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CRICKET | Page 2

Australia ready for India's varied bowling options: Carey



COMEBACK | Page 3

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# GULF TIMES SPORT

FOOTBALL  
**'No excuses' for Arsenal in title bid after January spending: Arteta**  
Page 4

MOTORSPORT

# Al-Attiyah in cruise control after stage 1 of Saudi Baja-Hail

'IT WAS GOOD. WE DID NOT PUSH HARD. WE JUST WANTED TO HAVE A DAY WITHOUT ANY PROBLEMS'

By Sports Reporter  
Hail, Saudi Arabia

Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and French co-driver Mathieu Baumel cruised into a lead of 12min 05sec after a 230km loop stage through the deserts to the west of Hail on the 2023 Saudi Baja-Hail yesterday.

The Qatari stopped the clocks in 2hr 24min 48sec and beat closest rival Krzysztof Holowczyc by 9min 50sec to comfortably lead the Mini John Cooper Works Rally Plus driver and his Polish co-driver Lukasz Kurzeja.

Toyota driver al-Attiyah said: "It was good. We did not have a big push. We just wanted to have a day without any problems. We have a good time. We decide last week to do this one and we will do Qatar and, if we have the time, we will do Baja Spain and I would like to do Jordan Baja for the first time and then Dubai."

Holowczyc had suffered a blow after the opening Prologue stage when it came to light that the Pole had strayed slightly off the designated course and the result was a two-minute time penalty that dropped him to the foot of the rankings at the start of Friday morning's timed stage.

Yasir Seaidan was the class of the T3 lightweight prototype category and the Saudi managed to beat defending FIA Bajas T3 World Champion Fernando Alvarez by 6min 17sec to lead the class and hold third overall.

"It was a good stage, the best ever," said Seaidan. "We were fast from the beginning and we continued pushing to the end. We didn't have the top speed but it was a good day and a good start to the Middle East programme."

Fellow countryman Saleh al-Saif was second fastest in his Team Black Horse Can-Am, despite missing his designated refuelling time because of congestion at the refuelling zone, and slot-



Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and French co-driver Mathieu Baumel in action during the stage one of the Saudi Baja-Hail.

ted into fourth in the overall rankings and second in T3. Dania Akeel climbed through the field to hold sixth place, behind Alvarez, and fourth in T3 in her South Racing Can-Am. Young Spaniard Pau Navarro and his

French co-driver Michael Metge delivered an impressive performance to lead the FIA T4 category in an FN Speed Team Can-Am, while the French duo of Jeremie Warnier and Loic Minaudier were second in a Polaris RZR Pro R. Overnight leader Cristiano Batista lost time with technical issues.

T3 driver Meshari al-Thefiri hit trouble before the stage started. The Kuwaiti said: "After service, we started the road section and, after 25km, the fuel pump died. After 10km, the spare one also died and we came back. We found some connector problem and we didn't have the parts and, once we had fixed it, it was too late."

Argentina's Juan Cruz Yacopini was running strongly early in the stage in the second of the Overdrive Toyotas until he had an accident near the end of the special and slipped to seventh overall. He said: "It was not the best day. We had an accident 15km from the finish, but all is okay."

MX Ride Dubai's Mohamed al-Balooshi was in a class of his own on the stage in the motorcycle category and the Emirati won on the day by 2min 22sec to move into an overall lead of 4min 57sec over the Prologue-winning Jordanian Abdullah Abu Aishah.

"Today was good until km16 and I realised I had jumped from eighth to first," said al-Balooshi. "For me, I thought I would only catch them after 80km, or before the refuel, so I was surprised. That meant I had to navigate and open the route. I was not prepared for this but I managed and took up the challenge. I led the rest of the stage and won. I am happy with this. Tomorrow, I take it easy and make sure we arrive on the finish line."

Kuwait's Abdullah al-Shatti came home in second place on the day and climbed to third, while al-Balooshi's brother Sultan and Saudi rider Anass al-Rehyani rounded off the overall top five. Australian Martin Chalmers was the best of the non-GCC riders in sixth.

Abdulaziz Ahli increased his lead over Haitham al-Tuwaijri in the quad category by 4min 17sec to 4min 25sec. Hani al-Noumesi was a distant third.

Today, the opening round of the 2023 FIA World and Middle East Cups for Cross-Country Bajas and the FIM Bajas World Cup continues with a second selective section that runs for 184km through the An Nafud desert and starts at Farhaniyah, 57km from the bivouac. The ceremonial finish will take place from 7.30pm today at Maghawt.

TOP 5 POSITIONS AFTER SSI CARS

1. Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/ Mathieu Baumel (AND) Toyota Hilux Overdrive; 2hr 27min 45sec
2. Krzysztof Holowczyc (POL)/Lukasz Kurzeja (POL) Mini John Cooper Works Rally Plus; 2hr 39min 50sec
3. Yasir Seaidan (SAU)/Alexei Kuzmich (ARE) Can-Am Maverick X3 (T3); 2hr 42min 47sec
4. Saleh al-Saif (SAU)/Nasser al-Kuwari (QAT) Can-Am Maverick (T3); 2hr 44min 55sec
5. Fernando Alvarez (ARG)/Xavier Panseri (FRA) Can-Am Maverick (T3); 2hr 49min 08sec

BIKES

1. Mohamed al-Balooshi (ARE) KTM 450 Rally 3hr 34min 35sec
2. Abdullah Abu Aishah (JOR) KTM EXC-F 450 3hr 39min 32sec
3. Abdullah al-Shatti (KWT) Husqvarna 450 Rally 3hr 42min 01sec
4. Sultan al-Balooshi (ARE) TM 450 3hr 44min 32sec
5. Anass al-Rehyani (SAU) KTM 450 3hr 46min 54sec

QUADS

1. Abdulaziz Ahli (ARE) Yamaha Raptor 700; Time: 3hr 46min 58sec
2. Haitham al-Tuwaijri (SAU) Yamaha Raptor 700; 3hr 51min 21sec
3. Hani al-Noumesi (SAY) Yamaha Raptor 700; 5hr 59min 47sec

QNB STARS LEAGUE

# Leaders Duhail face high-flying Ahli; Sadd take on Umm Salal

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Leaders Al Duhail face top-four chasing Al Ahli, while reigning champions Al Sadd will look to continue their winning run as they face Umm Salal in the QNB Stars League today.

Duhail are four points ahead of Al Arabi, who have lost two successive matches to drop down to second. The Red Knights have shown splendid form since the league returned to action following the World Cup break. But against Al Ahli side, who are fifth with 17 points, Duhail will find a tougher opponent.

Ahli registered a 3-1 win over Umm Salal in the last round having to rally after being a goal down for their fourth victory of the season.

Duhail's Argentinian coach Hernan Crespo said his team will face one of the in-form teams of the league. "An important match for us against a big team that plays well in every match, but it is up to us to present a good match and come up with the result we want," Crespo said yesterday.

"I trust the capabilities of my players as we have a complete squad and the problem I always face is choosing the players to start the match. Our match in the first leg against Al Ahli was difficult and ended in a draw. We were not lucky in that match after they scored the equalizer in the last minutes," he added.

Ahli's Montenegrin coach Nebojsa Jovicic knows the task will not be easy for his team, with Duhail's forwards Michael Olunga and Almoez Ali posing a huge threat. "The match will not be easy as Duhail are top of the standings," Jovicic said.

"But Ahli has the quality to face Duhail in the best way and compete for points. As a coach, I work to develop performance and address the negatives that appear to me in order to reach the best level. I have full respect for Al Duhail team and they are the strongest team in the league at the moment.

"Facing them requires a lot of focus and the team will be ready for the match," he added.

Meanwhile, Sadd will look to continue their march to top four. The Wolves are in sixth, while Umm Salal have fallen to the 11th

and penultimate place in the table.

Sadd, who missed many of their Qatar Internationals as they were away training for the World Cup, have shown their quality with a full-strength squad. Umm Salal have terminated the contract of Wesam Rizik and handed over the reins to Moroccan Talal El Karkouri.

Sadd coach Juan Manuel Lillo Juanma said his team will have to be wary of Umm Salal due to managerial bounce.

"The match will be a bit special because of the presence of a new coach for Umm Salal, who arrived a few days ago, and this will give the clash a completely different character. We know the difficulty of every match we play. I hope we will be better than our last match against Al Markhiya. We will aim not to miss opportunities and to be stronger and more focused in front of the opponents' goal," said Juanma.

In another much-anticipated match today, Al Arabi take on Al Rayyan. Both teams will fight hard for the three points as Arabi aim to get back to winning ways. Al Arabi coach Younes Ali will try to compensate for the recent



Al Duhail players train yesterday, on the eve of their QNB Stars League match against Al Ahli.

losses suffered by his team so that they do not move away from the position of strength. He would also be wary of the chase being made by Qatar SC and Al Gharafa besides the rise of Al Ahli and the

surge of Al Sadd. Rayyan, who advanced to the 10th place with eight points having achieved their second victory this season overcoming Al Shamal 2-1 in the last round,

will look to revive their position in the standings table. Cordova will rely more on two stars who have joined the team just recently - Moroccan Sofiane Boufal and Chilean Jason Vargas.

Meanwhile, Al Wakrah face Al Gharafa in what is expected to be a gruelling affair. Wakrah are fourth in the standings with 18 points, while Gharafa are seventh with 16 points.

BORDER-GAVASKAR TROPHY

# Australia ready for India's varied bowling options

Alex Carey says visitors monitoring India's spinners and pacers who reverse swing



Pacer Jaydev Unadkat of India bowls during a training session at the Vidarbha Cricket Association Stadium in Nagpur yesterday. India are preparing to host Australia for the first Test of the four-match Border-Gavaskar Trophy series from Feb 9, 2023 at the same venue.

Reuters  
Bengaluru

While Australia are prepared for a trial by spin in India they fully recognise the threat reverse swing may pose in the four-Test series against Rohit Sharma's men, touring wicketkeeper Alex Carey said yesterday.

Spin talk has dominated the build-up to the series between the world's top two tests teams, who meet in the opener in Nagpur on Thursday.

Australia batters practised on a scuffed-up pitch in Sydney before flying to India and have since gathered a bevy of local spinners for their net sessions in Bengaluru having decided against playing any warm-up matches.

Carey is set to play his first Test in India and the 31-year-old said Australia were not oblivious to other threats lurking in these spin-friendly conditions.

"Going to Pakistan, it was a lot of spin talk, and I found the reversing ball difficult," Carey told reporters referring to their sub-continent tour last year.

"When I played a four-day game here in 2018 a lot of talk was about spin and you probably forget a little bit about how damaging both teams' fast bowlers are with a reversing ball, and on wicket that might be a little bit up and down."

Carey said Australia's batting line-up had enough experience to cope with the challenges they will face in the series for the Border-Gavaskar Trophy.

"We are having the preparation in the game to ebb and



flow between spin and fast bowling, dry periods and periods where we score quickly," he added.

"I think what's great about this team is the experience we have."

"There are players who have been here a number of times and players that are new, to be able to talk to other guys, what they're doing, trust their game."

"I think we'll enjoy this and embrace this challenge. It's going to be a big, big series."

## BANGAR SAYS ROHIT SHARMA KEEN TO LEAD TEAM FROM THE FRONT

Former India batting coach Sanjay Bangar yesterday said skipper Rohit Sharma 'will be keen on leading the team from the front as captain' in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy against Australia.

Sharma will lead India for the first time against Australia in a Test match when the two teams meet in the first of a 4-Test series against Australia in Nagpur.

"It's a massive series for Rohit purely for the reason that whenever he was at his best, unfortunately, injuries made him sit out a lot of Test matches from 2015-2018. In 2018, when he was batting really well, he had to miss a Test match because he wanted to come back home to be with his family for personal reasons," Bangar told *Star Sports*.

"He has already conquered in his own mind the challenge of batting in English conditions in Test match cricket as an opener. Against England in India, we saw what a terrific series he had at home. So he obviously would keep this at the top of his to-do mark to do really well as a captain against the Australian team."

Meanwhile, Bangar said Rohit should be cautious against the new ball to make sure he settles in and takes on the spinners, according to a report on *India Today* website yesterday.

Australia have travelled to India with four spinners in Nathan Lyon, Mitchell Swepson, Ashton Agar and newcomer Todd Murphy who are part of a three-man pace attack that includes Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and Mitchell Starc.

## Worth the weight? Van Niekerk decision hands cricket modern day dilemma

Paris: Once upon a time, cricket was seen as a universal game. Not just in its appeal to a global audience but for the fact that individuals of any shape, size, colour, creed or class could play alongside each other. With the news that Dane van Niekerk, one of the best players in the women's game, has been left out of South Africa's Twenty20 World Cup squad on fitness grounds alone, this age-old perception may just have landed in the trashcan. Less athletic players, it seems, are now being penalised, no matter how good they are at actually playing cricket. And yet some of the greatest players would have struggled to pass fitness tests, certainly in their older years.

WG Grace, who used to "block shooters to the boundary" in the 19th century, may have started his career as a lithe athlete but had little time for the sharp single as his waistline expanded in his thirties and forties.

Warwick Armstrong, one of Australia's greatest captains in the early part of the 20th century, was known as the "Big Ship" because of his 130kg frame and billowing shirt.

Van Niekerk, 29, is a leg-spinning all-rounder and the only South African woman to have scored more than 1,500 runs and taken more than 50 wickets in women's T20 internationals. From 2016 to 2021 she captained the side in all three formats.

However, she last played for the national team in September 2021 and has been recovering from a broken ankle.

Her exclusion from the World Cup squad was because she did not achieve the required time for a two-kilometre run. Having lost 10kg since playing in England last summer and in spite of running a personal best, she missed the nine minute 30 seconds limit by 18 seconds which, according to team officials, was not good enough. "Dane was given an extensive opportunity to meet the minimum criteria, or the fitness benchmark for eligibility into the World Cup," said women's selection convener Clinton du Preez.

"It's purely based on the not meeting of the fitness criteria that she's missed out."

Van Niekerk said she was "broken" by the decision to exclude her from the World Cup which

starts on her home patch on February 10, but the decision may backfire on the South Africans who now go into the tournament without two, maybe even three, of their best players. Last year, another key player Lizelle Lee was left out of the tour to England and Ireland for failing to meet her weight requirement.

She subsequently retired from international cricket in order to play in the franchises.

And, although she was named in the World Cup squad, there must be some doubt as to whether Marizanne Kapp will walk away in protest. She is married to Van Niekerk and pulled out of Thursday's T20 against India for "personal" reasons.

South Africa is not the only country to have fitness tests but they do appear one of the more rigid.

Sisanda Magala, who played in the recent men's ODI series against England, was excluded from the squad last year after similarly failing to meet the target, in his case by 12 seconds. The Van Niekerk decision highlights, however, a trend in cricket which is seeing a squeeze on athletes who are built more for comfort than speed.

The rise of short-form cricket is certainly a factor as the fielding skills are now far advanced of what they were even 10 years ago.

The natural power advantage that bigger players such as Colin Milburn or the "short and stocky" New Zealand wicket-keeper Jock Edwards may have had in the past is less vital now that bats have become sledgehammer and boundaries have been shortened.

What future then for the likes of West Indies off-spinner Rakheem Cornwall, listed on his Wiki page as weighing in at 140 kilos, or the Pakistani batsman Azam Khan who is still mocked, as seen on Twitter this week as he walked out to bat in the Bangladesh Premier League, even after losing 30kilos?

"It's not about being overweight, it's about performance," said Azam, making the case for the defence in an article in January's *Cricketer Monthly*.

"If a guy is scoring 400 runs and he is super-fit and another guy is scoring 800 runs and he is not super-fit, I will keep the guy who scored 800 runs in my team."

"That's my point of view."



In this file photo taken on March 5, 2020, South Africa's Nonkululeko Mlaba (left) celebrates her wicket of Australia's Jess Jonassen with teammate Dane van Niekerk during the Twenty20 women's World Cup semi-final in Sydney. (AFP)

PREVIEW

## Batting legend Lara hopes to boost WI on his return to scene of big century

AFP  
Bulawayo

West Indies cricket legend Brian Lara has fond memories of the southwestern Zimbabwe city of Bulawayo where he scored 191 in a Test innings 20 years ago.

The 53-year-old was back at the Queens Sports Club, the scene of his 203-ball knock, this week in a new role as West Indies performance mentor.

His maiden mission is to assist the West Indies in a two-Test series from today against Zimbabwe, a country they have faced 10 times in the longest format, winning seven and drawing three.

Once a powerful force in international cricket, the Windies have fallen on hard times, with a first-round exit from the Twenty20 World Cup in Australia last

year the latest setback. Lara, whose unbeaten 400 against England in 2004 remains the highest individual Test score, was part of a three-man panel that recently reviewed the multi-nation team's woes.

The panel pinpointed the financial lure of T20 franchise cricket, saying some West Indies stars were putting it ahead of international duty.

The warning was stark: West Indies cricket may "cease to exist" unless the issue of its top players prioritising global T20 leagues over international calls-up is resolved.

Lara has kept a low profile since arriving in Zimbabwe, saying only that he "believes he can help the players with their mental approach and tactics".

After a 2-0 Test series loss in Australia two months ago, the West Indies confront Zimbabwe with an interim coach and several injury-enforced changes.

Coach Phil Simmons quit after the T20 World Cup humiliation. His replacement Andre Coley called the visits to Zimbabwe, and then to South Africa next month, "challenging".

"The tours offer me an opportunity to make a tangible and meaningful contribution to the growth of West Indies cricket," he said.

Fast bowler Shannon Gabriel has been recalled after a 14-month absence, with knee surgery ruling out Jayden Seales. Seamer Anderson Phillip is another injury victim. Left-arm spinners Gudakesh Motie and Jomel Warrican made a 15-man squad captained by opening batter Kraigg Brathwaite.

Zimbabwe are winless in 22 Tests since beating Pakistan in 2013 and it will be the first time coach Dave Houghton has taken charge in the longest format since his appointment last year. Former England batsman

Gary Ballance is set to make a Test debut for his country of birth, but prolific scorer Sikandar Raza is absent, leaving franchise cricket in Dubai.

### Squads Zimbabwe

Gary Ballance, Chamunorwa Chibhabha, Tanaka Chivanga, Craig Ervine (capt), Brad Evans, Joylord Gumbie, Innocent Kaia, Tanunurwa Makoni, Wellington Masakadza, Kudzai Maunze, Brandon Mavuta, Richard Ngarava, Victor Nyauchi, Milton Shumba, Donald Tiripano, Tafadzwa Tsiga

### West Indies

Kraigg Brathwaite (capt), Jermaine Blackwood, Nkrumah Bonner, Tagenarine Chanderpaul, Roston Chase, Joshua da Silva, Shannon Gabriel, Jason Holder, Alzarri Joseph, Kyle Mayers, Gudakesh Motie, Raymon Reifer, Kemar Roach, Devon Thomas, Jomel Warrican

## NEW ZEALAND TAKING CAUTIOUS APPROACH WITH 'ASSET' JAMIESON

Wellington: New Zealand paceman Kyle Jamieson is likely to play only in the opening pink ball Test against England in the two-match series as staff take a cautious approach with the recovering

quick. The towering 28-year-old was named in his first Test squad since injuring his back on the tour of England last year, interrupting a sensational start in the longest format.

New Zealand head coach Gary Stead said selectors did not want to risk putting Jamieson in a "compromising" position by having him play both Tests while easing back in.

"We've still got important matches coming up through the rest of the year," Stead told reporters yesterday. "We've selected a squad of 14 so we think we've got cover for all the options that we're going to need. He's obviously an important asset to us and there's no doubt what he's done at the start of his career has been pretty amazing." Jamieson, who has raced to 72 wickets in 16 Tests at an average of 19.45, joins a pace unit featuring captain Tim Southee, Matt Henry, Neil Wagner and uncapped quick Blair Tickner.

The series starts with the day-night Test at Bay Oval in Tauranga from Feb. 16, with the second

match at Wellington's Basin Reserve from Feb. 24. Jamieson said he had been through a "whole range of emotions" while recovering from his back problem but was feeling energised and

ready to take the new ball if called upon.

"If and when that time comes to put the test baggy (cap) back on, it'll be great," he told reporters. Rejuvenated England, under the watch of head coach and former New Zealand captain Brendon McCullum, whitewashed New Zealand 3-0 in the home series last year.

Inaugural World Test Championship winners in 2021, New Zealand hit a wall last year and are winless from their last five Test series. England have been on fire, though, winning three of their last

four with their attacking "Bazball" game. Stead said it was exciting to face England on relatively bouncy home pitches but gave short shrift to the idea New Zealand needed to lift their aggression to match the Ben Stokes-led side.

"There's no point in us talking to our players about going out and playing an aggressive brand of cricket if it's not their natural style," he said. "We will still play our way of aggression - but it will be in our way."



MOTORSPORT

# Ford team up with Red Bull for return to F1 grid in 2026

'This is the start of a thrilling new chapter in Ford's motorsports story'

AFP  
New York

American car manufacturer Ford will return to Formula One in 2026 with a link-up with world champions Red Bull, the company said yesterday.

Ford said they were entering a "long term strategic technical partnership for the development of the next-gen hybrid power unit to be used from the 2026 Formula 1 season onwards."

The company said they would provide the power units for both the Red Bull team and the Alpha Tauri team from 2026 until at least 2030.

"This is the start of a thrilling new chapter in Ford's motorsports story that began when my great-grandfather (Henry Ford) won a race that helped launch our company," said Bill Ford, executive chair.

Ford last featured in F1 in 2004 when they were partnered with Jordan and their return is a further sign of the growth of the sport in the United States.

This season will see three Grand Prix races in the US with Las Vegas joining Miami and Austin on the calendar.

The popularity of F1 in the country has soared since the Netflix series 'Drive to Survive' enjoyed huge success.

Red Bull's Max Verstappen has won the past two drivers' titles in F1 and the Honda-powered team are the defending constructors' champions.

Ford have played a part in 10 constructors' championships and 13 drivers' championships - making them the third most successful engine manufacturer in F1 history with their most recent success coming via Michael Schumacher's win with Benetton in 1994.

Red Bull unveiled their new car for the



In this file photo taken on May 2, 2003, Italian Jordan-Ford driver Giancarlo Fisichella steers his car in the pits of the Montmelo racetrack near Barcelona before the Catalunya Grand Prix of Spain. (AFP)

upcoming season at an event in New York yesterday and team principal Christian Horner said he was looking forward to the link-up.

"It's fantastic to be welcoming Ford back into Formula 1 through this partnership," he said.

"They are a manufacturer rich in motorsport history that spans generations. From Jim Clark to Ayrton Senna and Michael Schumacher, the lineage speaks for itself. For us as Red Bull Powertrains to open the next chapter of that dynasty, as Red Bull Ford, is tremendously excit-

ing," he said.

The companies will begin collaborating this year ahead of the change of regulations for engines in F1 and the agreement was welcomed by Formula One chief executive Stefano Domenicali.

"The news today that Ford is coming to Formula 1 from 2026 is great for the sport and we are excited to see them join the incredible automotive partners already in Formula One," said Domenicali.

Based around the current turbo-charged 1.6-litre power unit, F1's future engine regulations will feature increased

electrical power and 100% sustainable fuels, which the series says will also improve safety and lowering costs for manufacturers.

Red Bull also announced that their launch that fans will be able to design the team's livery for the three Grands Prix in the United States.

"It's going to be a competition, it's a huge opportunity and we've thought long and hard about it," said Horner.

"There'll be then a panel of judges and we'll pick out the best and most striking ones for these three races," he added.

TENNIS

## Nick Kyrgios admits assaulting girlfriend, avoids conviction



Tennis player Nick Kyrgios arrives at the ACT Magistrates Court in Canberra, Australia, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Canberra

Australia's Nick Kyrgios yesterday pleaded guilty to assaulting a former girlfriend, but avoided a conviction for what the magistrate called a "single act of stupidity".

Appearing in a Canberra court, the Wimbledon finalist admitted assaulting then-girlfriend Chiara Passari on January 10, 2021, by pushing her to the ground after a heated argument.

Kyrgios said he was "not in a good place" at the time, and that he "reacted to a difficult situation in a way I deeply regret".

"I know it wasn't OK and I'm sincerely sorry for the hurt I caused," he said in a statement.

Passari lodged a complaint with police 10 months after the incident, after the pair had broken up, lawyers told the court.

In a statement read to the court, Passari said she had been severely traumatised by the incident, experiencing severe weight loss, staying in bed day and night - unable to sleep or form new romantic relationships.

Lawyers for Kyrgios appealed to have the charge of one count of common assault dismissed on mental health grounds, arguing it was an isolated incident and out of character.

Psychologist Sam Borenstein told the court Kyrgios suffered from recurring major depression, which included black periods,

thoughts of self harm, insomnia, agitation and feelings of guilt.

Borenstein said the tennis star had relied on alcohol and drugs as a means of coping, but was now making progress in dealing with the issues.

Magistrate Beth Campbell heard that appeal but ultimately dismissed the case without conviction.

Campbell said Kyrgios acted poorly but the offence was not planned or premeditated and was a "single act of stupidity" by a young man attempting to remove himself from a tense situation.

The court was told Kyrgios shoved Passari, who was preventing him from leaving her Canberra apartment.

"I do not record a conviction against your name, I do not find any necessity to place you on a good behaviour bond," Campbell said.

Kyrgios had hobbled into court in Canberra with a pair of crutches and a brace on his knee, after suffering a "gruesome" injury that sidelined him at last month's Australian Open.

He was flanked by his current girlfriend Costeen Hatzl, an interior designer, and his mother Norliaila.

Canberra-born Kyrgios, known for his mercurial talent and on-court outbursts, later said "mental health is tough".

"Life can seem overwhelming. But I've found that getting help and working on myself has helped me to feel better and to be better," his statement read.

GOLF

## Lebioda leads after first round at Pebble Beach

AFP  
Pebble Beach, California

Hank Lebioda piled up nine birdies to shoot an 8-under-par 63 and take the first-round lead at the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am on Thursday in Pebble Beach, Calif.

Lebioda went 5 under on the back nine at Monterey Peninsula Country Club, one of three courses in use for the first three days of the tournament.

Kurt Kitayama and England's Harry Hall shot rounds of 7-under 64 at Monterey Peninsula. They are tied for second with Chad Ramey, who posted a 7-under 65 at Pebble Beach Golf Links.

All players will play one round apiece at Pebble Beach, Monterey Peninsula and Spyglass Hill Golf Course before a 54-hole cut. The low 60 players and ties will play Pebble Beach in Sunday's final round.

Lebioda, 29, has yet to win a PGA Tour event and missed the cut in his first five starts of the 2022-23 season. His 63 tied a career low on tour.

"For probably the last couple weeks or so I felt like my putting had really turned a corner, even though I may not have shown the results," Lebioda said. "But I felt more confident standing over the ball. I liked what I was looking at visually standing over it. I knew it was just a matter of time. So today fortunately it was one of the days where quite a few of them did go in."

Lebioda said his game plan for now is simply to have fun.

"If it's blowing as it is right now it will be definitely a tough challenge playing Pebble Beach tomorrow," he said after the Thursday round. "But I'm going to rest tonight, get my body ready and try to go out and do more of the same."

Kitayama was bogey-free, while Hall eagled the par-5 16th and had a five-birdie run at Nos. 3-7.

"The eagle on 16, hit a little driver off the tee and the hybrid in. Holed a 20-footer," Hall said. "Coming down the last two holes (the wind) started to blow 45 miles an hour. It was crazy. Happy to get in at 7 under today."

Eric Cole, Aaron Baddeley of Australia and Martin Trainer of France shot

6-under 65 at Monterey Peninsula to form a tie for fifth.

Spyglass Hill is considered the most difficult of the three courses. The low round of the day at Spyglass Hill was Keith Mitchell's 5-under 67. Mitchell had six birdies and just one bogey.

Notable names include Englishmen Luke Donald (4-under 68 at Pebble Beach) and Justin Rose (3-under 69 at Pebble Beach), Viktor Hovland of Norway (2-under 70 at Spyglass Hill), 2017 champion Jordan Spieth (1-under 71 at Spyglass), defending champion Tom Hoge (1-under 71 at Pebble) and US Open champ Matt Fitzpatrick of England (1-under 71 at Spyglass).

On top of the pro-am leaderboard is Carolina Hurricanes owner Tom Dundon, who paired with Will Gordon to shoot a 12-under 60 at Pebble. Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers, paired with Canada's Ben Silverman, is tied for third after a 10-under 62 at Spyglass Hill. Mitchell's partner was Buffalo Bills quarterback Josh Allen; they are tied for 10th after an 8-under 64 at Spyglass.



Hank Lebioda of the US reacts during the first round of the AT&T Pebble Beach at Monterey Peninsula Country Club in Pebble Beach, California. (AFP)

### BALE IMPRESSES ON PGA TOUR DEBUT AT PEBBLE BEACH PRO-AM

Former Real Madrid forward Gareth Bale impressed on his PGA Tour debut on Thursday as he made a swift switch from his glittering soccer career into following his passion for golf.

Bale, who announced his retirement from soccer in January, made his golf debut at the Pebble Beach Pro-Am in California. The event runs from Feb. 2-5 and sees a number of celebrity players compete alongside some of the world's top golfers.

The 33-year-old Bale and professional partner Joseph Bramlett closed with a

seven-under-par 65 to end tied 18th on the amateur leaderboard at the Spyglass Hill course.

A highlight of Bale's first round was a recovery shot off a path to save par on the second hole, the BBC reported.

"It was a great shot," former Wales captain Bale said. "I tried to play it into the bank and hope for the best, as all amateur golfers would. It was nice to see it roll up nice and close. I finished it off nicely as well. I can't really say much more."

Former Real Madrid and Wales star Gareth Bale hits his bunker shot on the first hole during the first round of the AT&T Pebble Beach. (USA TODAY Sports)



SPOTLIGHT

## Paris 2024 chief says athletes shouldn't 'suffer' in Russia row

AFP  
Marseille

The president of the 2024 Paris Olympics organising committee yesterday said athletes should not "suffer" from decisions they do not control amid an escalating row over allowing Russians and Belarusians to compete.

The issue has divided opinion since Russia invaded Ukraine last February and used Belarusian territory to launch its offensive. That led to bans from several major sporting events.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) last week said it was examining a "pathway" to allow Russians to participate in Paris, probably as neutral athletes rather than under their national flag, a position backed by the United States on Thursday.

But Kyiv has called for a complete ban on Russian participation, with a Ukrainian presidential aide accusing the IOC of being a "promoter of war".

The head of the Russian Olympic Committee has demanded his athletes be able to compete without restrictions, but the IOC said some sanctions against the country's athletes would continue.

Tony Estanguet, head of the Paris Olympics organising committee, yesterday said in an interview many athletes were "not involved at all in these decisions right now and, personally, I think they shouldn't suffer the consequences of decisions that don't concern them".

"We're hoping a maximum number of delegations and athletes can live their dream of taking part in the Games," he told AFP in the southern French city of Marseille.

Estanguet, a three-time Olympic canoe champion, said it was up to the IOC, the International Paralympic Committee and individual federations to de-



A visual creation released by the Paris 2024 Olympic committee shows the Belem, a historic three-masted ship, entering the Old Port of Marseille with the Olympic flame, while taking part in the Torch Relay for Paris 2024 Olympics. (Reuters)

side on delegations' eligibility for the Games.

"My role as an organiser is to offer athletes from across the world the best organisation and security conditions," he added.

Poland's sports minister on Thursday said he expected up to 40 countries including Britain and European Union member states to come out against allowing Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete in Paris next year. Sports ministers from the group have a video call scheduled for February 10, he added.

Estonia's prime minister yesterday suggested her country might even boycott the Olympics if Russian and Belarusian athletes were allowed to participate, while the Danish government said Russia must remain "excluded from all international sport" as the Ukraine war continues.

### 2024 OLYMPIC TORCH RELAY TO START IN MARSEILLE

The torch relay for the Paris Olympics will start in the southern port of Marseille in April 2024, organisers announced yesterday. The torch will arrive in Mar-

seille from Greece, the spiritual home of the Olympics, on a three-masted ship.

It will set the tone for a Games whose opening ceremony will be held on the Seine in Paris.

"In the spring of 2024, Marseille will have the honour and good fortune to be the first city to welcome the Olympic flame on French soil," organisers Paris 2024 said in a statement.

"The Belem, a majestic three-masted ship, will carry the flame across the Mediterranean Sea from Athens to Marseille, two cities closely connected by a shared history."

The ancient Greek colony of Massalia was founded on the French Mediterranean coast in 600 BC. The settlement would become modern-day Marseille.

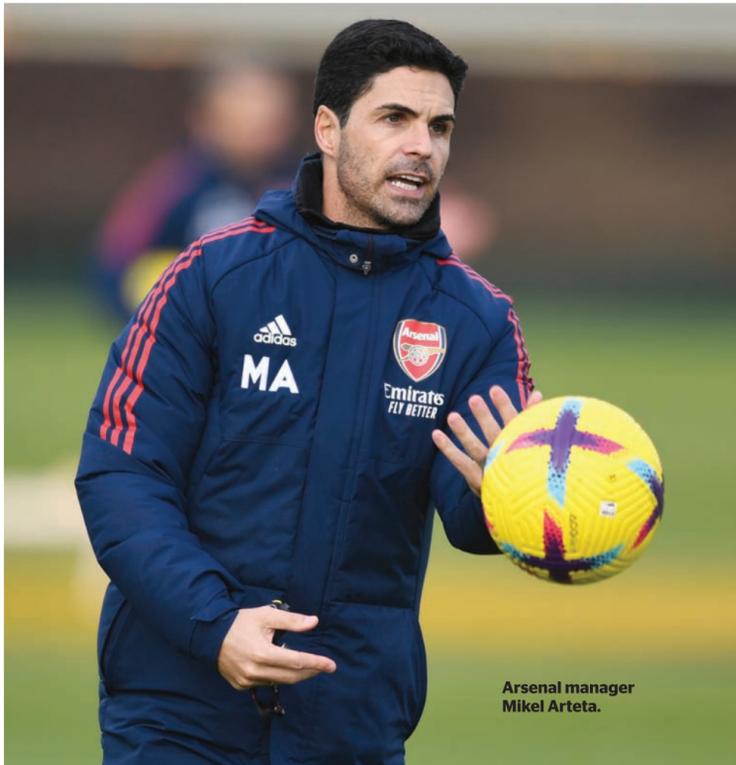
Chief organiser Tony Estanguet said Marseille "was a natural and clear choice" to host the arrival of the torch.

He noted Marseille's deep links with sport - the city's club the only one from France to be crowned European champions - and said the city "reflects the image of the Games: popular, festive, warm and multi-cultural".

## PREMIER LEAGUE

# 'No excuses' for Arsenal in title bid, says Arteta

Arsenal splashed more than £50mn on three signings as the club look to hold onto their lead



Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta.

AFP  
London

**M**ikel Arteta says Arsenal can have no excuses if they do not win the Premier League title for the first time in two decades after strengthening their squad during the January transfer window.

Arteta splashed out more than £50mn (\$61 million) on three new signings as the club look to hold onto their lead at the top of the table, bringing in Italy midfielder Jorginho, Belgium forward Leandro Trossard and Poland defender Jakub Kiwior.

The Gunners are five points clear of second-placed Manchester City with a game in hand on the champions and Arteta knows his side are perfectly placed to win the club's first English title since 2004. Arteta was asked yesterday about whether there would now be no excuses if Arsenal failed to get over the line. "If you want to put it that way, that's fine," he said. "What we have to do is train really well and win, and play well to win. That's the only thing we can do."

Arsenal would have spent even more on new signings last month but they missed out on Ukraine winger Mykhailo Mudryk, who instead joined Chelsea, and Brighton's highly rated midfield-

er Moises Caicedo. Despite those frustrations, Arteta is pleased with the backing he received from the Arsenal hierarchy.

"I'm really happy with what we've done," Arteta said ahead of today's trip to struggling Everton. "We knew that in this market you have to adapt and be flexible and ready for inconvenience. We've done that and the most important thing is the profile of the person, and the quality that we bring in makes us better. We had three main key areas of positions that we wanted to improve and fulfil. It was tricky but positive in the end."

Arteta received more good news yesterday, with the confirmation that Brazilian forward Gabriel Martinelli has signed a new long-term contract. Martinelli has scored seven league goals this season and the 21-year-old has given Arteta a genuine threat down the left flank. "It is great news," Arteta said. "He is a player with enormous potential that still has so many things to improve but is already performing at a really high level."

He revealed England forward Bukayo Saka and French defender William Saliba could also be in line for new contracts soon. Arsenal have yet to win at Goodison Park under Arteta and the Spaniard knows Everton could get a boost from the appointment of new boss Sean Dyche.

"We have the experience in the last few years about how tough it has been, and we didn't get the results that we wanted," said the Spaniard, who once played for Everton. "When there is a new manager the environment will change, so it's going to be a really tough test."

The contrast in mood between Arsenal and Everton fans could hardly be starker ahead of their meeting at Goodison Park.

Everton were the only Premier League club not to make a January signing and former Burnley boss Sean Dyche knows he has a mountain to climb. The Toffees' 69-year stay in the English top flight is at severe risk and further protests from supporters against the club's board are planned for after the match. "There's a big challenge ahead but one I'm ready for and want to take on," Dyche said. "We want to change the shape of this club going forwards, remodel it in our style, but remodel it in a way we can win."

#### FIXTURES (ALL TIMES GMT)

**Today:** Everton v Arsenal (1230), Aston Villa v Leicester, Brentford v Southampton, Brighton v Bournemouth, Man Utd v Crystal Palace, Wolves v Liverpool (all 1500), Newcastle v West Ham (1730)

**Tomorrow:** Nottingham Forest v Leeds (1400), Tottenham v Man City (1630)

## Ronaldo nets first goal for Al Nassr to snatch draw

**Riyadh:** Cristiano Ronaldo scored his first goal for Al Nassr with a last-gasp penalty to salvage a 2-2 draw at Al Fateh in a thrilling Saudi Pro League match yesterday.

The 37-year-old Portugal international, a five-times Ballon d'Or winner, converted from the spot three minutes into added time, having failed to score on his debut last month.

Ronaldo signed a 2-1/2 year deal with Al Nassr in December, reported to be worth over 200mn euros (\$216.54mn), and was appointed captain shortly after his arrival.

Al Nassr now top the standings after 15 games, level on 34 points with second-placed Al Shabab but with a match in hand. They next travel to Al Wedha on Thursday.

## AUBAMEYANG DROPPED FROM CHELSEA'S CHAMPIONS LEAGUE SQUAD

Chelsea have dropped Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and left out new £36mn signing Benoit Badiashile from their Champions League squad for the rest of the season. The Blues spent in excess of £300mn in the January transfer window on eight new signings.

However, UEFA rules allow only three new players to be registered for the knockout stages. Enzo Fernandez, whose £107mn move from Benfica set a new British transfer record, has been included alongside Mykhailo Mudryk and loan signing Joao Felix.

That meant there was also no place for Aubameyang. The former Arsenal captain had become a peripheral figure under Graham Potter even before the wave of new arrivals in January. By contrast, Badiashile has made an impressive start to his Chelsea career since joining from Monaco.

## CONTE COULD TAKE CHARGE OF SPURS DAYS AFTER SURGERY

Tottenham assistant manager Cristian Stellini said that Antonio Conte could be in charge for the clash with Manchester City just days after he had surgery to remove his gallbladder.

Tottenham boss Conte returned to his native Italy following last weekend's FA Cup win over Preston, but was taken ill with "severe abdominal pain" that was later diagnosed as cholecystitis, a swelling of the gallbladder.

Although Conte revealed on Instagram that his surgery had gone well, it had not been expected he would be on the touchline for the Premier League champions' visit to north London tomorrow.

Spurs will have a fully fit squad after Harry Kane recovered from the illness that forced him to watch as an unused substitute last week.

## FOCUS

# Guardiola and Klopp baffled by Chelsea's spending

AFP  
London

**M**anchester City boss Pep Guardiola and Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp say they are bewildered by Chelsea's huge spending spree during the January transfer window.

Chelsea signed eight new players last month, taking their total outlay since the end of last season to more than £500mn (\$605mn).

The Blues paid a British record of nearly £107mn to land Argentine World Cup winner Enzo Fernandez from Benfica on Tuesday's transfer deadline day. In contrast, City spent just £8mn on Argentine midfielder Maximo Perrone during the January window, while Liverpool brought in Netherlands forward Cody Gakpo from PSV Eindhoven for a fee of 40-50mn euros.

Chelsea's spending since the Todd

Boehly consortium's takeover at Stamford Bridge last year has prompted questions over how the club will meet Financial Fair Play requirements. And Guardiola suggested City, given their past issues with FFP, would have faced considerable criticism and scrutiny had they matched Chelsea's level of investment in new signings.

"I know what would happen. It's none of my business but it's a surprise because it's not a 'state' club," Guardiola, whose club is owned by the Abu Dhabi United Group, said yesterday. "What I'm concerned about is we won 11 trophies in the last five years being the fifth or sixth team in net spend in the Premier League. That is what really counts to us. Not just in the Premier League, but Europe, you have to spend. Now the market is 'wow'. What Chelsea do is not my business, I never involve opinions in other clubs because there are regulations, rules, that we have to do. But we were accused. I don't forget, eight or



nine teams in the Premier League sent a letter to the Premier League for us to be banned. That happened to us"

Klopp was also stunned by the level of

Chelsea's spending on improving Graham Potter's team, who are currently a place below struggling Liverpool. "I say

nothing without my lawyer -- that's a joke," Klopp said.

"I don't understand this part of the business. What you can do, what you cannot do. However, it's a big number in the last two windows. The players they brought in, I didn't think once 'Why did they do that?' They are all really good players, so from that point of view congratulations when you can do it, and obviously they do it. I don't understand how it's possible, but it's not for me to explain how it works. Hopefully you all know exactly how it works, and then it's fine."

Asked if he expected an instant improvement from Chelsea after such a huge spree, Klopp added: "Yeah, Graham knows that. I'm not sure (co-owner) Todd Boehly is too much interested in that, but that will happen at one point as well that they will play well together. With the quality they have, that's hard to avoid. How quickly it will go, I don't know"

## SPOTLIGHT

# PSG's Neymar ruled out of Toulouse tie

AFP  
Paris

**N**eymar will miss his second straight game for Paris Saint-Germain after being ruled out of today's match at home to Toulouse because of a groin problem, the club announced. The Brazilian has been receiving treatment and training individually this week. He sat out Wednesday's 3-1 victory in Montpellier, in which Kylian Mbappe picked up a thigh injury.

Mbappe faces three weeks on the sidelines and will be unavailable for the first leg of PSG's Champions League last-16 tie against Bayern Munich on February 14. Neymar is expected to resume full training next week, as is Sergio Ramos who also came off against Montpellier after suffering a groin strain.

"The absence of Neymar and Kylian is obviously a pity because the three players up front had been connecting well," said PSG coach Christophe Galtier. "It will be up to those who play alongside Leo (Lionel Messi) to seize the opportunity."

PSG lead the standings with 51 points from 21 games, five ahead of second-placed Olympique de Marseille.

## 'HE'LL PLAY': NAGELSMANN CALLS OUT PSG MIND GAMES OVER MBAPPE

Bayern Munich coach Julian Nagelsmann said on Friday he thinks Kylian Mbappe will play for Paris Saint-Germain in the first leg of their Champions League tie, accusing the French club of "playing poker". PSG announced on Thursday that the star forward would miss "up to three weeks" with a thigh



Paris Saint-Germain's Lionel Messi trains yesterday.

injury, ruling him out of the February 14 clash in the French capital.

"I don't think he'll be out," Nagelsmann said, claiming the Ligue 1 champions had given a speculative diagnosis of the star's condition. "I don't know what he's got, (but) I assume he's playing. What it says on the website is vague. If it's not a structural injury, I can't imagine him missing the game, but I don't know. I am preparing for the game as if he is going to play."

Alongside Mbappe, both Neymar and Sergio Ramos are currently under fitness clouds for the French side, but both should be fit in time for the clash with Bayern.

Nagelsmann's side have injury concerns of their own, with the long-term absences

of goalkeeper Manuel Neuer, wing-back Noussair Mazraoui and defender Lucas Hernandez. Forward Sadio Mane has been out since November but has returned to training, although he won't feature at the Parc des Princes.

With six wins from six matches Bayern are unbeaten in the Champions League this season, but have drawn their past three league matches ahead of tomorrow's clash with Wolfsburg.

Bayern currently sit in first place in the Bundesliga, but are just one point clear of Union Berlin. A further three teams - RB Leipzig, Borussia Dortmund and Freiburg - are within one win of the 31-time Bundesliga winners.

## Messi open to playing in 2026 World Cup

**Buenos Aires:** After hoisting his first World Cup trophy with Argentina in December, Lionel Messi said that tournament would be his last, but now it appears he's open to the possibility of playing in the 2026 event. "Because of age it'll be difficult to make 2026," Messi, 35, told *Diario Ole*, a sports newspaper in Argentina. "I love playing football and while I feel like I'm in good shape and enjoying this, I'm going to keep

at it. It seems like a long time until the next World Cup, but it depends on how my career is going."

Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni would love to see the superstar - who is one of only six players to compete in five World Cups - suit up for the next World Cup, which will be held in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

"I think Messi can make it to the next World Cup," Scaloni

told Spanish radio *Calvia FM* last month. "It will depend a lot on what he wants and what happens over time, that he feels good. The doors will always be open. He is happy on the pitch, and for us (it) would be good."

After scoring seven goals in the 2022 World Cup, Messi could become the World Cup's all-time leading scorer if he suits up in 2026. He has 13 goals, three behind record-holder Miroslav Klose of Germany.

## ROUND-UP

## Madrid win but Benzema off injured

AFP  
Madrid

**R**eal Madrid reduced Barcelona's La Liga lead to five points with a 2-0 win over Valencia on Thursday, thanks to spectacular goals from Marco Asensio and Vinicius Junior. The duo struck in a three-minute second half salvo which stunned the visitors at the Santiago Bernabeu, and Valencia were later reduced to 10 men when Gabriel Paulista took a wild hack at Vinicius.

Madrid dominated throughout but an otherwise good night was tainted when captain Karim Ben-

zema went off injured in the second half with an apparent thigh problem, and Eder Militao was also replaced for a similar reason.

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti confirmed Benzema's injury was "very light" but that Militao would miss tomorrow's trip to face Real Mallorca. The game will likely be remembered for Gabriel's red card tackle on Vinicius, who netted his 50th goal for Madrid on his 200th appearance at 22 years old.

Madrid stay five points behind Barcelona at the halfway point of the season. Valencia sit 14th, just one point clear of the relegation zone, and will now be without experienced defender Gabriel.

## KIMMICH SET FOR GUEST TV ROLE IN CRIME SERIES

Bayern Munich midfielder Joshua Kimmich is set to make his German television debut with a small role in cult detective show 'Tatort'. The 27-year-old will appear in a March 12 episode of the series entitled 'Hackl', playing a moustachioed fitness trainer named Kenny.

According to series producer Cornelius Conrad, Kimmich has a small role with one line which he shot in one day in the spring of 2022. 'Tatort', which translates as crime scene, is a show which takes place across different cities, and has been a staple of Germans since the 1970s.