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MOTORCYCLING

# Martin clinches Qatar GP sprint to cut Bagnaia's lead

'I was behind Marquez and Bagnaia and they're amazing riders, but I had the pace tonight'

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Pramac Racing's Jorge Martin stormed into Qatar Grand Prix sprint victory to cut Francesco Bagnaia's world championship lead to seven points after the Ducati rider came fifth at the Lusail International Circuit yesterday.

Martin, who started fifth on the grid, was at his aggressive best as he finished ahead of Gresini Racing's Fabio Di Giannantonio while polesitter Luca Marini of VR46 Racing took the final place on the podium under the floodlights. Martin's victory ensured that MotoGP will have back-to-back final round title deciders for the first time in history, with the season concluding in Valencia next weekend.

Bagnaia seemed to be struggling with grip on his rear tyre and he could do nothing to catch up with the leaders, finishing behind Gresini's Alex Marquez. "I felt I was going to be strong today. I was behind Marquez and Pecco (Bagnaia) and they're amazing riders, but I had the pace," Martin said after winning his eighth sprint of the season.

"I thought and knew I could go fast. I felt I had the potential to win, but you never know how far a race will start. I felt good this weekend and now even better. The management of the rear tyre was important, which allowed me to catch up and overtake them. It was very important to win because we recovered points. Tomorrow will be the big day and we hope to do the same job," the Spaniard said.

Polesitter Marini led into turn one and Martin quickly moved up to third, but Bagnaia took his place to sit behind second-placed Marquez. Bagnaia and Martin had jostled for position from turn one and made contact a few times before the Pramac rider elbowed his fellow title contender out of the way to move up to third on the second lap.

Di Giannantonio also took advantage to overtake the slower factory Ducati bike, leaving Bagnaia searching for answers as the top four pulled away. Martin quickly set his sights on Alex Marquez and Marini, taking the lead after two well-timed overtakes on one lap. Di Giannantonio did not back down either and the Gresini rider, who had set a lap record in qualifying that was later broken by Marini, overtook his Italian compatriot to put pressure on Martin.

"I tried to push a lot to close the gap but they were faster than me today," Marini said. "We need to find something for the race tomorrow, I was struggling for grip with the rear tyre. Every time there is no grip, Jorge does well. I tried to give my best to get on the podium, which is a fantastic result. "

With two laps to go, Di Giannantonio was right on Martin's tail but the Spaniard kept his cool to take the chequered flag. "Jorge was doing a great job in sectors two and three. Incredible race, I was pushing so hard to catch him," Di Giannantonio said.

Behind the podium, Alex Marquez was fourth ahead of Bagnaia, who only just kept Aprilia's Maverick Vinales at bay. Brad Binder was seventh on the factory



Prima Pramac's Spanish rider Jorge Martin leads the sprint race during the MotoGP Grand Prix of Qatar at the Lusail International Circuit yesterday. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil



Gresini Racing's Italian rider Fabio Di Giannantonio (left), Prima Pramac's Spanish rider Jorge Martin (centre) and Mooney VR46 Racing's Italian rider Luca Marini celebrate after the Sprint race at the Lusail International Circuit yesterday.

team KTM from Yamaha's Fabio Quartararo and Tech3 GasGas rider Augusto Fernandez, while Pramac's Johann Zarco missed the points in 10th. Marc Marquez slid to 11th after running on at Turn 1 when battling for the final points-paying positions in the closing stages. Aprilia's Aleix Espargaro and RNF's Miguel Oliveira failed to finish after a lap-one tangle that also involved Ducati's Enea Bastianini and Yamaha's Franco Morbidelli.

**MARINI TAKES POLE FOR TODAY'S GRAND PRIX**  
Earlier, Bagnaia and Jorge Martin, qualified fourth and fifth for today's Qatar Grand Prix, setting the tone for a white-knuckle ride. Italy's Marini took his career-second

pole position, pulverising the track record with his compatriot Giannantonio and Alex Marquez second and third.

Frenchman Zarco recorded the fastest time in the first qualifying and ended up sixth after round two, taking his place on the second row. Honda's former champion Marc Marquez hugged Bagnaia's back wheel several times and took seventh place ahead of Maverick Vinales of Aprilia and Raul Fernandez of Aprilia-RNF.

The Federation Internationale de Motocyclisme (FIM) announced that Espargaro had dropped six places on the grid and received a 10,000 euro (\$10,900) fine for hitting Franco Morbidelli's helmet during Saturday's free practice. In a statement, the FIM said the Spaniard's sanction was



Abdulrahman bin Abdul Latif al-Mannai, President of the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) and Lusail International Circuit met with team principles of the MotoGP teams yesterday.

due to "aggressive behaviour" and for having hit the Italian.

**QATAR GP SPRINT RESULTS**  
1. Jorge Martin (ESP) Prima Pramac Racing; Time: 20m 52.634s; 2. Fabio Di Giannantonio ((ITA)) Gresini Racing +0.391; 3. Luca Marini ((ITA)) Mooney VR46 Ducati (GP22) +2.875s; 4. Alex Marquez (ESP) Gresini Ducati (GP22) +3.370s; 5. Francesco Bagnaia (ITA) Ducati Lenovo (GP23) +3.957s; 6. Maverick Vinales (ESP) Aprilia Racing (RS-GP23) +4.239s; 7. Brad Binder (RSA) Red Bull KTM (RC16) +5.761s; 8. Fabio Quartararo (FRA) Monster Yamaha (YZR-M1) +6.454s; 9. Augusto Fernandez (ESP) Tech3 GASGAS (RC16)\* +8.285s; 10. Johann Zarco (FRA) Pramac Ducati

(GP23) +8.314s; 11. Marc Marquez (ESP) Repsol Honda (RC213V) +9.596s; 12. Jack Miller (AUS) Red Bull KTM (RC16) +10.173s; 13. Marco Bezzecchi (ITA) Mooney VR46 Ducati (GP22) +10.646s; 14. Raul Fernandez (ESP) RNF Aprilia (RS-GP22) +11.117s; 15. Franco Morbidelli (ITA) Monster Yamaha (YZR-M1) +12.163s; 16. Pol Espargaro (ESP) Tech3 GASGAS (RC16) +12.745s; 17. Iker Lecuona (ESP) LCR Honda (RC213V) +19.285s; 18. Takaaki Nakagami JPN LCR Honda (RC213V) +26.238s; 19. Joan Mir (ESP) Repsol Honda (RC213V) +28.446s; 20. Enea Bastianini (ITA) Ducati Lenovo (GP23) +35.553s  
**DID NOT FINISH:** Aleix Espargaro (ESP) Aprilia Racing (RS-GP23); Miguel Oliveira POR RNF Aprilia (RS-GP22) DNF

## QATAR'S AL-BAKER AND AL-AJAMI SHINE AT JAHEZ SHOWJUMPING LEAGUE

Qatar riders sparked on the second day of Jahez Showjumping League, organised by the Saudi Arabia Equestrian Federation with participation of 135 riders from 17 countries. Qatar's Mohamed Khalifa al-Baker was crowned the champion in the 145cm class where Jordan's Nosouh Kayali finished second while Thailand's Jan Kabahorn clinched the third place. Qatar's Faleh Suwaid al-Ajami claimed the first place in 130cm event ahead of Saudi Arabia's Faisal Bakesri and Khalid al-Hadi, who occupied the second and third places respectively.



MOTORSPORT

# First round of Qatar Drag Racing Championship concludes

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

In the midst of intense competition and breath-taking duels, the first round of the Qatar Drag Racing Championship for the season concluded on Saturday.

The championship, held under the gracious patronage of HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani, the chairman of the Qatar Racing Club, witnessed record participation with 138 racers across the fifteen categories. The top qualifiers in 11 categories secured their places in the final races, claiming victory.

One notable instance was in the new category introduced this year, the Eight Cylinder Pro category. Majed al-Sharshani, who topped the qualifying sessions, clinched the title by defeating Ahmed al-Emadi in the final showdown. Abdullah Ali secured the third position.

In a similar fashion, the Super Stock category saw Ahmed al-Emadi emerge victorious over last season's champion, Nawaf al-Ansari, who settled for second place. Meanwhile, Mohamed al-Nabit claimed the third position in this category.

Four categories of the current season witnessed the reigning champions clinching the title in the first round to kick off their title defense in an optimal manner. The first of these categories was the 4 Cylinder Modified, where Waseem Agha managed to overcome Bahraini racer Mahmoud Ali Abbas in



Director of Qatar Racing Club Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani with winners of the first round of Qatar Drag Racing Championship.

the final showdown, with the third place going to Abdulaziz al-Hajjar. The same scenario repeated in the truck competitions, both in the Stock and Modified categories. The defending champion in the Stock category, Abdullah al-Hamadi, secured the title of this round by defeating his competitor Mahmoud Diab in the final face-off, while the third place went to Faisal Mohamed.

In the Modified category, title holder Khalifa al-Khalaf sur-

passed his rival Saeed al-Madahka in the final. Abdulaziz Saqr came third.

The last of the categories that saw the titleholder's victory was the Real Street Bike category. Dawood al-Sharshani triumphed in the final race of this category against his compatriot Youssef Ali Karam, while the third place on the podium went to Shahed Muneer.

On the other hand, the Super Street category witnessed strong

surprises, as Khaled Al-Sultan, with the second-best time in this round, climbed to the top spot on the podium after his victory in the final face-off against the fastest qualifier, Badr al-Sharshani.

The latter faced issues that led him to settle for the second podium position, while Hamad al-Muftah, who finished third, completed the podium.

The same scenario was repeated in the 6 Cylinder Modified category, with the fourth-place qualifier

in the qualifying trials, Hassan Al-Hamar, winning the title.

He defeated the trials' leader, Rashid al-Jhani, in the final, while the third place went to Ali al-Jhani. Walid Salim won the eight-cylinder engine-equipped cars, the modified category. Badr al-Khalaf came second, while Fahad al-Raisi finished third.

In the stock category, Ali Azm followed a similar path, dominating the qualifying trials and securing the title by defeating Akram

al-Rashidi in the final. The third-place podium went to Ibrahim al-Muntafiqi.

As for the first-round titles in the 6-cylinder stock and 4-cylinder stock categories, Hamad al-Mansour and Marc Frederic Seguy claimed victory in their respective final matches against Mohamed Saeed and Armando Austria, who settled for second place in each category.

The third position in both categories was secured by Amr Abdullah and Cristiano Sarmiento, respectively.

The title for the stock motorcycle category was decided in favor of Shahid Muneer, who topped the qualifying trials, faced off in the final, and defeated Mohamed al-Darwish. Hamad al-Muhamnadi secured the third position in the competition.

With the increase in the number of championship categories to 15 this year, the organizing committee decided to conduct the elimination competitions for the ET categories for cars and bikes (which witnessed the largest number of participants) on Thursday.

The awards ceremony for cars saw Yousif Abu Daya clinching the first place, while the second place went to Rafael alvaran, and the third to Regi Kansani.

In the bike category, the top three spots were secured by Osama Wahid (first), Ouzair Ismail (second) and Kazem Sadeqi (third).

HE Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani, the Director of Qatar Racing Club, crowned the top three winners.

TENNIS

# Sinner sees off Medvedev to enter final of ATP Finals

'IT'S VERY DIFFICULT TO PLAY AGAINST HIM, BUT I FOUND A WAY TO WIN'

AFP  
Turin, Italy

Jannik Sinner reached the final of the ATP Finals yesterday, beating Daniil Medvedev 6-3, 6-7 (4/7), 6-1 in front of passionate home support in Turin.

World number four Sinner is the first Italian to make the final of the season-ending tournament. He will face either Novak Djokovic or Carlos Alcaraz today.

The 22-year-old now has the chance to win the biggest title of his career at the end of his best season, in which he has won four four-level titles.

Two of those wins, in Vienna and Beijing were earned by beating Medvedev in the final. The Russian is ranked third in the world.

"It's very difficult to play against him, but I found a way to win. I'm really happy with my performance, let's see how things go tomorrow," said Sinner.

"It's an incredible feeling... It's a privilege to play under this kind of pressure... The crowd has given me so much energy and for me it's a pleasure to play in front of home fans."

Sinner took early control in game four of the first set when he broke Medvedev's serve and then fought back from 0-30 down in the next game to take a 4-1 lead.

Huge applause rang around the



Italy's Jannik Sinner celebrates a point against Russia's Daniil Medvedev during their semi-final at the ATP Finals in Turin yesterday. (AFP)

arena when Sinner served out the set, but Medvedev did not immediately wilt in front of the vociferous support for the home favourite.

The pair went at it toe-to-toe in the second set, holding their respective serves and slugging it out in long baseline rallies.

Medvedev eventually struck

back in the tie-break, his powerful service game too much for Sinner who started to show signs of being ground down, even if it was the Russian who called for treatment straight after drawing level.

But an inexplicably bad second game in the third set from Medvedev, ending with a double fault, handed a break of serve to Sinner.

Medvedev became increasingly irritated with his own errors and the partisan crowd, following up one lost point by gesturing towards a spectator after smashing his racket into the floor.

The game was up for Medvedev once he was broken again in game six. Sinner needed nearly the best part of 10 minutes and three break points to get the double break and close in on victory, which he sealed with a perfect service game to love.

The other semi-final promises to be a blockbuster clash as Novak Djokovic continues his bid for a record-breaking seventh finals title. The world number one has a burgeoning rivalry with Carlos Alcaraz, as the Spaniard is already a two-time Grand Slam champion at the age of 20 and beat the Serbian in an epic five-set Wimbledon final.

"Well, it's just two matches, but at the same time it's too far away. I have Novak in the semifinal. If I win that match, I have a really tough final," Alcaraz said.

GOLF

# Nine birdies in nine holes for Wallace in season-ending event

AFP  
Dubai

England's Matt Wallace made nine birdies in his last nine holes at the race to Dubai for the lowest round in the season ending tournament's history.

The 33-year-old shot a 12-under par 60 but it took the world No87 to 16-under par total and to the top of the leaderboard. However, it's the first time that a player has birdied all nine holes of any half of the golf course.

Two Ryder Cup stars - England's Dubai-based Tommy Fleetwood and Norway's Viktor Hovland - both shot rounds of 66, but could not make a birdie on the par-5 18th hole and remained one shy of Wallace at 15-under. Denmark's Jeff Winther, assisted by two eagles on the back nine, moved into solo fourth place at 14-under after a round of 64.

Defending champion and world No3 Jon Rahm was in tied ninth place with a bogey-free 67, while world No2 Rory McIlroy finally came into his own with a 65 that elevated him to tied 19th place.

Wallace said he was unaware that he had a chance to shoot a 59. He missed his second shot on the par-5 18th to the right bunker and made his up-and-down for a birdie when an eagle would have cracked the 60 barrier.

"Kind of gutted now actually. It was a great opportunity to do it. I've done it at Moorpark on the West Course, which is only a par 68, but to do it out there would have been really special today," said Wallace, who had earlier missed a short four-footer putt for birdie on the seventh hole.

Asked if he'd sleep well given the \$3 million winner's cheque

within his grasp tomorrow, Wallace said: "I will. If there was a competition for sleeping, I'd be on the podium each time.

"Money doesn't drive me. It inspires me a little bit, but the bigger the tournament, I want to compete in them against the best players. I am happy we're doing that this week."

Fleetwood started strongly with four birdies in the first seven holes and then made a long eagle putt on the par-5 14th hole. However, a three-putt bogey on the 17th halted his momentum.

Still looking for his first win of the year, Fleetwood said: "It would be great. I'm very happy with the fact that you get to the final day of the year and I'm still playing well, still feel fresh and I'm still motivated and in contention. I take a lot of pleasure out of that.

"We will see tomorrow. It was great today. Out there playing with one of the best golfers in the world and trying to go toe-to-toe with Viktor. Just look forward to more of it tomorrow."

Hovland was bogey-free for the round. A win tomorrow would make him only the second player after Henrik Stenson in 2013 to win the Tour Championship of both PGA Tour and the DP World Tour.

Asked about the possibility of replicating Stenson, the world No4 said: "It would be cool. It's been a crazy year. This is another big one and would be really nice to have it on the resumé."

The \$10.5 million season-ending championship has a limited field of 50 players. While the Race to Dubai has already been decided in McIlroy's favour, the top-eight players getting a share of the \$6m bonus pool will be determined today, as also the 10 PGA Tour cards on offer for the top-10 non-exempt DP World Tour members.

# Evans stays in control at Rally Japan

Britain's Elfyn Evans maintained a commanding lead at the season-ending Rally Japan yesterday as conditions settled down following the previous day's wild weather. Evans leads an all-Toyota top three heading into the final day, 1min 15.0sec ahead of Frenchman Sebastien Ogier and 1:40.6 in front of newly crowned world champion Kalle Rovanpera. The roads in central Aichi Prefecture were easier to drive on than the treacherous conditions which caused three drivers to crash out the previous day. But changing weather and slippery leaves still posed a problem

throughout the day's eight stages. "We thought we had seen the worst but the weather always amazes us here," said Ogier. "We had a message before the start that it should be dry but the wind is so strong that it is changing so quickly." Belgium's Thierry Neuville, Spain's Dani Sordo and France's Adrien Fourmaux all retired the previous day after crashes, although Neuville was back in action yesterday. Evans began the day with a lead of almost two minutes and the Welshman was taking no chances with a careful drive. "It's been pretty OK," he said

after stage 15. "Getting caught in the rain in the previous one was not nice and we were maybe too careful in some places, but it was always going to be a bit tricky to judge with such a big gap." Rovanpera had already wrapped up his second straight world title at the Central European rally last month. The Finn said there was "nothing really to fight for" with such a big gap separating him from the lead. "When we are in this position, we need to make sure that we get to the finish in the best way possible," he said. **Standings:** 1. Elfyn Evans-Scott

Martin (GBR/Toyota) 2hr 28min 20.8sec, 2. Sebastien Ogier-Vincent Landais (FRA/Toyota) at 1min 15.0sec, 3. Kalle Rovanpera-Jonne Halttunen (FIN/Toyota) 1:40.6, 4. Esapekka Lappi-Janne Ferm (FIN/Hyundai) 3:09.3, 5. Ott Tanak-Martin Jarveoja (EST/Ford) 3:35.3, 6. Takamoto Katsuta-Aaron Johnston (JPN-IRE/Toyota) 3:50.2 **Leading retirements:** Dani Sordo-Candido Carrera (ESP/Hundai), Adrien Fourmaux-Alexandre Coria (FRA/Ford) **Stage winners:** Katsuta (SS5, SS6, SS7, SS10, SS13, SS14, SS15), Evans (SS2, SS3, SS11, SS12), Neuville (SS1, SS9), Lappi (SS8, SS16).



Elfyn Evans and his co-driver Scott Martin of Great Britain drive their Toyota GR Yaris Rally1 Hybrid at the SS14 Lake Mikawako section of the Rally Japan, the 13th round of the FIA World Rally Championships, in Toyota yesterday. (AFP)



AL SHAQAB INTERNATIONAL ARABIAN HORSE SHOW

# Bashir Al Bashir clinches Senior Stallions title

The eye-catching show featured more than 250 of the finest horses



The connections of Bashir Al Bashir celebrate after it won the Senior Stallions Championship title at the Al Shaqab International Arabian Horse Show.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The Al Shaqab International Arabian Horse Show held under the esteemed patronage of HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee and Chairman of Al Shaqab, concluded with a resounding success yesterday. Organised by Al Shaqab, a member of Qatar Foundation, the event held over two days at the magnificent Longines Arena Al Shaqab embodied a significant milestone for the Arabian Show Horse industry in Qatar and the wider region. The eye-catching show featured more than 250 of the finest purebred Arabians horses from Qatar and abroad.

The show, which was witnessed by a packed crowd, not only showcased the beauty and grace of purebred Arabian horses but also celebrated the traditional and cultural significance of owning these magnificent creatures, reflecting the deep-seated love for Arabian horses in the community.

On the final day of the event, Abdullateef Basheer Reja Alrasheedi's Bashir Al Bashir claimed the top honours in the Senior Stallions Championship. Badi Athbah, owned by Al Jazeel Stud, was second with Aladeed Stud's Falah Al Shaqab taking the third place.

DA Magic Moment owned by Nasser Mohamed M A al-Hajri won the Senior Mares Championship. Al Thamer Stud's AJ Sara took the second place, followed by Al Hamad Stud's E.M Queen Desert.

The Junior Colts Championship was won by Bahi Al Jaham, which is owned by Al Jaham Stud. Hamad bin Mohamed al-Rajhi/Al Rajhiah Stud's Alsultan RJ was second, followed by Sons Mubark Hindi al-Khaldi/Alkhawolid Stud's Dawood Al Muawd.

Majed Mohamed A. Alnukhaysh's Shmooa Al Enaya won the Shmooa Al Enaya ahead of Mzoon Al Diriyah, owned by Mesfer Mohamed



M A al-Hajri. Sab'ah Al Shahania of HE Sheikha Iman Mohamed K H al-Thani finished third.

The inaugural edition of the show boasted an esteemed panel of judges who brought their expertise to evaluate and appreciate the prowess of these equestrian teams, adding an extra layer of excitement to the competition.

Al Shaqab International Arabian Horse Show is classified as a B show by the European Conference of Arab Horse Organisations (ECAHO), allowing winning horses to qualify for international shows of higher classification.

#### RESULTS (TOP 3)

**Mares 4-6 Years Old (Class 7):** 1. E.M Queen Desert; 2. AJ Sara; 3. Minerva SBA  
**Mares 7-10 Years Old (Class 8):** 1. D Fala; 2. Bint Sultan; 3. Arwa Al Nasser  
**Mares 11+ Years Old Class 9:** 1. Da Magic

**Moment; 2. HS Miesque; 3. Lamana Stallions 4-6 Years Old (Class 10):** 1. Bashir Al Bashir; 2. Karim Alkhalel; 3. Muhab BHM  
**Stallions 7+ Years Old Class 11 & 12 merged:** 1. Badi Athbah; 2. Falah Al Shaqab; 3. D Jaleel  
**Yearling Fillies Championship:** 1. Farida Mudhar; 2. Hariryah Al Nasser; 3. Rahaf Mudhar  
**Yearling Colts Championship:** 1. Hamza Al Shahania; 2. Magnums Ramses SH; 3. Baheer Al Shaqab  
**Junior Fillies Championship:** 1. Shmooa Al Enaya; 2. Mzoon Al Diriyah; 3. Sab'ah Al Shahania  
**Junior Colts Championship:** 1. Bahi Al Jaham; 2. Alsultan RJ; 3. Dawood Al Muawd  
**Senior Mares Championship:** 1. DA Magic Moment; 2. AJ Sara; 3. E. M. Queen Desert  
**Senior Stallions Championship:** 1. Bashir Al Bashir; 2. Badi Athbah; 3. Falah Al Shaqab

FOOTBALL

## Croatia close in as Wales' Euro hopes are hit by draw

AFP  
Yerevan

Croatia beat Latvia yesterday to leave Wales' hopes of automatic qualification for Euro 2024 hanging by a thread after they drew in Armenia.

Aware that automatic qualification was in their hands after the earlier Welsh result, Croatia started fast in Riga and wrapped up their 2-0 victory inside the first 20 minutes.

Lovro Majer got the breakthrough for the visitors after just seven minutes and Andrej Kramaric doubled the lead with 16 minutes gone.

The Croats go into their last match on Tuesday, needing a win at home to Armenia to seal their spot in Germany next year.

Victory for Wales in Yerevan and another win over Turkiye at home on Tuesday would have secured automatic qualification for Rob Page's men, but after their 1-1 draw they sit third in the group.

Wales should have the safety net of a two-match playoff through their ranking in the Nations League. "We're disap-

pointed, of course, we wanted to get the win," said Page.

"We've got to pick ourselves up and finish with a performance on Tuesday. We look forward to finishing with momentum and if it's a playoff in March, then we take that."

Lucas Zelarayan's fine strike from the edge of the area put Armenia in front after just five minutes. The visitors took time to find their feet and lacked a creative spark so often given to them in the past by a moment of inspiration from the retired Gareth Bale.

Only a gift from the hosts got Wales level before half-time as Nair Tikhizyan headed Connor Roberts' long-throw into his own net. Both teams threw bodies forward in the final stages with a draw little use for either side's chances of qualifying.

In the first of three Group I matches, Belarus beat minnows Andorra 1-0 at home, thanks to a late Denis Laptev goal.

Later, Netherlands host Ireland and Gibraltar travel to France in Group B, while both automatic qualification spots in Group I are up for grabs with Switzerland welcoming Kosovo and Israel taking on Romania.



Latvia's Roberts Savalnicks and Croatia's Andrej Kramaric (right) vie for the ball during the Euro 2024 qualifier Group D match in Riga, Latvia, yesterday. (Reuters)

### If you want to party go to Ibiza not Vegas for F1, says Verstappen

**Las Vegas:** If you want to party go to Ibiza, suggested Red Bull's triple Formula One world champion Max Verstappen as the disillusioned Dutchman lamented the lack of passionate, knowledgeable motor racing fans in Las Vegas this weekend.

Las Vegas may have lots of great spots to drink, gamble and see a good show, but Formula One is a serious sport and not just another act on the Strip, Formula One's biggest star said after putting his Red Bull second on the starting grid alongside Ferrari polesitter Charles LeClerc.

"Of course I understand the fans. They need something to do as well around a track," said Verstappen. "But I think it is more important you actually make them understand what we do as sport."

"Most of them just come to have a party, drink, see a DJ play or watch a performance act. I can do that all over the world, go to Ibiza. They don't actually understand what we are doing or what we are putting on the line."

Since arriving in Sin City for the much-hyped race, Verstappen has expressed his disdain for the showbiz promotion around the event, reminding everyone he is first and foremost a racing driver.

While Las Vegas leaves the 26-year-old cold, it is motorsports' traditional tracks like Spa and Monza that get him fired up. And until many of those with tickets to the Las Vegas race understand what it is that makes drivers tick, Formula One will remain a warmup act for every other performer on the Strip.

HORSE RACING

# Al Shaqab Racing's Aajel lands Lekhraib Cup

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Al Shaqab Racing's homebred Aajel won the Lekhraib Cup in the first race meeting of the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's (QREC) racing calendar at Al Uqda Complex in Al Khor yesterday.

In a thrilling finish, Aajel held on to win the feature of the day, the 2200m handicap (85-105) for Purebred Arabians by a neck under jockey Kyllan Barbaud, completing a double on the day for trainer Jean de Mieuille.

De Mieuille was in the winners' enclosure earlier in the day also when Al Shaqab Racing's Anasheed won the 1400m Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate race for three-six-year-old.

Jockey Chloe Mignonneau guided Anasheed to win by one and a half lengths.

In the penultimate race of the day, Mohamed Nasser al-Naimi's



The Connections of Aajel celebrate Lekhraib Cup win at Al Uqda Complex yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaïm

Akmar won the 2100m Purebred Arabian Handicap (65-85) for three-year-old+ race by a margin of one length and three quarters.

The pair of trainer MHK al-Attayah and jockey Szczepan Mazur combined well to seal trebles with triumphs for Inzan, AJS Haizum and AJS Jassas.

Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi, QREC Racing Manager, crowned the winner.

**RESULTS**  
**1st Al Uqda Meeting - Lekhraib Cup Day**  
**WINNERS:** (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)  
1 - Lekhraib Cup, Purebred Ara-

bian Handicap (85-105), 3YO+ Aajel, Jean de Mieuille, Kyllan Barbaud  
2 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (65-85), 3YO+ Akmar, Hadi al-Ramzani, Ebrahim Nader  
3 - Thoroughbred Handicap (60-80), 3YO+



Jockey Kyllan Barbaud guides Aajel to Lekhraib Cup victory yesterday.

Inzan, MHK al-Attayah, Szczepan Mazur  
4 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (60-80), 3YO+ AJS Haizum, MHK al-Attayah, Szczepan Mazur  
5 - Thoroughbred Handicap (0-70), 3YO+ Flirty Rascal, Al Anoud Khalifa al-Malki, Saleh Salem al-Marri  
6 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap

(35-55), 3YO+ Mutamarrid, Jihad El Ahmad, Giuseppe Cultratro  
7 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate, 3-6YOs Anasheed, Jean de Mieuille, Chloe Mignonneau  
8 - Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate, 3-6YOs AJS Jassas, MHK al-Attayah, Szczepan Mazur





PREVIEW

# Australia ‘ready for anything India throw at us’ in final

CAPTAIN ROHIT SAYS INDIA ‘CALM AND COMPOSED’ AMID WORLD CUP FINAL HYPE

AFP  
Ahmedabad

Australia are adamant they will be “ready for anything” India throw at them in the Cricket World Cup final after controversy hit the tournament in a ‘pitch switch’ row.

India have been the form team of the World Cup, winning all 10 games on their way to today’s showpiece match in Ahmedabad.

But there was controversy in the lead-up to their 70-run semi-final in over New Zealand in Mumbai after it emerged the game was being played on a Wankhede Stadium pitch already used twice before during the tournament rather than a freshly-prepared surface.

“No doubt playing on your own wicket in your own country has some advantages,” Australia captain Pat Cummins told a pre-match press conference yesterday. “But we’ve played a lot of cricket over here.”

“We’ll be ready in terms of anything they’ll throw at us...we’ll make sure we have some plans.”

The pitch will be the same surface as the one on which India cruised to a seven-wicket pool win over Pakistan last month, when they dismissed their arch-rivals for just 191 after winning the toss.

“My understanding is it’s going to be on the slower side,” said India captain Rohit Sharma.

“But we have to assess what it is like tomorrow,” he added, pointing out that while there had been dew on the ground ahead of the Pakistan game, none appeared during the match itself.

“That’s why I keep saying the toss is not going to be a factor, you’ve got to play well to win the game regardless of how well you know the conditions.”

A used pitch had no major bearing on the Mumbai semi-final, with more than 700 runs scored in the game. Cummins, asked if he had already seen the pitch for the final, replied: “Yeah, just had a look. It looked pretty firm...I think Pakistan played someone there!”

Used pitches generally favour spinners, with slow bowling a key component of a five-man India attack where Kuldeep Yadav and Ravindra Jadeja are expected to bowl 20 of their 50 overs on Sunday. Australia have already won the World Cup a record five times and 30-year-old fast bowler Cummins, a member of the victorious 2015 side, was excited by having the opportunity to emulate the likes of Steve Waugh and Ricky Ponting by leading the team to another triumph.

“It would be huge,” he said. “We were all kids not too long ago, watching some of those great teams win the 1999, 2003, 2007 World Cups.”

He added: “To be captain would be an absolute privilege...it’d be awesome. “It (the World Cup) has



India's captain Rohit Sharma (left) and his Australian counterpart Pat Cummins pose with the ICC World Cup trophy yesterday, on the eve of the final in Ahmedabad.



India's Shubman Gill attends a practice session in Ahmedabad. (AFP)

got the longest history of a world event where all the teams compete. You only get a shot at it every four years. So even if you have a long career, you might only play in two of these events. 2015 is still a career highlight for me, but I think tomorrow, if we win, might pip it.”

Rohit yesterday said his players understand the pressure of being Indian cricketers and remain “calm and composed” for the final. “Leading up to every game

we have been quite composed, quite calm about what we want to do, because we know how it is outside the environment we have,” Rohit told reporters. “The expectations and the pressure, criticism and everything, so it’s important we stick to our strength and what we want to do as a team.”

“Inside what they (players) feel I can’t tell you, but when they are around the group, everybody seems to be quite relaxed and



Australia's Steve Smith (right) and Mitchell Marsh check the pitch in Ahmedabad yesterday. (AFP)

calm. Being an Indian cricketer you have deal with pressure, that’s a given, it’s there.”

India last won the World Cup in 2011 at home under MS Dhoni with the cricket crazy-country erupting in joy as thousands took to the streets to celebrate.

Two years later, Dhoni led India to the 2013 Champions Trophy, but the cricketing powerhouse faltered at the World Cup semi-final stage in 2015 and 2019.

This time around, Rohit’s team has lived up to their billing of pre-tournament favourites with a perfect showing in the league stage and then a 70-run win over New Zealand in the semi-final.

“Emotionally it’s a big thing, a big occasion,” said 36-year-old Rohit. “So along with me, all the other 10 players who will play on the ground tomorrow, their focus will be more on their work for the team, rather than thinking about, this is

the biggest moment of my life.”

Fellow cricket superpower Australia are into their eighth World Cup final. They have won eight matches on the bounce after two opening losses, including a six-wicket defeat to India after they were bowled out for just 199.

“They’ve won eight out of eight and they played it really well. So, it’s going to be a good contest,” said Rohit.

“Both teams deserve to be at this stage playing the finals and we understand the importance of what Australia can do. They are a very complete side and for us again what is important is to focus on what we want to do as a team.”

Rohit he wants to win the title for coach Rahul Dravid who was part of the India team which suffered a crushing 125-run defeat at the hands of Australia in the 2003 World Cup final in Johannesburg.

In 2007, India failed to qualify for the knockout stages when Dravid was captain. “His role has been absolutely massive,” said Rohit. “Clearly, looking at how Rahul himself has played his cricket and how I am playing these days, obviously it’s quite contrasting.”

“For him to agree and give me that freedom and liberty to go and play the way we want to play, that says a lot about him. Obviously, what he has done for Indian cricket is massive. And he also feels that he wants to be part of this big occasion. And it’s for us to do it for him.”

## Kohli enters 50-overs GOAT debate at run-laden World Cup

**Virat Kohli** has long been on the cusp of batting greatness and at 35 years old he is making a solid case to be considered the greatest 50-overs player of all time after a run-laden World Cup campaign on home soil. Sachin Tendulkar was the game’s premier batsman until he retired in 2013, and Kohli has inherited that mantle from his compatriot, dominating the game for long stretches in the past decade. Initially, Kohli was part of batting’s “Fab Four” alongside England’s Joe Root, Australia’s Steve Smith and New Zealand’s Kane Williamson. While others have faded somewhat recently, Kohli has been burning brightly, and pulling ahead of his peers. From 2011 to 2019, Kohli scored more than 1,000 ODI runs a year seven times before going nearly three years without a hundred in international cricket. The elegant right-hander ended that drought in September last year and has been at his prolific best at the current World Cup, where he is the runaway top-scorer with 711 runs from 10 matches including three centuries. He overtook Tendulkar’s record of 49 ODI hundreds in Mumbai on Wednesday and it was only

fitting that his idol was present at the Wankhede Stadium to see it. “I couldn’t be happier that an Indian broke my record,” Tendulkar wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter, to congratulate his protegee. “And to do it on the biggest stage - in the World Cup Semi-final - and at my home ground is the icing on the cake.” The pace at which Kohli broke Tendulkar’s record also stands out, achieving his 50th ODI ton in 279 innings to his predecessor’s 49 in 452 innings. Kohli seems immune to the pressure that other batters feel while chasing, and 27 of his 50 hundreds have come batting second.

### RICHARDS COMPARISONS

His dominance has invariably drawn comparisons with West Indies great Viv Richards, who himself is an admirer of Kohli’s batting. “I am a huge fan of Virat ... and he continues to show why he has to go down as one of the all-time greats, right up there with the likes of the great Sachin,” Richards wrote in his column for the International Cricket Council.

“Many people have made comparisons between the two of us over the years, partly because of our shared intensity on the field. “I love Virat’s enthusiasm... He is always in the game and I like individuals like that.” Age and fatherhood may have mellowed him, but Kohli can still put on an arresting display when he steps onto the field. Once out in the middle, Kohli does not shun the spotlight, he hogs it - even when celebrating a rival’s dismissal in which he has played no role. Fans love him. And many obey him as well - with a gesture or a stare he can whip up frenzied support from the stands when the team need extra motivation, or stop the crowd from booing a rival, such as Steve Smith, or taunting a fellow India player. But it is with the bat that he is at his best, and there is hardly a more impressive sight in contemporary cricket than his checked cover drive. Pakistan bowling great Wasim Akram’s post on X this week best summed up Kohli’s impact on batting. “We live in @imVkohli era. Congratulations emperor,” the bowling great wrote after Kohli’s Mumbai masterclass.

