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Will win again but could be some wait: Hamilton



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Champions League success raises hopes of Italian revival



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GULF TIMES SPORT

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QATAR INTERNATIONAL BAJA

Al-Attiyah and Dabrowski fastest in prologue stage

Kuwait's al-Thefiri takes early lead in T3 in his new MCE-5 T3M, Emirati al-Ahli drew first blood in quad category

By Sports Reporter
Lusail

Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and Konrad Dabrowski recorded the fastest times in the car and motorcycle classes on the opening 9.08km Prologue stage of the Qatar International Baja yesterday afternoon.

The customary short opening timed section has been introduced to determine the starting order for the longer second part of the stage through the Qatari deserts today morning and preceded the ceremonial start on Lusail Boulevard yesterday evening.

Forty-four cars (seven T1+, three T1, three T2, 18 T3 and 13 T4), 47 motorcycles and five quads passed scrutineering checks and were permitted to start the Prologue stage. Santiago Navarro and Henry Kahy were non-starters in the T3 category for lightweight prototype machines. There were also nine cars running in a National event behind the main Baja. Al-Attiyah and his regular co-driver Mathieu Baume carded a time of 5min 49.5sec in their Toyota Hilux and lead the car section by 4.8 seconds from the Polish duo of Krzysztof Holowczyc and Lukasz Kurzeja in their Mini JCW Rally Plus. Denis Krotov and Konstantin Zhiltsov are third in an Overdrive Racing Toyota.

Kuwait's Meshari al-Thefiri edged out the South Racing Can-Am Team's Otavio Sousa for the early lead in T3 in his new MCE-5 T3M. Brazil's Cristiano de Sousa Batista continued his excellent run of form to top the T4 standings from young Pau Navarro in his FN Speed Team Can-Am.

A time of 6min 20.9sec enabled the defending champion Konrad Dabrowski to claim the early advantage in the motorcycles on a stage where the times are multiplied by a coefficient of eight to ensure tactics and positional musical chairs are discouraged. The Pole has recovered well from a recent appendicitis operation and is targeting a repeat win this season. The KTM rider also topped the junior category.

Great Britain's Robert Wallace and Italy's Paulo Lucci came home in second and third, with Italian rider Cesare Zacchetti (KTM) leading the Veterans in 12th and Mirjam Pol topping the Women's section in 13th.

Emirati Abdulaziz al-Ahli drew first blood in the quad category to lead from Saudi Arabia's Haitham al-Tuwaijri and Mansoor al-Suwaidi. Saudi Arabia's Mishal al-Ghuneim is one of the more experienced of the motorcycle riders. He finished 14th on the Prologue and



Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah waves the Qatar flag as Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) President Abdulrahman al-Mannai looks on during the ceremonial start of the Qatar International Baja at the Lusail Boulevard yesterday.



Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and his regular co-driver Mathieu Baume carded a time of 5min 49.5sec in their Toyota Hilux and lead the car section by 4.8 seconds.



Motorcycle action from the prologue.

- said: "I feel good after my ankle injury and have got a couple of riders with me, Andrew (Houlihan) from Australia and Luca from Italy. Luca is a rookie but Andrew is fighting for the Veterans' Championship. Hopefully we all have a good race."
- Today, the second part of leg one runs through the Qatar deserts for 233.87km and is split into three sections of 46.05km, 70.53km and 117.29km by non-competitive transfer zones. The first motorcycle will be live on stage at 07.35hrs. Cars will tackle the longer section of 117.29km first and then the two shorter stages with the first vehicle on stage from 08.45hrs.
- QATAR INTERNATIONAL BAJA - PROLOGUE RESULT**
- FIA - Cars (Top 15 only)**
1. Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Mathieu Baume (AND) Toyota GR DKR
 2. Krzysztof Holowczyc (POL)/Lukasz Kurzeja (POL) Mini JCW Rally Plus 5min 54.3sec*
 3. Denis Krotov (KGZ)/Konstantin Zhiltsov (ISR) Toyota Hilux Overdrive 6min 02.4sec*
 4. Guoyu Zhang (CHN)/Oriol Mena (ESP) Baic ORC BJ40 6min 09.8sec*
 5. Meshari al-Thefiri (KWT)/Oriol Vidal (ESP) MCE-5 T3M (T3) 6min 11.0sec*
 6. Otavio Sousa (BRA)/João Ferreira (PRT) Can-Am Maverick X3 (T3) 6min 12.3sec*
 7. Nasser al-Kuwari (QAT)/François Cazalet (FRA) Can-Am Maverick X3 (T3) 6min 17.1sec+
 8. Abdulaziz al-Kuwari (QAT)/Alexei Kuzmich (ARE) Can-Am Maverick X3 (T3) 6min 19.4sec+
 9. Ahmed al-Mohannadi (QAT)/Mubarak al-Khelaifi (QAT) Can-Am Maverick X3 (T3) 6min 20.8sec+
 10. Juan Cruz Yacopini (ARG)/Daniel Oliveras (ESP) Toyota Hilux Overdrive 6min 23.5sec*
 11. Cristiano de Sousa Batista (BRA)/Fausto Mota (PRT) Can-Am Maverick XRS Turbo (T4) 6min 23.5sec*
 12. Lionel Baud (FRA)/Lucie Baud (FRA) G Rally Team OT3 (T3) 6min 24.7sec*
 13. Pau Navarro (ESP)/Michael Metge (FRA) Can-Am Maverick XRS Turbo (T4) 6min 25.5sec*
 14. Jeremie Warnia (FRA)/Loic Minaudier (FRA) Polaris RZR 1000 R (T4) 6min 25.6sec*
 15. Ronan Chabot (FRA)/Gilles Pillot (FRA) Toyota Hilux Overdrive 6min 26.6sec*
- T1 unless stated; *denotes registered for FIA World Cup; + denotes registered for FIA Middle East Cup
- FIM - Bikes (top 15 only)**
1. Konrad Dabrowski (POL) KTM 450

- Rally 6min 20.9sec
2. Robert Wallace (GBR) KTM 450 RFR 6min 52.7sec
 3. Paulo Lucci (ITA) KTM 450 EXC-F 6min 54.0sec
 4. Jonathan Finn (CAN) Honda CRF 450 RL 7min 05.5sec
 5. Michael Anderson (ZAF) KTM 450 EXC 7min 05.6sec
 6. Alex McInnes (GBR) Husqvarna FE450 7min 09.0sec
 7. Mohamed al-Balooshi (ARE) KTM 450 Rally Replica 7min 09.2sec
 8. Abdullah Lanjawi (ARE) Husqvarna FE450 7min 09.8sec
 9. Simon Marcic (SVN) Husqvarna 450 Rally Replica 7min 12.6sec
 10. Martin Chalmers (AUS) Beta 430 RR 7min 23.7sec
 11. Oran O'Kelly (IRL) KTM 450 Rally 7min 26.3sec
 12. Cesare Zacchetti (ITA) KTM EXC 350F 7min 27.6sec
 13. Mirjam Pol (NLD) KTM 7min 30.1sec
 14. Mishal al-Ghuneim (SAU) KTM 450 Rally 7min 37.1sec
 15. Ola Floene (NOR) KTM 450 Rally 7min 37.8sec
- FIM - Quads**
1. Abdulaziz al-Ahli (ARE) Yamaha Raptor 700 6min 54.8sec
 2. Haitham al-Tuwaijri (SAU) Yamaha Raptor 700 7min 05.5sec
 3. Mansoor al-Suwaidi (ARE) Yamaha YFZ 450R 7min 21.1sec
 4. Arnoud Dom (BEL) Suzuki LTR 450 7min 35.3sec
 5. Hani al-Noumesli (SAU) Yamaha Raptor 700 7min 57.3sec



Qatar International Baja competitors pose after the ceremonial start at the Lusail Boulevard yesterday evening.



UAE's Mohamed al-Balooshi is flagged off by the QMMF president Abdulrahman al-Mannai.

F1

Hamilton says he will win again but could be some wait

Mercedes' Hamilton finished fifth in season-opening Bahrain GP on March 5

Reuters
Jeddah

Lewis Hamilton has no doubt he will add to his record tally of 103 Formula One wins but cannot say how long he might have to wait. The seven times world champion's last win was in Saudi Arabia in December 2021 and the Mercedes driver returned yesterday with no great hope of success after a tough start to the season.

"I will win again," the 38-year-old Briton assured reporters in Jeddah ahead of race two of 23 on the calendar. "It's just going to take some time."

Hamilton finished fifth in Bahrain on March 5 with teammate George Russell seventh while champions Red Bull won one-two with Max Verstappen and Sergio Perez. Mercedes had the fourth fastest car in Bahrain — beaten by Red Bull, Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso and Ferrari's Carlos Sainz.

Hamilton said then that Mercedes were on the wrong track, and he had not been listened to, while team boss Toto Wolff agreed the car concept needed a rethink. Russell feared Red Bull could win every race.

Hamilton replied simply 'no' and 'yes' in Jeddah when asked whether he felt closer to the front than last year and whether the gap to Red Bull was greater. "I think in the race they weren't pushing and so I think they are a lot quicker than they even seemed. We have it as them a second and a half faster in the race per lap. Something like that," he said.

"They will run away with it most likely this year unless Ferrari can stop them. At some point during the year we're hopeful we might be able to close the gap but at that point it will probably be too late in terms of fighting for a championship."

When Hamilton last won he was fighting to the wire with Verstappen — a battle that ended controversially in Abu Dhabi with Verstappen taking the title after race



Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton (left) and Red Bull Racing's Sergio Perez (centre) listen to Aston Martin's Lance Stroll during a press conference at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit yesterday, ahead of the Saudi Arabia Formula One Grand Prix. (AFP)

director Michael Masi changed the safety car procedure late on.

"In 2021 when we were here, we were hoping to be fighting for another world championship. You never know what's up ahead," said Hamilton. "There will be things that happen in all of our lives that we least expect but it's not how you fall, it's how you get up. It's how you deal with it, it's how you show up. It's how you continue to remain positive and tackle the issues that you are faced with. That's where my energy is going into and what every

single person in the team is focused on."

VERSTAPPEN DELAYS SAUDI ARRIVAL DUE TO STOMACH BUG

Red Bull's Formula One championship leader Max Verstappen has delayed his arrival at the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix after suffering a stomach bug. The double world champion said on Twitter he was recovering but would not turn up at Jeddah's floodlit Corniche street circuit until today, when practice starts.

"Feeling fine again, after not being fit

for a few days because of a stomach bug," Verstappen told his 3.2mn followers. "Therefore, I unfortunately had to postpone my flight for a day, so I won't be on the track until Friday."

Champions Red Bull said the 25-year-old would not be at the track for media commitments yesterday with the agreement of the governing FIA. Verstappen won last year's night race in Jeddah and leads the championship after his one-two victory with teammate Sergio Perez in the season-opener in Bahrain.

FOCUS

Leclerc says Ferrari has belief in their potential

AFP
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Charles Leclerc said yesterday that he and the Ferrari team are concerned about their continuing reliability problems, but still believe in their potential. The Monégasque driver will pay the price for mechanical problems with a 10-place grid penalty at this weekend's Saudi Arabian Grand Prix. Ferrari changed two electronic engine components in Leclerc's car over the opening weekend in Bahrain and announced on Wednesday that they were switching a third time.

That means that before the second race has even started Leclerc has passed the permitted total of two changes in a power unit for the 23-race season.

"It's the way it is," he said. "It's the beginning of the season and, of course, it's not the ideal start. But what can I do



about it? Now we need to focus on what is ahead, what we can do to be a better team, to do better. This weekend we are starting from the back foot, but our target is to try and do something special. I like

this challenge of starting a little bit more on the back foot and trying to do something special and come back to the front as quickly as possible!"

He said he had been working to galvanise the team and rebuild morale after the season-opening race in Bahrain where he was forced to retire due to the power unit problem. "We've still got many races to go and we still need to be fighting like crazy to be back at the top and keep pushing," he conceded.

"I still believe in it and of course we still need to all believe in it because it's only the first race. So, it hasn't gone as planned — and when it's Ferrari and it doesn't go as well as it should, then there are lots of voices and all of this around the team."

Carlos Sainz echoed his teammates' sentiments. "Yes, we are concerned," said the Spaniard. "It's not the way to start the season with a penalty at race two. We have identified the battery issues as a weakness and it has taken us by surprise. We are putting things in place to fix it and we're pretty sure that we are capable of fixing that in the short term. But, for now, it's a bad situation. So, we have to fix it, go forward and be more competitive."

SPOTLIGHT

Boycott and Russian flags fire up world boxing championship in India

AFP
New Delhi

The Women's World Boxing Championships began in India yesterday with several nations boycotting because of the presence of Russians and Belarusians competing under their flags. Numerous international sports federations have banned Russian and Belarusian athletes from competition since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine last year.

Some sports have allowed them to compete but said they must do so under neutral flags. But the International Boxing Association (IBA) event in Delhi involves fighters from both nations competing under their national flags and anthems.

The flags and colours of Russia and its political ally Belarus were paraded at Wednesday's opening ceremony. The IBA is headed by Russian Umar Krem-

lev and counts Russian energy giant Gazprom as a major financial backer. The IBA was suspended by the International Olympic Committee in 2019 over multiple corruption scandals.

The United States, Ukraine, Canada, Sweden and Britain are among the countries boycotting the tournament, which runs until March 26 and involves 65 nations. Some have said they will also refuse to take part in the men's event in Tashkent, Uzbekistan on May 1-14. GB Boxing said last month that the IBA's move to allow boxers from Russia and Belarus to compete in India under their national flags defied IOC resolutions. "This has put further distance between IBA and the Olympic movement in addition to the significant, longstanding issues over sporting integrity... which the IOC has asked IBA to address," a statement said.

Russia's Sports Minister Oleg Matytsin said that "in this difficult period it is important that the team



Russian boxer Anna Aedma (in red) reacts after her loss to Monique Suraci of Australia in the Round of 32 of the 50-52kg flyweight category at the Women's World Boxing Championships in New Delhi yesterday. (Reuters)

appears under the Russian flag... You can see that these young girls know which country they are representing. Sport should be separate from politics

and should not be the target of discrimination on the basis of nationality," Matytsin said on Tuesday while in New Delhi, quoted in a statement

by his ministry. The IOC suspension of the IBA means that boxing risks disappearing as an Olympic sport from the Paris Games in 2024. The French Boxing Federation is allowing its fighters to compete in Delhi, with its head Dominique Nato saying Tuesday it wanted to remain "neutral" ahead of the Paris Olympics. "I am aware of what is happening in the world, but again, politics is taking sport hostage and that is unacceptable," Nato said.

Boxers from other European Union nations including Spain and Italy were taking part, according to organisers, as well as New Zealand, Australia and Japan. On March 1 the IBA opened disciplinary action against the chiefs of several national boxing associations over the boycott, accusing them of "unethical behaviour".

"In boxing, there is no place for any form of discrimination and IBA sees it as its mission to protect its values," it said. Russia has 12 boxers at the tour-

namment and Belarus six. "It is very important for me to represent my country under my flag and I will proudly do it," Russian boxer Ekaterina Paltseva said. "In my opinion, there should be no (politics) in sports. Sports must combine all countries."

GERMANY SCRAPS FENCING WORLD CUP AFTER RUSSIA'S RE-ENTRY

The German fencing federation cancelled a planned women's foil international Fencing Federation World Cup competition after the world fencing body decided to let Russian and Belarusian athletes compete in Olympic qualifying events. The meet was scheduled for Tauberbischofsheim on April 28-30. The International Fencing Federation (FIE) last week reversed a ban on fencers from both countries enforced after Russia invaded Ukraine in February last year. Fencing's qualifying process for the 2024 Paris Olympics is due to begin in April.

CRICKET

World record-holding Pakistan umpire Dar steps down

AFP
Lahore

Pakistan veteran Aleem Dar stepped down yesterday from the ICC Elite Panel of Umpires after officiating in a record number of international cricket matches during his distinguished career. The 58-year-old stood in 144 Tests and 222 one-day internationals — both world records — in addition to 69 Twenty20 internationals.

It doesn't mean his career in international cricket is over though. Dar can still work matches played at home in Pakistan any time the PCB picks him to do so. He may also get to go on tour if he finds a place in the International Panel of Umpires — one rung down from Elite — when it is reconstituted.



"The veteran umpire Dar has stepped down after 19 years on the Elite Panel, standing in a record 435 men's international matches," the International Cricket Council (ICC) said in a press release. Dar's first international match as an Elite Panel umpire was in 2002 and a year later he stood in the 2003 World Cup in South Africa. Dar, who took up umpiring after playing first-class cricket in Pakistan, said he was honoured to have officiated international matches.

"It has been a long journey, but I have enjoyed every bit of it," Dar was quoted in the ICC release. "I have had the pleasure and honour of umpiring the world over and what I have achieved is something I did not even dream of when I started in the profession."

ICC chief executive Geoff Allardice praised Dar's contribution to the sport. "Aleem's contribution to international

cricket and to the ICC has been truly remarkable. Consistently elite performances over such a long period saw him enjoy enormous respect across all involved in international cricket," said Allardice.

The ICC said South Africa's Adrian Holdstock and Pakistan's Ahsan Raza have been added to the Elite Panel of Umpires, which takes its number from 11 to 12. Raza happens to be the only person to stand in more men's T20Is than Dar's 69. The other in the list are Chris Gaffaney (New Zealand), Kumar Dharmasena (Sri Lanka), Marais Erasmus (South Africa), Michael Gough (England), Nitin Menon (India), Paul Reiffel (Australia), Richard Illingworth (England), Richard Kettleborough (England), Rodney Tucker (Australia), Joel Wilson (West Indies).

South Africa vs West Indies first ODI abandoned due to rain

East London: The first One-Day International between South Africa and West Indies was abandoned without a ball being bowled after persistent rain at Buffalo Park in East London yesterday.

The day-night encounter was called off just after 1430GMT with no prospect of play and the teams will now try again in the second of three ODI fixtures at the same venue tomorrow, when the forecast looks brighter.

The series is important for both sides as they look ahead to the 2023 Cricket World Cup in India later this year, though neither has yet qualified and face the prospect of going through June's qualification tournament in Zimbabwe.

South Africa recently completed a 2-0 test series victory over the touring Caribbean side. The sides will also play three Twenty20 Internationals after the completion of the 50-over matches.

PANT RULED OUT OF IPL, WARNER NAMED DELHI CAPTAIN

Rishabh Pant will miss this year's Indian Premier League to continue his recovery from a car crash, with David Warner

replacing him as Delhi Capitals skipper, the franchise said. Indian star Pant, a left-handed wicketkeeper-batsman, suffered multiple injuries when his Mercedes SUV crashed north of New Delhi in December. "Warner steps in as skipper for Rishabh Pant, who is currently undergoing rehab and recovery," Delhi said in a statement.

The 25-year-old Pant has not put a timeframe on his recovery but he had not been expected to return for the IPL, which begins at the end of this month. Australia's Warner left the Test series in India last month with concussion and a fractured elbow but is returning for the tourists' three-match one-day international series. "This franchise has always been home for me and I couldn't be more excited to lead such a supremely talented bunch of players," the batsman said in a statement.

Delhi paid \$750,000 for Warner's services in the December IPL auction. The latest instalment of the cash-rich IPL will begin on March 31 with Delhi to open their campaign the next day against Lucknow Super Giants. The tournament this year returns to the home and away format for the first time since the pandemic.

Third QOC Beach Games reaches final stage



The third edition of the Qatar Olympic Committee Beach Games 2023 entered crucial stage as football and volleyball semi-finals were held at Katara - Cultural Village. In the men's football semis, Green Owl team secured a narrow 3-2 victory over Lusail, while Al Jasra got better of Dukhan 6-5 in a free-scoring game. The final between Green Owl and Al Jasra will be held today. At another court, F45 team defeated Al Dafna 2-0 in the men's volleyball semi-finals, while Policy Sports Federation overcame Edge Fitness 2-0. In U-18 basketball event, Shooters team defeated OG 11-7, Garbia got better of Qatar Tigers 9-3. Chosen One team got past OG 15-2 and Garbia defeated Shooters 10-3 in group one. The QOC Beach Games, which began on March 10, will conclude tomorrow. More than 800 participants are taking part in the event in seven beach games - football, volleyball, 3x3 basketball, boxing, karate, swimming and Aquathlon.



FOOTBALL

Champions League success raises hopes of Italian revival

Napoli appear to be best-placed to end country's wait for a European Cup title

AFP
Milan

Napoli's romp past Eintracht Frankfurt into the Champions League quarter-finals ensured Italy will have three clubs in today's last-eight draw for the first time since 2006. Serie A, the dominant force in European football in the 1990s and early 2000s, has slipped behind the Premier League, Bundesliga and La Liga over the past 20 years, both on the pitch and off it. But this season's successes, with AC Milan and Inter Milan also making the quarter-finals, have raised hopes in Italy that the gap is finally beginning to tighten. Napoli are running away with the Serie A title this term, sitting 18 points clear at the top of the table as they bid for a first Scudetto since 1990.

They have also impressed in Europe, kicking off their Champions League campaign with a 4-1 hammering of last season's runners-up Liverpool before reaching the quarters for the first time. Napoli appear to be best-placed of the Italian trio to end the country's wait for a first European Cup triumph since Jose Mourinho's Inter lifted the trophy in 2010.

Coach Luciano Spalletti has played down comments from Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola claiming Napoli are the best team in Europe. Eintracht boss Oliver Glasner said they are on the same level as German heavyweights Bayern Munich. "I can't make any comparisons with the Premier League but they are top class, like Bayern Munich," Glasner said after his side's 3-0 loss at the Stadio Maradona on Wednesday. Italian football has hit low after low since Inter's victory over Bayern Munich 13 years ago, with Juventus the only club to reach the Champions League final since - losing to Barcelona in 2015 and Real Madrid in 2017.

The national team failed to qualify for the past two World Cups, although they



Napoli's players celebrate after their win against Eintracht Frankfurt in the Champions League round of 16 match in Naples. (AFP)

did win Euro 2020 while playing an unusually expansive style of football. Napoli are dominating with a team of youngsters committed to attack, similar to the way AC Milan ended their 11-year wait for a league crown last season.

But a return to the glory days still appears a way off. There was at least one Serie A club in 11 of the 20 Champions League/European Cup finals from 1991-2010, with the trophy heading to Italy five times in that spell. Italy boasted three quarter-finalists in 2003, 2005 and 2006. In 2003, AC Milan beat Juventus in the final at Old Trafford. Sustained success may be hard to come by. Italian teams are

increasingly relying on bringing through young talent, like the majority of clubs in France and Germany. None of this season's Italian quarter-finalists are in the top 20 of Deloitte's list of richest clubs. Napoli sit outside the top 30.

Juventus, hit by a 15-point deduction in the Italian top flight after financial problems, are the only Serie A team in the top 20. Premier League clubs make up six of the top 10 and 11 of the top 20, but only Manchester City and Chelsea reached the quarter-finals. The financial deficit has helped facilitate breakthroughs by youngsters including Napoli duo Victor Osimhen and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia and

AC Milan winger Rafael Leao. Osimhen has already spoken of his desire to play in the Premier League and Italian clubs will likely struggle to keep their biggest stars in the transfer market.

Some of the biggest teams have crashed out early in the Champions League, partly because of the draw. Barcelona went out in the group stage, before Paris Saint-Germain lost to Bayern Munich and Liverpool to reigning Champions Real Madrid in the round of 16. Italy can rejoice at having the largest representation left in Europe's most prestigious tournament, before worrying about how to repeat the feat in 12 months' time.

TENNIS

Medvedev allays fitness fears to reach semis, Sabalenka, Tiafoe race through

AFP
Indian Wells, United States

Daniil Medvedev's sore right ankle wasn't a factor on Wednesday as he beat Alejandro Davidovich Fokina 6-3, 7-5 to reach the semi-finals at Indian Wells, where Aryna Sabalenka and Frances Tiafoe raced into the final four.

Medvedev showed little ill effect from the twisted ankle he suffered in a three-set battle against Alexander Zverev a day earlier as he pushed his ATP match winning streak to 18 straight. He booked a semi-final clash with 16th-ranked American Tiafoe, who beat 2021 Indian Wells winner Cameron Norrie 6-4, 6-4.

Australian Open champion Sabalenka, still building on her maiden Grand Slam title in Melbourne, overpowered Coco Gauff 6-4, 6-0 to advance at the combined WTA and ATP Masters 1000 event. Sabalenka will face 2022 runner-up Maria Sakkari after the seventh-ranked Greek defeated two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova 4-6, 7-5, 6-1.

Medvedev arrived in the California desert riding high after nabbing titles at Rotterdam, Doha and Dubai in three weeks. Long a critic of the slow hard courts of the Indian Wells Tennis Garden, he was through to the quarters for the first time after hanging on to beat Zverev despite rolling his ankle.

"I'm actually happy the ankle didn't hurt much because when I warmed up it was hurting pretty bad," Medvedev said. "I couldn't move well on the warmup. I tried to warm it up as long as possible and take one painkiller so that probably helped and I was actually feeling better and better during the match," added the former US Open champion, who has two days off before he takes on Tiafoe.

He raced through the opening set, a break of the Spaniard's serve in the second game the only opening he needed as he lost just six points on his serve on the way to pocketing the set in 39 minutes. It was a different story in the second set on a windy Stadium Court. Davidovich Fokina

had a break chance in each of Medvedev's first three service games, only for the Russian to come up with big serves to fend him off.

Davidovich Fokina was up 0-40 in the eighth game only for Medvedev to escape. Along the way Medvedev had another fall on the court, this time scraping his hand and requiring the trainer to bandage his bloody thumb. "Daniil has been winning many tournaments, many consecutive matches and you can see how solid he is on the court," Davidovich Fokina said. "It was a very unpleasant match with the wind," he added. "We both had break chances, he took his chance and I didn't, but the level is there."

Sabalenka, ranked second in the world, roared past Gauff 6-4, 6-0, turning the tables on a player who had won three of their four prior encounters. Sabalenka was in full command of her serve, and her thunderous ground strokes left Gauff with few options.

The Belarusian fired five aces and a total of 18 winners, closing out the match without facing a break point with three straight unreturnable serves. She said she's a different player than she was when she lost to Gauff in Toronto last year - and since she won her second title of the year at the Australian Open. "I think I'm more calm on court, and I'm able to control my emotions, which help me to stay in the game no matter what, and just fight for every point," Sabalenka said. Sabalenka will face a battle-tested opponent in Sakkari, who has been taken to three sets in all four matches this week.

Tiafoe, who has reached his first Masters 1000 semi without dropping a set, made it clear he's looking further than the final four. "It's great, but it's the semis," Tiafoe said. "The job's not done."

Tiafoe had broken Norrie twice in the second set to serve for the match at 5-2. He was broken himself, but made no mistake on his next opportunity as he finished it off with a love game. "At the end, it got a little tricky, but it was pretty one-way traffic and I am really happy with where my game is at," he said.



Aryna Sabalenka in action against Coco Gauff of USA in the quarter-finals of the Indian Wells Masters. (AFP)

FOCUS

Madrid full of confidence in Champions League: Ancelotti

AFP
Madrid

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said his team were full of confidence after reaching the Champions League quarter-finals on Wednesday. The record 14-time champions of Europe beat Liverpool 1-0 at the Santiago Bernabeu, 6-2 on aggregate, to progress to the last eight.

Madrid are aiming to win the Champions League for the sixth time in 10 seasons and Ancelotti believes his team's remarkable run to glory last season has given them a lot of confidence. Los Blancos pulled off stunning comebacks against Paris Saint-Germain, Chelsea and Manchester City, before beating Liverpool in the final.

Even in the last 16 first-leg clash with Jurgen Klopp's Reds, Madrid fell two goals behind before roaring to a 5-2 win. "We have a lot more confidence, because of what happened last year, it gave us a lot of confidence," Ancelotti told reporters.



Real Madrid's Karim Benzema celebrates after scoring against Liverpool. (AFP)

"We saw that in this tie, against a strong team, we did well in the two games. But later, with confidence alone, we don't reach the semi-finals. We have to play surprising football ... as always, the Champions League is very complicated and we have to compete until the end."

The coach hailed the blend of youth

and experience in his squad, with veteran midfielders Luka Modric and Toni Kroos, and youngster Eduardo Camavinga, playing well together against Liverpool. "The atmosphere is created by the players - the intelligence, humility and patience of the veterans," said Ancelotti.

"The key is the humility of the veterans, they don't have egos, and the patience of the youngsters because in front of them are players who have had fantastic careers and still are. Modric and Kroos aren't playing because of the careers they have had, they are playing because they deserve it."

RASHFORD DRIVE EASES UNITED PAST BETIS IN EUROPA LEAGUE

Marcus Rashford's swerving strike from distance earned Manchester United a 1-0 win at Real Betis yesterday and passage to the Europa League quarter-finals with a 5-1 aggregate triumph.

The Red Devils and their counterparts from Andalusia played out an entertaining game at a lively Benito Villamarin stadium, with home fans believing for a

while they could mount a comeback, despite their three-goal deficit.

Joaquin hit the post for Betis and Juanmi spurned two clear chances for the hosts as they started well. However Rashford's brilliant goal early in the second half quelled that idea and United saw the game out comfortably as Betis' energy levels dipped.

Manchester United coach Erik ten Hag handed 21-year-old winger Facundo Pellistri his first start for the club in sun-washed Seville, after some bright cameos from the bench. Antony was unavailable because of illness and Argentine forward Alejandro Garnacho is out for weeks with an ankle injury. The Uruguayan youngster was instantly involved on a bright display, overcooking a cross from the right as United looked to put the game out of Betis's reach straight away. Wout Weghorst flung himself at a corner, flicked on by Casemiro, but it was too far for him to reach. The hosts hit back, sending Juanmi through on goal, but the former Southampton forward dragged his shot wide of David de Gea's far post.

HORSE RACING

Thomas leads Bolthole to HH Sheikh Mohamed Bin Khalifa Al Thani Trophy

KHALIFA BIN SHEAIL AL-KUWARI'S LAYEQ CLINCHES EBRAZ CUP BY TWO LENGTHS

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Guided by Ronan Thomas, Wathnan Racing's Bolthole yesterday clinched the HH Sheikh Mohamed Bin Khalifa Al Thani Trophy after winning the feature race of an eventful Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's (QREC) 42nd Race Meeting. The Alban de Mieulle-trained edged In The Night, ridden by Tomas Lukasek, to win the 2000m Thoroughbreds (Class 1) securing top prize in the QR500,000 race. His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani crowned the winners of the feature. Ali al-Kubaisi received the Trophy on behalf of Wathnan Racing in presence of Bader Mohamed al-Darwish, Acting CEO of QREC.

Meanwhile, in penultimate race of the day, trainer Julian Smart and jockey Jefferson Smith teamed up to complete a double on the day and again in the colours of Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari with Layeq winning the Ebraz Cup, having prevailed by almost two lengths in the 2000m open race for 4YO+ Local Purebred Arabians and recording his own second straight win.

In other race, Bader al-Balushi saddled an impressive winner in the 1400m Conditions for 4YO+ Local Thoroughbreds as Abdulatif Hussain al-Emadi's homebred Black Pearl bolted up by five lengths, to win the Gazwan Cup, get rewarded for his last six placed finishes and give jockey Ronan Thomas a third winner on the day.

Also yesterday, trainer Alban de Mieulle saddled his second winner for Wathnan Racing on the day as Abida won the Assy Cup, a Conditions for 4YO+ Local Purebred Arabians. In the hands of jockey Carlos Henrique, the 7YO mare managed to hold off challenges and win the 1400m race by half a length.

The Thoroughbred Filly & Mare Cup yesterday went to the impressive Kerindia in the colours of Injaaz Stud. Having been either a winner or placed in 8 of her 9 starts, the 3YO filly won once again for trainer Zuhair Mohsen and jockey Ronan Thomas, their second winner of the day.

Once asked for an effort, she stretched way clear of the field, winning the 1500m contest for 3YO+ by 7 lengths at the line.



His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani crowned the winners of the feature race at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.



His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani presents a trophy to Wathnan Racing's Ali al-Kubaisi after Bolthole won the HH Sheikh Mohamed Bin Khalifa Al Thani Trophy yesterday.

42ND RACE MEETING - HH SHEIKH MOHAMED BIN KHALIFA AL THANI TROPHY WINNERS (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

1 - HH Sheikh Mohamed Bin Khalifa Al Thani Trophy (Qa Gr2) - Thoroughbreds

(Class 1) (Far Bend)
Bolthole, Alban Elie De Mieulle, Ronan Thomas
2 - Ebraz Cup - Local Purebred Arabian Open Race (Far Bend)
Layeq, Julian Colin Smart, Jefferson



Ronan Thomas leads Wathnan Racing's Bolthole to victory yesterday.

Smith
3 - Gazwan Cup - Local Thoroughbred Conditions (Far Bend)
Black Pearl, Bader al-Balushi, R Thomas
4 - Assy Cup - Local Purebred Arabian Conditions (Far Bend)
Abida, Alban Elie De Mieulle, Carlos Henrique
5 - Assy Thoroughbred Filly & Mare Cup (Class 2) (Far Bend)
Kerindia, Zuhair Mohsen, Ronan Thomas
6 - Aziz Purebred Arabian Handicap Cup 70-90 (Far Bend)

Djalco, Julian Colin Smart, Jefferson Smith
7 - Jaafar Thoroughbred Handicap Cup 60-80 (Class 4) (Far Bend)
Classic Order, Zuhair Mohsen, Soufiane Saadi
8 - Djendel Novice Cup - Local Purebred Arabian (Far Bend)
Tania, Alban Elie De Mieulle, Ronan Thomas
9 - Mared Al Sahara Premium Maiden Cup - Purebred Arabian (Far Bend)
Haman, Rudy Andre Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier

FIFA president thanks Qatar for organising best World Cup in history

Kigali, Rwanda: Qatar was widely praised after its success in organising the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, which was held in November and December last year, making the tournament one of the best history.

During the 73rd FIFA Congress in Kigali, Rwanda yesterday, FIFA President Gianni Infantino, Rwanda President Paul Kagame and the representatives of football federations were impressed by Qatar's staging of the football showpiece event, which was the first to be held in the Middle East.

During his opening speech before the FIFA Congress, president Kagame congratulated Qatar on the great success achieved during the World Cup which he described as the best. Congratulating Qatar and the FIFA on organising a successful tournament by all standards, he said the last World Cup was one of the best tournaments that will remain vivid in the minds, and they were proud of what Qatar has accomplished which deserves all respect for what it provided to the game and to the world during that historic hosting.

For his part, FIFA president Infantino affirmed in his speech that the World Cup in Qatar was the best ever, stressing that the tournament was one of the most successful editions in terms of public, technical and organisational aspects, noting that FIFA and Qatar fulfilled the promise they made before the tournament.

Infantino said the last World Cup was watched by more than 5bn viewers around the world, while the tournament was attended by more than 3million fans in the wonderful stadiums that hosted the competitions, and everyone enjoyed the great event. FIFA President added that they had promised to present an exceptional and unique edition of the World Cup in Qatar, noting that there were those who did not believe and questioned what was said. Truly, it was indeed the most successful and best edition, as there were perfect stadiums and excellent infrastructure, and there was nothing disturbing football atmosphere. Thank you Qatar, he said.

Chairman of the FIFA Finance Committee Alejandro Dominguez said the period from 2019 to 2022 saw a record high in terms of financial revenue, amounting to \$7.6bn. This was achieved thanks to the Qatar World Cup, he said.

FOCUS

Infantino re-elected FIFA president until 2027

AFP
Kigali

Gianni Infantino has been re-elected as president of FIFA until 2027 after standing unopposed at the congress of world football's governing body yesterday. The 52-year-old Swiss lawyer, who succeeded the disgraced Sepp Blatter in 2016, was waved in for a third term by acclamation, just as he was four years ago, by delegates from the 211 member federations.

"To all those who love me, and I know there are so many, and also those who hate me, I know there are a few: I love you all," Infantino told delegates in the Rwandan capital, where the voting system did not register the number of dissent voices.

While FIFA statutes currently limit a president to a maximum three four-year terms, Infantino has already prepared the ground to stay until 2031, declaring in December that his first three years at the helm did not count as a full term. Infantino, who staunchly defended Qatar's hosting of last year's World Cup, has overseen the expansion of the men's and women's World Cups and huge increases in FIFA revenues.

The Norwegian and Swedish representatives in Kigali displayed their opposition to Infantino by not joining the delegates who rose to applaud. On Wednesday, German FA president Bernd Neundorff said he would not back Infantino, citing a lack of transparency from FIFA and insufficient explanations of "why certain decisions are made and who was involved in them".

However, Infantino's opponents were not able to put forward a candidate to stand against the man who was once Michel Platini's number two at UEFA. Infantino himself took aim at media who have criticised him and world football's



FIFA President Gianni Infantino addresses the 73rd FIFA Congress in Kigali, Rwanda, yesterday. (Reuters)

governing body, saying: "I don't understand why some of you are so mean. I don't get it."

"Today I was re-elected after receiving more than 200 letters of endorsement, and a standing ovation, so an overwhelming majority has the feeling that I am doing a pretty good job, including in Europe," he added.

His re-election followed a long speech in which he triumphantly listed his achievements, alternating smoothly between English, French, Spanish and German. That was after he told audience members a visit to the Kigali Genocide Memorial, which commemorates the 1994 Rwandan genocide, had inspired him to persist during his first campaign for election in 2016.

"What this country has suffered, how this country came back up, is inspiring to the entire world, so I certainly couldn't

give up," he said. "There is a lot to be looking forward to," Infantino added as he turned thoughts to the next four years and declared the 2026 World Cup, the first edition to feature 48 teams, will be "the most inclusive ever".

FIFA earlier announced that the tournament in North America will feature 104 matches, a huge increase from 64 at the 2022 World Cup, as it will start with 12 groups of four teams. The upcoming Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand this year will be the first to feature 32 teams, up from 24 at the last edition. It will also see overall prize money for participating teams increased to \$150mn, up sharply from \$50mn in 2019 and a huge rise on the \$15mn in 2015.

Infantino is also planning to introduce a new, expanded Club World Cup to be played every four years starting in 2025 and featuring 32 teams. "We need more,

not fewer, competitions worldwide," he told delegates.

Infantino has also announced projected income of \$11bn in the four years to 2026, compared to \$7.5bn over the last four years. But he said that figure did not include revenues generated by the Club World Cup, suggesting the final amount will be even greater.

Those improved financial results allow FIFA to keep on increasing the amount of money it provides in subsidies to federations, in turn helping ensure many of them will continue to back Infantino. In order to make football "truly global", as Infantino says, at a time when leading European clubs are able to hoard talent and wealth, FIFA distributes money evenly. That means the likes of Trinidad and Tobago and Papua New Guinea receive the same amount as Brazil, and each has one vote at the congress.

Alsemaitt shines at Hathab



It was a double delight for Maryam Ahmed Alsemaitt as she bagged the top two places in the dressage Medium (Level 1) during the 12th round of the Longines Hathab - Qatar Equestrian Tour at Al Shaqab yesterday. Alsemaitt topped the event with her 15-year-old stallion San Francisco after registering an aggregate score of 66.532. She also finished runner-up with veteran gelding Copain 10 with a score of 64.758. In third place was Maryam Ahmad al-Boinin astride Silvan in a score of 64.355. Earlier, Khalid Sanad al-Nuaimi won the Prelim (Level 2) onboard Medea VD Donkhoeve after the pair scored 68.174. Azade Apa Triolet astride What A Pleasure was second, with al-Nuaimi also coming third with Gop Stop.

