business figures and entertainment stars, the IPL has also led to the creation of similar competitions, such as Australia's Big Bash and the Caribbean Premier League.

In the process, players on the global T20 circuit earn a good living from

cricket without having to represent their countries. This has led to fears about the future of international cricket, in particular five-day Tests, but Strauss said issues of "overkill" had existed before the advent of the IPL in 2008 and were still evident at international and county level. Strauss, delivering the annual Cowdrey lecture at Lord's, urged his audience to embrace the IPL despite fears it meant the game had "sold its soul".

"As the Indian economy grows, it is expected that by the time it reaches parity with the size of the USA in 2040, the value of the IPL is likely to be six times what it is today - this is going to be the biggest domestic sporting tournament in the world, bar none," Strauss said.

"If you allow yourself to keep bound up in the thesis that the purpose of the game is to bring diverse people together, whether playing or watching, and to allow cricket to educate and connect, then surely the rise of franchise cricket is one of the great steps forward."

"More players are playing in different parts of the world, experiencing new places and meeting new people, more and more people around the globe are engaged with the great game that we all love so much." Turning to the new five-team women's IPL, Strauss said it would "accelerate" the growth of women's cricket.

"The first IPL franchises have just been sold for an earth shattering sum of £465 million (\$572.5 million)," the 45-year-old

former opener added. "Women's cricket is truly standing on its own two feet and is likely to be in the top three sports for earning potential for any young girl with talent and an ambition to play sport professionally."

Strauss, meanwhile, said the attacking way in which England red-ball coach Brendon McCullum and captain Ben Stokes had overseen nine wins from 10 Tests since taking charge in May, compared to a mere one in 17 before they joined forces, augured well for the future of the five-day game.

"I firmly believe that the Test series that capture our imaginations today - the ones that we really look forward to - aren't going anywhere," Strauss insisted.

Australia's Khawaja flies out to India after visa approved

Melbourne: Australia opener Usman Khawaja will join his test teammates in India later yesterday following a delayed approval of his visa, Cricket Australia said.

Pakistan-born Khawaja, named Australia's test player of the year this week, was the only member of the squad unable to travel and missed a flight on Wednesday because of the visa delay. A Cricket Australia spokesperson yesterday confirmed Khawaja's visa had been approved overnight and he was on a morning flight from Melbourne to Bengaluru. Australia are holding a training camp in Alur, about an hour outside Bengaluru, before the four-test series starts in Nagpur from February 9. Khawaja on Wednesday posted on social media about being "stranded".

He spent the night at an airport hotel in Melbourne after parting with teammates, local media said. Khawaja has previously had a visa problem travelling to India when he tried to enter the country in 2011 for the now-defunct T20 Champions League.



TWENTY20

Heat reach BBL final after stunning Sixers by four wickets

Reuters
Brisbane

Brisbane Heat secured their place in the Big Bash League (BBL) final where they face Perth Scorchers after a hard-fought four-wicket victory over a fancied Sydney Sixers side yesterday at the Sydney Cricket Ground.

After restricting the hosts to a modest 116-9 in their 20 overs courtesy of a miserly 3-17 by spinner Matthew Kuhnemann, the Heat battled their way to 117-6 with 10 deliveries to spare.

"We're a Queensland team and the great Queensland teams, when their backs are against the wall, they find a way to win. It's something we've tried to (grow) within our psyche," said Brisbane captain Jimmy Peirson.

With batsmen Usman Khawaja and Marnus Labuschagne in India with Australia's Test squad, it was left to domestic player of the year Michael Ne-

ser (48 not out) to steer the run-chase after the Heat middle order collapsed and the side reeled at 56-5.

The knockout match remained in the balance until Naser released the pressure that had been building by peeling four successive boundaries off seamer Hayden Kerr in the 16th over.

The lowly total appeared enough until Naser hit a BBL career-best 48 not out off 32 balls to mow down the target with 10 balls to spare as Heat's remarkable rejuvenation continued.

Having won seven of their last eight games, including previous road finals against Sydney Thunder and Melbourne Renegades, Heat are on the brink of an unlikely second BBL title.

Having studied Sixers' innings, Heat wisely decided to go for broke against the new ball, with opener Josh Brown hitting two sixes off Steve O'Keefe.

Playing his first match of the season, filling the shoes of Khawaja, Sam Heazlett wasn't fazed

and smashed a boundary off his second delivery before hitting a six over deep square leg off seamer Sean Abbott.

But disaster struck on the next delivery when Heazlett was run out after running on an overthrow to spark a collapse for Heat. Much like Sixers' batters, Heat struggled to score and slumped to 56 for 5 before Naser and recalled Max Bryant rallied with a 30-run partnership.

Bryant threw his wicket away in the power surge, but Naser continued to hold his nerve and blasted four consecutive boundaries off seamer Hayden Kerr in the 16th over to spectacularly swing the match. The Heat now travel to Western Australia to face defending champions Perth Scorchers in tomorrow's decider.

BRIEF SCORES: Brisbane Heat 117 for 6 (Naser 48*, Brown 20, Naveed 2-28) beat Sydney Sixers 116 for 9 (Hughes 23, Patterson 19, Kuhnemann 3-17, Johnson 3-28) by four wickets.



Brisbane Heat's Michael Naser in action against Sydney Sixers in the Big Bash League match in Sydney yesterday.

FOOTBALL

Barcelona earn tense win at Betis to extend La Liga lead

'I think we had a good game, our play was very good, excellent I would say'

AFP
Seville, Spain

Raphinha and Robert Lewandowski's strikes helped Barcelona move eight points clear at the top of La Liga with a 2-1 win at Real Betis on Wednesday.

The Catalans put pressure on second-placed Real Madrid, who host Valencia later yesterday, by scraping a narrow win from an intense clash at the Benito Villamarín.

With French winger Ousmane Dembele out injured for the next few weeks, Raphinha grabbed his chance to prove himself.

Dembele's superb form had limited the Brazilian's minutes since his move from Leeds United last summer.

Raphinha put Barcelona ahead in the 65th minute and Lewandowski, back after a three-match league ban, netted the second with 10 minutes to go.

Jules Kounde scored an unfortunate own goal to give Betis a fighting chance of a point in the final stages but Barcelona held out for the win.

"I think we had a good game, our play was very good, excellent I would say," Barca coach Xavi Hernandez told Movistar.

"We played a great game at a very difficult place to come. I'm very happy not just for the result but for how we played, we've improved a lot from the Girona game."

Barcelona had won their previous three league games 1-0, including against Catalan rivals Girona last weekend in a flat performance, but were operating on a higher level in Seville.

Betis started well in front of



Barcelona's Raphinha celebrates with Pedri after scoring his team's first goal against Betis during the La Liga match in Seville. (AFP)

their boisterous support, with Alejandro Balde doing well to block Luiz Henrique's effort in the opening exchanges.

At the other end Lewandowski headed wide, while Pedri could not find a finish when racing through on goal.

Raphinha had a goal ruled out

for a clear offside and Kounde flung himself in the way of Sergio Canales's strike.

Betis goalkeeper Rui Silva denied Pedri either side of half-time as the Spain international tried to continue his own goal-scoring form after netting the winner in Girona.

Raphinha appealed unsuccessfully for a penalty after a tangle with Abner Vinicius in the area, but the Brazilian's complaints soon turned to celebrations.

Freddie de Jong cleverly fed Balde from a quick free-kick and the young left-back slid a

ball across the face of goal for Raphinha to tap home.

"It's about attitude, competitiveness, desire, faith, our hopes are huge," said Xavi when asked about De Jong's quick thinking.

"We are at a good moment with this, we have confidence and the morale to achieve success. That matters, too, it's about competing well."

La Liga's top scorer Lewandowski's return was largely a frustrating one for the striker, having a shot blocked after Sergio Busquets set him up, while his touch was unusually clunky.

However the Polish international finished clinically after Ronald Araujo headed down to him, to net his 14th league goal of the season and 23rd across all competitions.

Substitute Ansu Fati headed wide from another fine Balde cross, before Kounde accidentally chested a ball into his own net past the outstretched arm of Marc-Andre ter Stegen, setting up a nervy finale.

Barcelona survived to round off the first half of their league campaign with a victory, aiming to win the title for the first time since 2019. Betis, sixth, had William Carvalho sent off after the full-time whistle for protesting some of the refereeing decisions.

The Andalusians sit three points behind Atletico Madrid in fourth.

"Against Barca the games are always like this, it's hard to take the ball off them, they are capable of pushing you back and keeping you in your own half," Betis forward Borja Iglesias told Movistar.

"Until their goal we were doing well, from there it was a different game."

TENNIS

Davis Cup takes first step into uncertain future

AFP
Paris

The Davis Cup holds its qualifiers this week for the first edition of the competition since the International Tennis Federation ended the controversial partnership with investors Kosmos.

The ITF last month ended its agreement with the Kosmos group, headed by former Spanish international footballer Gerard Pique, less than five years after a 25-year deal was signed.

The revamped Davis Cup, first played in 1900, has attracted widespread criticism for its new format which broke away from its traditional system of home and away ties, favouring city-based events instead. Despite the cutting of ties with Kosmos, the team event will continue with the new format this year.

Teams including Britain, Serbia, Switzerland and Argentina, will play qualifying ties hoping to reach the group stage of the Davis Cup Finals, scheduled for September.

The original contract with Kosmos, which is yet to pay players prize money for last year's Davis Cup, was worth \$3bn. "We all knew it was going to happen," former France captain Arnaud Clement told AFP of the end of the deal. "We would have liked to be wrong so that the Davis Cup did not die, but the starting ingredients were not the right ones."

British player Dan Evans also believed it was never likely to last. "It was a matter of time, wasn't it? We were getting paid a little too much for not a lot, I guess. But you get it while you can," he told *The Guardian* newspaper last month.

Croatia won the last Davis Cup to be held with the traditional knockout ties, decided over five rubbers, played as best-of-five-set matches.

Leading players had started to play in the tournament less frequently, although Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray have all lifted the trophy.

But the change to a World Cup-style format did not have the desired effect of bigger au-



diences and more stars competing. Nadal helped Spain to victory in the inaugural Davis Cup Finals four years ago but has not featured since due to injuries. Djokovic also skipped the event last year.

"We changed it when I don't think it necessarily needed the whole format changing," added Evans, who is in the British team to take on Colombia in Cota this weekend.

"There's people out there who are pumped to play three out of five (sets) for three days and win the tournament and I'd still be happy to do that."

Last year's group stage matches were sparsely attended and late-night finishes brought back common complaints about scheduling. The row with Kosmos is still simmering, after Pique's group took the dispute to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, citing an "unjustified termination" of its contract with the ITF. The Davis Cup can still count on support from elsewhere in the sport, though, as organisers look to find a solution for the future. "The Grand Slam tournaments are united in their support of the Davis Cup competition," the four Grand Slam events said in a statement last week. The ITF will be hoping that on-court action can take the spotlight this week as the countries battle for the last 12 tickets to the finals.

Holders Canada, France, Italy and Spain have all already secured their places by reaching the 2022 semi-finals. Stan Wawrinka, who won the tournament for Switzerland in its old format alongside Federer in 2014, is returning to the tournament against Germany. "I always said I would like to play once again for my country in Davis Cup and that I am available to play if I can bring support to the team," said Wawrinka.

GERMAN CUP

Cancelo shines in Bayern's 4-0 victory over Mainz

AFP
Berlin

New Bayern Munich signing Joao Cancelo set up a goal to help his side secure a first win of 2023 with a 4-0 triumph at 10-man Mainz in the German Cup on Wednesday.

Cancelo, who joined the German champions on loan from Man City on Tuesday, made an immediate impact, floating in a lofted cross to Cameroon striker Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting, who hammered home from close range.

Winless in their first three league games of 2023, Bayern entered the game under significant pressure to advance to the German Cup quarter-finals for the first time in three seasons.

Choupo-Moting's 17th-minute strike settled the visitors' nerves and they had a second on the 30-minute mark when Bayern veteran Thomas Mueller found teenage forward Jamal Musiala, who slammed the ball across the face of goal to make it 2-0.

Winger Leroy Sane scored the third with one minute of the first half remaining, sliding in a looped assist from former Mainz forward Choupo-Moting.

Canadian wing-back Alphonso Davies, who came on for Cancelo with 20 minutes to go, added a fourth late in the game, heading in a floated assist from Dutch centre-back Matthijs de Ligt.

Mainz had a number of half



Bayern Munich's Joao Cancelo controls the ball during the German Cup last 16 match against Mainz. (AFP)

chances in an increasingly fiery second half which saw centre-back Alexander Hack sent off for a second yellow card, along with Bo Svensson, who was shown a straight red for arguing with the assistant referee moments before Davies' goal.

Svensson complained that the German champions got better treatment from the officials in the lead up to his red card.

"I saw a clear difference in the way Bayern's bench were handled and the way we were handled (by the referees). It's not the first time."

Bayern manager Julian Nagelsmann praised his side, saying they were "much more aggressive" than they have been so far this year.

"I'm glad we won again. I

think the style and manner in which we played was very, very good."

Former Chelsea striker Timo Werner scored late to help holders RB Leipzig beat Hoffenheim 3-1. Werner, who returned to Leipzig from a two-year stint at Stamford Bridge in August, had endured a difficult night and was caught offside on multiple occasions.

He got his timing right however in the 83rd minute, latching onto a pass from Danish striker Yussuf Poulsen and driving the ball past Hoffenheim goalkeeper Oliver Baumann to seal his side's win.

Leipzig, who are unbeaten at home in the league this season, struck after just eight minutes, with Swedish forward Emil Fors-

berg catching Baumann napping to squeeze in a long-range shot at the near post.

Leipzig doubled their lead before half-time, with Austrian midfielder Konrad Laimer collecting the ball on the turn before unleashing a fierce left-foot shot into the far corner of the net.

Kasper Dolberg headed in a sublime cross from former Leipzig wing-back Angelino in the 77th minute to cause some nerves for the home side in the closing stages.

However, Werner scored his fourth goal of the cup campaign with just over five minutes remaining.

"We showed that we want to go further (in the competition)," said Forsberg.

"We played a good first half, we were really focused. We could have sealed it earlier, but it was a deserved win!"

Former Borussia Dortmund midfielder Thomas Delaney, who signed with Hoffenheim on Monday, told Germany's Sky "we have a good team, we have great players, but we are lacking confidence at the moment."

Hoffenheim captain Baumann agreed, saying his under-pressure side had hoped to build confidence with a better result in the cup.

Hoffenheim sit in 13th place in the league, three points above the relegation playoff spot, with Baumann saying the side needed to admit "we're in a relegation fight."

"We are almost only losing and that really annoys me."

FIA launches application process for prospective F1 teams

London: Formula One's governing body said yesterday it had formally started a process that could lead to new teams entering the championship from 2025.

Michael Andretti has already announced plans for an American bid with the support of General Motors brand Cadillac, but the commercial rights holder and most of the 10 existing teams have sounded lukewarm on expanding the grid. The teams are concerned about diluting their share of the revenues while Liberty Media-owned Formula One Management (FOM) has been increasingly at odds with Mohamed Ben Sulayem, president of the governing FIA. The FIA said it sought to identify one or more new teams

interested in joining in 2025, 2026 or 2027.

Those proceeding to a formal application process must pay a fee of \$300,000 to cover due diligence checks carried out by the governing body. The deadline for submission of formal applications was expected to be April 30 with any decision by June 30. Criteria included a detailed business plan for the first five years and, for the first time, proof of sustainability and how the team intended to "achieve a positive societal impact through its participation in the sport."

The FIA said there was a high level of interest but recognised FOM had a say and "may also impose additional selection criteria/conditions".

While the FIA ultimately owns the rights to the championship, it signed them over to FOM in a 100-year deal in 2001 as part of a separation of commercial and regulatory activities. The championship is limited to a maximum 12 teams up to and including the 2025 season. The sport will have a new power unit from 2026, when Audi will also enter after taking over the existing Sauber team. "The growth and appeal of the FIA Formula One World Championship is at unprecedented levels," said Ben Sulayem. "The FIA believes the conditions are right for interested parties, which meet the selection criteria, to express a formal interest in entering the Championship." (Reuters)

FOCUS

Dyche braced for Everton battle after failing to make new signings

AFP
London

New Everton manager Sean Dyche says he is comfortable heading into a Premier League relegation battle with no fresh signings after the club failed to land a single target in the January transfer window.

The Toffees were the only English top-flight club not to strengthen last month despite a desperate need to inject life into a squad that is second from bottom of the table with just three wins all season.

Numerous attempts were made to bring in players on Tuesday's deadline day, the day after Dyche was officially

announced as manager, but Everton were beaten by rivals or could not get deals over the line. Owner Farhad Moshiri had promised the club would sign a striker but Dyche said they had not failed for want of trying.

"Phone calls were made, the offers were made, it didn't get to them whatever the reason," the former Burnley boss said at his first press conference yesterday. "We can have debates on why (but) I'm not going to sign players for the sake of it. They've got to be good enough to affect what we do."

"There's good players here. They may not have shown it but we need to remind ourselves of the good players here. We've got to polish them up a bit." Everton fans have been fiercely

critical in recent weeks about the way the club is being run and the board was advised not to attend the recent home match against Southampton due to threats made over their safety.

Dyche, who faces a daunting first match against Premier League leaders Arsenal on Saturday, said he had walked into the situation with his eyes wide open but called for everyone to pull together to haul the club out of relegation trouble.

"The message is clear - unity," he said. "It's a given. Even the most disgruntled Evertonians, give us a chance to stick by the team. They (fans) are important, players respond to fans and when the pressure lifts all of a sudden they feel the backing and support."

HORSE RACING

Hidalgo Du Croate lands Ain Sinan Cup

High And Wide topped the 1100m Handicap for second straight victory

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari's Hidalgo Du Croate won the Ain Sinan Cup, the day's feature race at the Al Uqda Complex yesterday. Jockey Jerome Moutard gave a good ride to the six-year-old Julian Smart-trained gelding as he won the 2000m contest for four-year-old+ Purebred Arabians by a length.

In the penultimate race of the day, Yousuf Bakhit al-Kuwari's High And Wide enhanced his tally with a second straight win as he topped the 1100m Handicap (65-85) for three-year-old+ Thoroughbreds by a length for the trainer-jockey combination of Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki and Tomas Lukasek.

Al Jeryan Stud's AJS Duhail won his second victory in a row yesterday. Trainer MHK al-Attayah and jockey Szczepan Mazur teamed up to good effect once again as the four-year-old gelding took the 1300m Handicap (0-70) for four-year+ Local Thoroughbred by a length.

In a thrilling start to the day's racing, Nasser Owaida Salem al-Hajri's Rain Prancer emerged victorious in a battle for the line. Under jockey Fahel Bughanaim, the Owaida Salem al-Hajri-trained six year-old gelding got the better of Arsaad by a head in the 1300m Handicap (0-65) for four-year-old+ Thoroughbreds.

There was another exciting finish in the 2000m Maiden for four to six-year-old Purebred Arabians, as only a short head decided the winner and it was Abdullah bin Ali bin Khalifa al-Attia's Igor Du Pouy, trained by Mohamed Nasser al-Naimi, who narrowly came out on top for jockey Soufiane Saadi ahead of Fetown.

Al Rufaa Racing's Flaming Lord returned back to his game with a win in the 2000m Novice for four-year+ Thoroughbreds. Jockey Marco Casamento gave the Jassim Ghazali-trained four-year-old gelding a good ride to finish a length and a quarter in front of his nearest rival.



Jerome Moutard rides Hidalgo Du Croate to Ain Sinan Cup victory at the Al Uqda Complex yesterday. PICTURE: Juhaim

Khalifa Hassan al-Jehani's Kai Du Soleil opened his account, as the four-year-old colt won the 1300m Handicap (0-75) for four-year+ Purebred Arabians in comprehensive fashion, going two and a half lengths clear under jockey Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi for trainer Mohamed Ghazali.

RESULTS
Horse, Trainer, Jockey
1 - Ain Sinan Cup - Purebred Arabians

Hidalgo Du Croate, Julian Colin Smart, Jerome Moutard
2 - Thoroughbred Handicap 65-85 (Class 4)
High And Wide, Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, Tomas Lukasek
3 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap 0-70
AJS Duhail, MHK al-Attayah, Szczepan Mazur
4 - Purebred Arabian Handicap 0-75 (Qatari Riders Only)
Kai Du Soleil, Mohamed Ghazali, Saleh

Faraj al-Otaibi
5 - Thoroughbred Novice Plate (Class 5)
Flaming Lord, Jassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento
6 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate
Igor Du Pouy, Mohamed Nasser al-Naimi, Soufiane Saadi
7 - Thoroughbred Handicap 0-65 (Class 6)
Rain Prancer, Owaida Salem al-Hajri, Fahel Bughanaim

AL SADD CLINCH QATAR CUP BASKETBALL TITLE



Al Sadd won the Qatar Cup basketball after beating Al Rayyan 100-76 (21-9; 32-20; 21-23; 26-24) in final at the Al Rayyan Sports Club on Wednesday. Waverly Samuel Austin (23 points), Babacar Dieng (16pts), Faisal Nabil Abuissa (9pts), Mohamed Bechir Sadi (7pts) and Ahmad Saied Mohamed (6pts) were the leading scorers for Al Sadd while Ibrahim Seck (12pts) and Ali Tawfiq Hussein (8pts) excelled for Al Rayyan. President of the Qatar Basketball Federation Mohamed Saad al-Mughaiseb presented the trophies. Al Sadd's Babacar Dieng won the Best Player Award. He scored a total of 850 points, recovering the ball 209 times and providing 105 assists. Al Gharafa club's Mohamed Youssef won the award for three-pointer - scoring 79 shots. Mohamed Hashim of Al Ahli won the Best Promising Player Award with 276 points, while Al Sadd's Vassilis Bratsiakos was named as the Best Coach.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Potter's free-spending Chelsea can 'attack' end of the season

AFP
London

Chelsea manager Graham Potter says he is excited by the challenge of getting the best out of a bloated squad after the Blues smashed spending records during the January transfer window. World Cup winner Enzo Fernandez could make his debut against Fulham today after joining for a British-record 121m euros (\$132mn, £107mn) from Benfica.

Ukraine's Mykhailo Mudryk could also make his Stamford Bridge bow after joining from Shakhtar Donetsk for a fee that could rise to 100mn euros.

Chelsea signed eight players in total in January, taking their total spend in the first season under new ownership to more than £500mn. Despite the investment, Chelsea sit 10th in the Premier League table and were dumped out of both domestic cups by Manchester City.

Potter's men have a 10-point deficit to make up if they are to catch the top four. And the former Brighton boss faces a tricky task ahead, unable to register all the new arrivals for the latter stages of this season's Champions League. "It's exciting," said Potter, who only arrived at the club in September.

"It's a test for me of course and for the staff and everybody but it's an exciting one. We've got a lot of really good players. We have to create an environment where there's healthy competition and they can push each other and at the same time understand that there's going to be frustration at times because only 11 can play. But we've got a lot of important games and we need to improve our results so it's about playing, supporting the team and being ready to play."

Potter suddenly has a wealth of options at his disposal, with Chelsea's long injury list beginning to clear. Reece James, Ben Chilwell, Raheem Sterling and Ruben Loftus-Cheek are available again for selection. "There is a youthful dynamic and you can

see the type of player we've tried to sign. We are trying to build something for now and the future," Potter said, referring to Chelsea's much-criticised transfer policy.

"We've had a pretty unprecedented injury situation, lots of things have happened. We've learnt a lot and we can attack the second half of the season."

Argentina's Fernandez was signed with minutes to spare as protracted negotiations with Benfica went down to the wire on Tuesday's deadline day. But not all of Chelsea's business was completed - a move to send Hakim Ziyech to Paris Saint-Germain on loan collapsed after the paperwork was not finished in time.

"I'm the head coach so I don't get too involved in the nitty gritty of deadline day," said Potter. "I've been involved too long to know that there are some things you can't control and I couldn't do anything at that point to change things. I found out that we had signed Enzo when it was all done and I'm very pleased, because he is a fantastic player."

SPOTLIGHT

France defender Varane retires from international football

AFP
Paris

France centre-back Raphael Varane, a World Cup winner in 2018 and runner-up last year, announced yesterday his retirement from international football at the age of 29. "I've been thinking about it for several months and I decided it was the right time for me to retire from international football," Varane wrote on Instagram.

The Manchester United defender made his France debut in 2013 and won 93 caps for Les Bleus. He had been in the running to take over as captain following the retirement of Hugo Lloris last month. "To represent our magnificent country for a decade has been one of the greatest honours of my life. Each time I wore this special blue shirt I felt immense pride," said Varane.

Varane's decision to call time on his France career leaves Kylian Mbappe as the frontrunner for the captaincy, with Didier Deschamps' side set to begin Euro 2024 qualifying at the end of March with a double-header against the Netherlands and the Republic of Ireland.

The former Real Madrid star played every minute of his country's triumphant 2018 World Cup campaign as France defeated Croatia 4-2 in the final. He was one of five French players who also started the 2022 final defeat by Argentina on penalties, recovering from a leg injury that ruled him out of the start of the tournament.

"I'll definitely miss these moments with you, but the time has come for the new generation to take over," he said, thanking Deschamps and his coaching staff as well as the supporters. "We have a group of talented young players who are ready to step up and who deserve their chance."

Deschamps paid tribute to Varane and praised him for the leadership qualities he had brought to the team throughout his time with France. "I cannot turn this page without some emotion, given the bonds we have formed," said Deschamps, who gave Varane his international debut in a 2014 World Cup qualifier against Georgia.

"I respect his decision even if it may seem a bit unfortunate given everything he was able to do with the national team through to the World Cup, during which he behaved like the leader we know he is from start to finish."



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Cremonese stun Roma to reach Italian Cup semis

Milan: Cremonese will play Fiorentina in the last four of the Italian Cup after Serie A's bottom club inflicted a surprise 2-1 defeat on Roma on Wednesday.

Davide Ballardini's side are yet to win a league game in their first top-flight season since 1996 but have a two-legged semi-final to look forward to thanks to Cyril Dessers' 28th-minute penalty and a Zeki Celik own goal shortly after half-time.

They will take on Fiorentina, who beat Torino 2-1 earlier on Wednesday, in April following the second shock cup win of their season after beating Serie A's runaway leaders Napoli on penalties in the previous round. Roma exit with a poor performance from an initially second-string team nothing like the display Jose Mourinho's team put in at Napoli on Sunday.

Mourinho was so enraged by his side's first-half efforts that he made four changes at the break but not even the introduction of Paulo Dybala and Tammy Abraham was enough to turn the result in Roma's favour despite Andrea Belotti's late strike for the hosts.

Among those left out was Nicolò Zaniolo, who sent an open letter to Italian news agency saying he was "at the complete disposal of the Roma family" following a public transfer spat which led to him fleeing Rome in apparent fear for his safety.

The Italy international has been frozen out by Roma, reportedly at the request of the club's American owners, after

putting in a transfer request, refusing to be selected for matches and then turning down a 30-million-euro move to Bournemouth.

On Saturday Mourinho said that Zaniolo had told him and his teammates that he never wanted to play for Roma again.

The 23-year-old was then threatened by supporters outside his home in the Italian capital, leading to him escaping to La Spezia from where he offered Wednesday's olive branch. The semi-final line-up will be completed when Juventus host Lazio in Turin, with the winner facing Inter Milan.

FERNANDES HAILS TEN HAG EFFECT AFTER UNITED REACH LEAGUE CUP FINAL
Bruno Fernandes has hailed Erik ten Hag's role in transforming the fortunes of Manchester United after the club secured a place in the League Cup final. The Dutch manager, in his first season at Old Trafford, will lead his team out at Wembley on February 26 against Newcastle after Wednesday's 2-0 win against Nottingham Forest wrapped up a 5-0 aggregate semi-final triumph.

It is a chance for United to end their worst trophy drought in 40 years - they have failed to lift any silverware since winning the Europa League in 2017. Ten Hag has overseen a dramatic change in fortunes and culture at Old Trafford since arriving from Ajax, with a first trophy now tantalisingly close. Last year they finished sixth in the Premier League.

Ooredoo sponsors padel tournament

Doha: Ooredoo, a pioneering supporter of regional sporting excellence, is the title sponsor of the Ooredoo Padel Tournament, which will conclude on Sunday at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex.

The tournament - organised by the Qatar Tennis Federation - features more than 90 teams, some including prominent players drawn from national and international padel competitions.

The organising committee of the tournament has allocated prize money for the winners, who will be honoured by senior officials from the Qatar Tennis Federation and Ooredoo.

Moza Khalid al-Mohannadi - Director CSR, Sponsorship and Media at Ooredoo - said: "The regional rise to prominence of padel is a development Ooredoo welcomes, in line with our environmental, social and governance emphasis on sporting excellence and healthy community participation. It's a further opportunity for the people we serve to 'Upgrade their World' by taking part in sport or by cheering for their team as spectators."



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