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'Special feeling' to win Davis Cup for Italy, says Sinner

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AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Al Sadd keep last 16 hopes alive with win over Sharjah

The 2011 champions have seven points from five games with only their meeting with FC Nasaf left



Al Sadd's Baghdad Bounedjah (right) celebrates with teammate Mohamed Waad after scoring against Sharjah FC during the AFC Champions League group stage match in Sharjah, UAE, yesterday.



Al Duhail's Michael Olunga in action during the match against FC Istiklol at the Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's Al Sadd roared back into contention for knockout rounds of the AFC Champions League with a 2-0 win over Sharjah FC, while Al Duhail too kept their slim hopes alive with an identical victory over FC Istiklol yesterday.

A goal in each half from Gonzalo Plato and Baghdad Bounedjah earned Al Sadd all three points against United Arab Emirates' Sharjah in the Group B clash to move the 2011 champions onto seven points from five games with only their meeting with Uzbekistan's FC Nasaf left. Nasaf now lead the group with 10 points following their 3-1 win over Al Faisaly with Sharjah in second, two points adrift, and Al Sadd a further point behind. Al Faisaly have three points and have been eliminated.

Only the group winners are guaranteed to advance to the last 16 alongside the three runners-up with the best records in West Asia. Al Sadd went in front in the ninth minute when Akram Afif was released down the left by Pedro Miguel's low cross field ball, the winger cutting inside to unleash a low shot that was initially saved by Darwish Mohamed to his left only for Plato to convert the rebound.

Miralem Pjanic almost unlocked the Al Sadd defence 17 minutes later, the Bosnian bending his free-kick into the box from 30 yards. Al Sadd's Miguel made contact with his head, steering the ball towards his own goal and Meshaal Barsham pushed to safety. With six minutes remaining in the first half Al Sadd threatened a second. Afif's ball from deep inside his own half sent Hassan al-Haydos scampering behind the Sharjah defence but, when the Al Sadd captain attempted to centre to the awaiting Bounejhad, the home side blocked and cleared. Pjanic was left frustrated when a pair of free-kicks were well off target in the early exchanges of the second half while Afif was also wayward with his attempt from a set-piece, but on the hour mark the Qataris doubled their advantage.

Once again Miguel was at the heart of the action, powering in a cross from the left touchline that Bounedjah gleefully headed in from the edge of the six-yard box to see off Sharjah and reignite Al Sadd hopes of a place in the last 16.

OLUNGA BRACE FIRES DUHAIL PAST ISTIKLOL

Meanwhile, Michael Olunga twin headers earned Duhail a 2-0 win over FC Istiklol in Group E. The Kenyan scored in the 47th and 90th minutes to give Al Duhail their first win of the group phase and move Christophe Galtier's side onto four points from five games ahead of their final match against Persepolis FC in two weeks' time.

The result sees Istiklol drop to the bottom of the standings and leaves the side from Turkmenistan with no chance of securing a top two finish. Al Duhail's hopes, meanwhile, hinge on the outcome of Persepolis' meeting with Al Nassr, which was being played late last night.

Only the winners of each group are certain to advance to the last 16 while the three best runners-up in West Asia will also progress to the next phase. Ehson Panjshanbe saw his eighth minute goal-bound effort blocked by Olunga while three minutes later the Turkmenistan side had the ball in the net, only for Cedric Gogoua to be ruled offside after rolling his shot over the line following Alisher Dzhalilov's free-kick.

While Al Duhail were monopolising possession, it was the visitors who created the better chances with Senin Sebai's low shot in the 19th minute another Istiklol effort that was frustratingly off target.

Al Duhail thought they had been given a penalty when Olunga went down under a challenge by Gogoua only for referee Mohamed Nazmi Nasaruddin to overturn his decision to award the spot-kick upon reviewing the incident on the pitch side monitor.

The Qataris took the lead two minutes into the second half when Olunga met Isaac Lihadji's deflected cross from the right with a header that goalkeeper Rustam Yatimov clawed to apparent safety, only for the goal to be given after VAR confirmed the ball had crossed the line.

Almoez Ali should have doubled his side's lead 19 minutes from time but his header flew across the face of goal, while Olunga also had a view of the target less than minute later but fired over the bar. Olunga met Ismaeel Mohamed's cross as the game went into the final minute to double his side's advantage and confirm the three points for the home outfit despite an injury time red card for Ruben Semedo.

FOCUS

90,000 Asian Cup tickets sold within first 24 hours of second release

An additional 90,000 tickets for the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 have been sold within the first 24 hours of a second batch being released on November 19, it was announced yesterday.

Supporters from Qatar, Saudi Arabia and India once again bought the majority of tickets offered, an official statement explained.

In addition to the tournament opener between Qatar and Lebanon, scheduled for January 12 at the iconic Lusail Stadium, the match between Saudi Arabia and Oman led ticket sales.

Ticket sales are continuing for the tournament. Fans can purchase tickets online through the tournament's official ticketing website (http://asiancup2023.qa). Prices for group stage match tickets start at QR25. A total of 51 matches are set to be played across stadiums between January 12 and February 10, 2024.

Qatar's compact nature means that the farthest distance between any two stadiums is 75km. This will enable supporters and players alike to stay in one place of accommodation throughout the tournament. Stadiums and key cultural and fan activity sites will be connected by a robust metro system and modern road network.

All match tickets for the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 are digital and can be downloaded and presented on any mobile device. Hayya will not be a mandatory prerequisite to enter stadiums. All stadiums will be equipped with accessible seating options to ensure that disabled fans can enjoy a barrier-free experience. This includes wheelchair accessible seating as well as seats for people with limited mobility.

For more information about the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023, visit http://asiancup2023.qa and follow @Qatar2023 on X, formerly known as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

Al Arabi finish runner-up after a gripping final



Qatar's Al Arabi suffered a heartbreaking loss to Saudi Arabia's Khaleej Club in the final of the Asian Men's Club League Handball Championship in Sabah Al Salem, Kuwait, yesterday. The gripping final went to extra time after the two teams were locked at 27-all. At the end of the first extra time, the scores read 30-all. But the Saudi club scored five more goals in the second extra-time while Al Arabi could add only three to their total, as Khaleej clinched the Asian title with a scoreline of 35-33. Khaleej had earned a slender lead in the first half (14-13) before Al Arabi fought back and levelled the match at 27 when the referee blew the full-time whistle.

SPORT

IPL TRADE

Pandya returns to MI, Green goes to RCB

Agencies
New Delhi

All-rounder **Hardik Pandya** has been traded to his former franchise Mumbai Indians (MI) from Gujarat Titans with Cameron Green moving from Mumbai to Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB), the IPL said yesterday.

Five-time winners Mumbai got all-rounder Pandya back on his existing player fee of $1.8mn as teams prepare their wish lists and organise their purses for the IPL auction on December 19 in Dubai.

Pandya first joined Mumbai, which is owned by Nita Ambani - wife of India's richest man, the Reliance Industries billionaire Mukesh Ambani - as an uncapped player in 2015 for $11,000.

"We are thrilled to welcome Hardik back home! It's a heartwarming reunion with our Mumbai Indians family!," Nita Ambani said in a statement.

"From being a young scouted talent of Mumbai Indians to now being a Team India star, Hardik has come a long way and we're excited for what the future holds for him and Mumbai Indians."

An attacking batsman and fast bowler, Pandya led Gujarat to the IPL title in their debut season in 2022 and remained captain in their runners-up finish this year.

He led from the front with 833 runs in 30 innings and a strike rate of 133.49. Pandya took 11 wickets.

Mumbai let go of Australian all-rounder Green, who was the second most expensive buy in the auction for the 2023 season at $2.11mn. Green had an impressive start to the IPL, hitting an unbeaten century and two half-centuries. He took six wickets with his pace bowling.

Green, 24, joins Virat Kohli and Faf du Plessis at Bangalore, who are still hunting a maiden IPL title.

Meanwhile Gujarat Titans said opener Shubman Gill would captain the side in next year's IPL.

Pandya's departure sees his India team mate Gill take the captain's arm-band at Gujarat and Vikram Solanki, the Titans director of cricket, said: "Shubman Gill has shown growth in stature and standing over the last two years at the highest level of the game. We've seen him mature not only as a batter but also as a leader in cricket. His contribution on the field has helped Gujarat Titans emerge as a formidable force, guiding the team through a successful campaign in 2022 and a strong run in 2023.



"His maturity and skill is evident in his on-field performance and we are extremely excited to embark on a new journey with a young leader like Shubman at the helm." Gill is currently fifth on the list of top run-scorers in the IPL in the last six years behind K L Rahul, Shikhar Dhawan, Virat Kohli and Faf du Plessis.

He will lead a strong Titans line-up which includes several experienced players like Kane Williamson, Rashid Khan, David Miller, Matthew Wade and Wriddhiman Saha. He also has some captaincy experience, having previously led Indian domestic sides in the Duleep Trophy and Deodhar Trophy.

Green could be an explosive package for Royal Challengers Bangalore, especially at the Chinnaswamy Stadium, according to their director of cricket Mo Bobat.

"He's the ideal fit for us in that middle-order power role," Bobat said on RCB Bold Diaries.

"He's a high-quality, skillful and powerful batsman. He's got the game against both pace and spin. He's got international experience across formats and I'm sure he will enjoy batting at the Chinnaswamy. So, seeing him do that will be really exciting. He's also a fantastic bowler and he bowls with pace and bounce, which were certainly attributes we were looking for particularly in our home conditions. Let's not forget what an exceptional fielder he is. Some of the catches he has taken in recent times fielding at gully is seriously impressive."

CRICKET

New Zealand get set for 'strong' Bangladesh test

'WHENEVER WE PLAY TEST CRICKET, IT IS ALWAYS SPECIAL'

AFP
Sylhet, Bangladesh

New Zealand's captain Tim Southee said yesterday he was looking forward to his side's Test series against Bangladesh, saying he hoped the Kiwis spinners would outwit their "strong" opponents.

"The guys have a great desire for Test cricket," Southee said ahead of the opening match of the two-Test series in Bangladesh's north-eastern city Sylhet today.

"They say it is the pinnacle of the game. Whenever we play Test cricket, it is always special. We love and prioritise Test cricket", he added.

New Zealand won the title of the opening World Test Championship in 2021 but finished sixth in the next cycle, which ended in 2023 with Australia beating India in the final.

The Kiwis have not won a Test in Bangladesh since their three-wicket win in Chittagong in 2008. Their next three Tests, including both matches in a 2013 series, ended in a draw.

"The start of the new cycle is exciting," Southee added. "It is a tough place to play Tests. Bangladesh are strong in these conditions."

Southee said he hoped his spinners would tip the balance in their favour.

"It is foreign conditions compared to New Zealand - pace plays a big role in New Zealand, spin historically plays a big role in this part of the world," Southee said.

"Our spinners have done some great things in Tests. We are looking forward to them showcasing their skills."

The visitors named a spin-heavy squad for the upcoming series, with Mitchell Santner and Ajaz Patel joining Ish Sodhi along with two spin all-rounders, Glenn Phillips and Rachin Ravindra.

Earlier this year, New Zealand ended their 15-year wait to win a series in Bangladesh, beating the home side 2-0 in the three-match one-day international series in September before they travelled to India for the ODI World Cup.

The Kiwis put up a credible show at that tournament, losing to hosts India in the semi-final.

Bangladesh, who won just two matches in the World Cup and finished eighth, also enter a new phase with the series. Newly-appointed captain Najmul Hossain Shanto, a batsman, will take the field as his side's leader for the first time, with regular captain Shakib Al Hasan and his deputy Liton Das taking a break.

"I will not say we are completely new, but less experienced. It was going to happen inevitably at some stage," Najmul said.

"I would call it an opportunity for those who are young and new to the team; they should take it as a challenge," he said. The second Test of the series will be held in Dhaka from December 6-10.



New Zealand captain Time Southee (right) and Bangladesh skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto pose with the series trophy. *(@BLACKCAPS)*

Iqbal to 'wait till January' before deciding on future

Experienced opening batsman Tamim Iqbal yesterday told a press conference that he will 'wait till January' to make a decision about his future in international cricket.

"After the World Cup, I felt that there should be a decision about my international future," Tamim said during a press conference yesterday.

Tamim briefly stepped away from international cricket in July, but following a meeting with Bangladesh's PM Sheikh Hasina, he decided to reverse his retirement. A month later, Tamim relinquished his role as ODI captain.

"Throughout my career, I have always kept myself away from indecision. I have always been very open and clear about whatever decision I have taken in my life. I was not in the country for quite some time, so this meeting (with BCB president Nazmul Hassan) was due.

"We held the meeting today because we had to postpone it yesterday too. Today is actually not a great day to do all this. The Test match (against New Zealand)starts tomorrow. Since we had to do the meeting today, a statement afterwards was always forthcoming, so I apologise that I am doing this the day before the game. It is important for me and the Bangladesh team that there's no impact of this in the game."


New Zealand's Daryl Mitchell during a net session in Sylhet, Bangladesh, yesterday. *(@BCBtigers)*

INEOS GRENADIERS SIGN NORWEGIAN CYCLIST FOSS

London: World Tour cycling team Ineos Grenadiers have added Norwegian **Tobias Foss** to their roster for next season, the British outfit said yesterday.

Foss, 26, is a former world time trial champion and has been with Jumbo-Visma for the past three years.

He has signed a three-year deal.

"When I was 14 years old and started cycling, Edvald Boasson Hagen and Team Sky (now Ineos) became my idols and my favourite team. After that Chris (Froome), Bradley (Wiggins) and Geraint (Thomas) inspired me as I dreamt of the Tour de France.

"All of this made the Ineos Grenadiers my dream team so this was a big factor in me signing, together with my belief that this team can help me further my career."

His best finish in a Grand Tour was ninth in the 2021 Giro d'Italia but he is yet to feature in the Tour de France.

Steve Cummings, Sport Director for Ineos Grenadiers, said: "Tobias is renowned for his time trialling ability, but with what he's achieved in the past he has also shown he can really climb too.

"He's achieved a range of very good results and we fully believe he has the versatility to play a key part in a GC team."

Meanwhile a lightweight wooden medal proved an inadequate reward for the thousands of amateur cyclists who completed the RideLondon mass participation event last year so organisers have bowed to pressure and will reinstate metal medallions instead.

Eco-friendly wooden medals have become more common for sporting events and were introduced for RideLondon in 2022 in part to make the event more sustainable. But they have not been to everyone's liking.

Finishers in next year's race, which takes riders from central London out to the countryside of Essex and back, will be decorated with medals made from recycled zinc alloy.

"We listened to the feedback from riders and the strong preference for a metal finisher's medal," Kevin Nash, RideLondon Route Director, said in a statement.

"We are delighted we have now identified a way to produce a sustainable metal medal, which meets our commitment to establishing sustainable initiatives across our events."



FOCUS

Shiffrin wins slalom for 90th World Cup victory

Reuters
Vermont

American **Mikaela Shiffrin** secured a record-extending 90th World Cup win on Sunday with victory in the women's slalom at Killington in Vermont.

Shiffrin posted the fastest time in the opening run and went on to prevail by 33 hundredths of a second over Olympic champion Petra Vlhova of Slovakia with a total time of one minute 42.02 seconds at the lone women's World Cup stop on US soil.

Swiss Wendy Holdener finished third, 1.37 seconds behind home favourite Shiffrin, who has now won six of the seven World Cup slalom events held at Killington.

"It's a pretty incredible hill and especially in slalom I feel like I have a good mentality," Shiffrin said after her 55th World Cup slalom victory.

"And I feel like the crowd really, really helps me here…I say it every year, but it's so loud, and I can hear them cheering at every split where the intermediate times are.

"Every time I pass one, I hear them get louder, and I'm like, 'Oh man, I don't know if I'm ahead or behind, but either way, I've got a push'. So it's amazing to ski with that kind of energy."



Shiffrin, who placed fourth and first respectively in the World Cup slaloms in Levi earlier this month, was 0.19 seconds ahead of Germany's Lena Duerr after the first run at Killington.

Vlhova briefly took over after a remarkable second run but Shiffrin overtook her perennial rival with a blistering second descent.

The win for Shiffrin gave the American her 141st World Cup podium, which trails only the 155 earned by Swedish great Ingemar Stenmark during the 1970s and 80s.

Qatar National Arabian Horse Show: Hader Al Shaqab champion stallion, D Fala champion mare





The four-day long 26th Qatar National Arabian Horse Show-2023 concluded with a gripping finale at Al Shaqab on Saturday. The championship title contests on the final day saw Al Shaqab's Hader Al Shaqab, owned by Ibrahim Yousef al-Rumaihi, emerging as the champion Senior Stallion. Arab Al Jasmiya of Al Jasmiya Farm won the silver medal while SG Mehwar of Al Yacoub Stud claimed bronze. The winners were awarded by Bader al-Darwish, President, Qatar Equestrian Federation, and Acting CEO of Qatar Racing & Equestrian Club (QREC). The Senior Mares Championship Class saw D Fala of Al Salem Stud being adjudged as the golden winner while Najla Umm Al Azm, owned by Nasser Mohamed Misfer al-Hajri, won silver. Al Zubarah Stud's Obaida Al Zubarah claimed bronze. In the Junior Colts' Championship, Areeb Al Nasser of Al Nasser Stud won gold, Jashar Al Bustan, owned by Fahd Muqbil al-Qahtani, won silver while the bronze went to Shaqran Al Zaeem of Al Dawasir Stud. Rayyanah Al Nasser of Al Nasser Stud was declared as best in the Junior Fillies' Championship with Mazoon Al Diriyah, owned by Misfer Mohamed al-Hajri, clinched silver, and 'His Excellency', owned by Ibrahim Muqbil al-Qahtani, won bronze. In the Yearling Colts' Championship, Jaleel Al Khor, owned by Ibrahim Yousef al-Rumaihi, won gold while Ghazal Al Riffa of Al Jameel Stud won silver. The bronze went to Magnum Ramses S Ansh of Al Nasser Stud. Khood Al Shaqab of Al Shaqab was best in the Yearling Fillies' Championship. The silver was won by Shahd Al Jamil of Al Jamil Stud while Tima Al Nasser of Al Nasser Stud won the bronze.

TENNIS

'Special feeling' to win Davis Cup for Italy: Sinner

'He showed why he's a top three or four player in the world at the moment'

AFP
Malaga, Spain

Italy's Davis Cup hero Jannik Sinner said it was a "special feeling" to end his team's 47-year drought in the competition on Sunday in Malaga.

Sinner beat Alex de Minaur in straight sets in the second singles rubber after Matteo Arnaldi scraped past Alexei Popyrin to earn his country their second trophy with a 2-0 win over Australia.

Sinner, ranked fourth, played a key role, winning all five of his rubbers, including two against world number one Novak Djokovic and Serbia on Saturday.

The 22-year-old said he would like to take Italy to further success in the competition if he can, but that winning it for the first time was wonderful.

"We are all very young, we are really hungry to try to win it one more time in our life, but in another way, you know, having this feeling at least once, it is a really special feeling," Sinner told reporters.

The Italian said his team triumphed because the group pushed each other on in search of their country's first Davis Cup since 1976. Sinner arrived after losing the ATP Finals title to Djokovic last Sunday.

"I played coming from Turin, I gave 100 percent, all I had," added Sinner.

"I think the whole team, they pushed each other on, and this is maybe our key, why we are standing here with this trophy."

Australia captain Lleyton Hewitt was disappointed after finishing runners-up for a second consecutive year but hailed the superb Sinner.

"Jannik, he's played awesome all week, the last few weeks, to be honest, the last few months," said Hewitt.

"So he showed why he's a top three or four player in the world at the moment. "He backed up what he did yesterday against Novak and played extremely good tennis."

De Minaur also acknowledged Sinner's superb form, which saw him win titles in Montpellier, Toronto, Beijing and Vienna this year.

"I think probably Novak said maybe a week ago, Jannik is riding this amazing wave of confidence," said the world number 12.

"He's seriously impressive (with) the level he's showing."

Australian players have vowed to return to Malaga and claim the title next year.

De Minaur also featured in last year's loss to Canada in the final at the same arena and the world number 12 took solace from how well Australia had performed since the finals format was changed to the best of three rubbers.

"There hasn't been another nation that's gone back-to-back in the last two years, so we are showing a pretty good effort collectively," he told reporters.

"We are very, very close and it stinks like hell but, like I said last year in this same position, we'll be back. We'll get this. I mean, we've got a very, very strong future ahead of us."

Australia won the last of their 28 titles in 2003 and have reached the last two finals without the talents of Nick Kyrgios, who is currently sidelined by injury and last played Davis Cup in 2019.

Hewitt has forged a strong team bond between the likes of De Minaur, world number 40 Alexei Popyrin and the 55th ranked Jordan Thompson as well as the doubles pairing of Matthew Ebden and Max Purcell.



Jannik Sinner celebrates with the trophy after Italy won the Davis Cup in Malaga on Sunday. *(Reuters)*

Quartararo says Yahama future in balance after 'toughest' season

Former MotoGP world champion Fabio Quartararo said his future with Yamaha will be decided in the coming months after enduring "the toughest season of his career".

The 24-year-old Frenchman won the world title in 2021, and was runner-up in 2022 but finished just 10th this past season which ended on Sunday at the Valencia MotoGP. "I knew it was likely to be a difficult season but I didn't think it would be this bad," said Quartararo, who failed to win a race for the first time since his debut season in 2019.

"I had a very bad experience with the first part of the season because I expected much better. I didn't know how to get the most out of my bike."This season was the hardest of my career in MotoGP, without a doubt."

Quartararo has one year left on his Yahama contract, but warned he will make a decision on his future early next year.

"If the bike doesn't perform well in 2024, it will put a big question mark on my future at Yamaha. "I'm not setting a deadline for deciding, it will depend on a lot of things, the February tests, the feeling I have on the bike, its potential. "I don't have any years to lose, I want to be at the best level from the start of the season."

The 2024 season opens with the Qatar MotoGP in March.

"When you find yourself fighting to make top 10 it's frustrating," said Quartararo, who replaced seven-time MotoGP champion Valentino Rossi at the Yamaha factory team ahead of the 2021 season. "But it's part of the game and I think that we managed to adapt well and turn our heads around in the second part of the season. "We managed to achieve good results on the Asian tour with two third places and above all, we were fast. "But for next year we'll really have to take a big step forward to fight regularly for these kinds of positions."

Honda brings in Marini to replace Marquez in MotoGP

Honda announced yesterday it had signed Italian Luca Marini, the half-brother of MotoGP legend Valentino Rossi, to a two-year deal with its factory team. Marini, 26, will take over from Marc Marquez, the six-time world champion who is leaving Honda a year early to join his brother at Ducati satellite team Gresini Racing.

After making his MotoGP debut in 2021, Marini earned his first two podium finishes this season – in the United States and Qatar – as he came eighth overall riding for VR46, the Ducati satellite team owned by Rossi. He also finished in the top three in four sprint races and twice took pole position.

Marini will get a first outing on his new Japanese bike at the post-season tests in Valencia today.

FOCUS

EVMC educational series seminar today at Al Shaqab



The Equine Veterinary Medical Center (EVMC) will hold a "Throat Surgery" seminar set to take place at Multifunctional Hall, Longines Indoor Arena at Al Shaqab. The event, to be held from 5:00pm to 6:00pm, will feature the esteemed speaker Guy Alexander, renowned for his expertise as a Clinical Director.

The EVMC monthly seminar series is dedicated to providing valuable insights for horse enthusiasts, breeders, and industry professionals. The series promises to widen the understanding across all aspects of equine health. EVMC, the pioneering institution in the realm of equine care and education in the Middle East, has reinforced its commitment to excellence by launching a recurring series of educational seminars.

The region's leading equine hospital is dedicated to delivering top-tier veterinary care while pushing the boundaries of scientific knowledge through groundbreaking research and transformative educational initiatives.

EVMC proudly stands as the inaugural equine hospital in the Middle East, boasting state-of-the-art facilities, including cutting-edge veterinary diagnostics and clinical research laboratories. The hospital is staffed with a team of distinguished board-certified clinicians, offering 24/7 emergency services and featuring purpose-built surgical theatres. As a specialised referral hospital, EVMC's mission is to cater to all horses in Qatar, equipped with a comprehensive suite of innovative imaging technologies to ensure optimal equine health.

At the heart of EVMC's mission lies an enduring dedication to equine education. The institution offers a diverse range of educational opportunities, encompassing externships, internships, residency programmes, and a captivating seminar series. These programmes highlight EVMC's dedication to promoting learning and development within the equine community.

SPOTLIGHT

MotoGP great Rossi to race full WEC season and Le Mans

Reuters
London

MotoGP great Valentino Rossi will do a full season with BMW in the new LMGT3 category of the FIA World Endurance Championship, including competing in the Le Mans 24 Hours, organisers announced yesterday.

The LMGT3 category replaces the LMGTE class that has been on the grid since 2012.

Rossi, 44, will be making his Le Mans 24 Hours debut next June in the number 46 car – the same number he raced with on two wheels in a career that brought him nine world championships. The Italian, who also owns the VR46 MotoGP team, won a Road to Le Mans support race this year.

"I am very excited to compete in the FIA WEC. It is the next step for me to participate in a world championship, not only in Europe but to race globally again," he said in a BMW statement.

"I am already familiar with the car after this season, but the format with three drivers from three different performance categories will be new for me. Overall, I believe we will be very well positioned."

Polish former Formula One driver Robert Kubica will be driving a Ferrari in the top Hypercar category of the championship with the AF Corse team after winning the now-defunct LMP2 category.

Mick Schumacher, a Mercedes F1 reserve driver and son of Ferrari great Michael, will be making his Hypercar debut in the series with Renault-owned Alpine. Championship organisers published the entry list yesterday with a record 19 Hypercars and 14 manufacturers represented across both classes. The LMGT3 class has 18 entries.

The manufacturers are Alpine, Aston Martin, BMW, Cadillac, Corvette, Ferrari, Ford, Isotta Fraschini, Lamborghini, Lexus, McLaren, Peugeot, Porsche and champions Toyota. Nine of them will be competing in the Hypercar championship.

McLaren have partnered with United Autosports to make their LMGT3 debut. "To have an entry list featuring 19 Hypercars plus 18 LMGT3 entries representing 14 different manufacturers truly reflects the golden era of endurance racing that we are experiencing right now," said WEC chief executive Frederic Lequien.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

PSG's tie with Newcastle is like a final, says Enrique

French giants are second, a point behind leaders Borussia Dortmund in Group F

AFP
Paris


Paris Saint-Germain players take part in a training session in Poissy, west of Paris, yesterday. *(AFP)*

Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique said yesterday his team were "far" from meeting his expectations and had "room for improvement" ahead of their pivotal Champions League clash against Newcastle.

PSG are second, a point behind leaders Borussia Dortmund in a tight Group F, with AC Milan and Newcastle also targeting the knockout rounds with just three points separating the four teams. "The team is not yet what I want, but we are still a work in progress," the Spaniard, who took over at the French club in July, said. "We are far from what I hope that PSG is in the future. There are things that I like, a huge desire of the players to do what the coach asks. I think we have a lot of room for improvement. We are still searching to find an exact style that I want for this team. We are still far from what I hope to see for the team."

Newcastle stunned PSG 4-1 in the first meeting at St James' Park but are bottom of the group after losing both their matches against Dortmund. However Eddie Howe's side have been boosted by a Premier League win over Chelsea at the weekend.

"This competition could be very short, in a very complicated group with tight margins, these are decisive matches," continued Luis Enrique. "Tomorrow's (Tuesday) match could be decisive. There are two teams who can qualify and on the last day there will be the possibility of qualifying too. I'm convinced that my team will be competitive, I have no doubt. The Parc des Princes is a cauldron which lifts us."

Newcastle have slid from top to bottom in the standings after successive defeats and would be unable to reach the last 16 if they lose to PSG. "Newcastle know how to exert pressure very well, they need a victory because they are bottom of the group," said Luis Enrique. "If you watch Newcastle's game against Chelsea, their physicality is important. "They went to press with up to six players and they are capable of maintaining a very quick pace. I expect that same intensity against us, but we will be prepared."

Newcastle must overcome the might of PSG and a mounting injury list if the Magpies' first foray into the Champions League for 20 years is not to come to a premature end. Qualification looked well within the grasp of Howe's side when they humbled PSG 4-1 on Tyneside in October. But things have since unravelled for Newcastle as an injury crisis has taken its toll despite the club being backed by the riches of the Saudi sovereign wealth fund.

Contrary to expectations, Newcastle did not splash their newfound wealth extravagantly in the transfer window by the standards of top Premier League sides. The club's one marquee summer signing, Sandro Tonali, has been slapped with a 10-month ban for breaching betting rules during his time with Milan.

Harvey Barnes has spent most of the campaign out injured since his switch from Leicester, while young full-backs Lewis Hall and Tino Livramento have only been pressed into action in recent weeks due to injuries to others. The decision to be more conservative in the transfer market is now coming back to bite, even if Newcastle showed remarkable resolve to thrash Chelsea on Saturday without 13 first-team players.

Sven Botman, Dan Burn, Callum Wilson, Joe Willock and Sean Longstaff are among the other key players likely to miss out again at the Parc des Princes. "You look at the players who were missing and that was a giant performance from the players we have fit," said Howe after Chelsea were swept aside at St James' Park.

However, the fear for Howe is that his depleted squad have already emptied the tank ahead of facing a PSG side led by Kylian Mbappe with revenge and a place in the last 16 in their sights. Howe needed to name three goalkeepers and a number of teenagers just to fill his bench at the weekend.

The demolition of the French champions in their first home Champions League match for two decades appeared a statement of intent from a coming power of European football. Newcastle are aiming to follow in the footsteps of Manchester City as a state-backed project that can go onto dominate English football and conquer Europe. But Howe is not yet working with a squad filled with superstars built to compete with the Champions League elite.

The likes of captain Jamaal Lascelles, Fabian Schar, Longstaff, Joelinton and Miguel Almiron were part of a side fighting relegation when Howe took over just two years ago. City had to go through plenty of growing pains on the Champions League stage before finally lifting the trophy in June in their 12th consecutive season in the competition.

Newcastle's rise into the Premier League's top four last season came quicker than expected and they were then handed by a distance the toughest Champions League group in this season's draw.

A return to facing Europe's best may have come as a reality check for a depleted squad, but they are still in the fight for the last 16 if they can repeat the feat of keeping Mbappe quiet as they did in October and deliver another bloody nose to PSG.

TODAY'S FIXTURES

(All times GMT) Lazio v Celtic (1745); Shakhtar Donetsk v Antwerp (1745); Manchester City v RB Leipzig (2000); Young Boys v Crvena Zvezda (2000); Feyenoord v Atlético Madrid (2000); Barcelona v Porto (2000); PSG v Newcastle United (2000); Milan v Borussia Dortmund (2000)

Porto match represents 'turning point' for Barcelona, says Xavi

Barcelona: Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez says today's Champions League match at home to FC Porto could be a potential "turning point" for his side as they look to clinch a place in the last 16. The Catalans missed the chance to qualify from Group H with two games to spare when they suffered a shock 1-0 loss to Ukraine's Shakhtar Donetsk in Hamburg at the start of November.

However, a victory over second-placed Porto at home will send Barcelona through to the knockout phase and lift some of the tension after a stuttering run of form over the past month. "It's a very important match, it's vital. If we win we would be assured of finishing in the top two, after two years without being able to qualify for the last 16," Xavi said at pre-match news conference.

Barcelona won the last of their five European titles in 2015 in Xavi's final season as a player at Camp Nou. They failed to make it past the group stage each of the last two seasons, dropping into the Europa League on both occasions, and there is renewed concern following the club's worrying run of underwhelming performances.

A 1-1 draw at Rayo Vallecano on Saturday left Barcelona four points adrift of La Liga leaders Real Madrid, while also trailing Girona and Atletico Madrid. "Lately, things have not been going the way we want but we are on the right path. We believe in what we are doing," said Xavi, who has faced heavy criticism for the nature of his team's displays. "We need to be very demanding of our ourselves and be self-critical, because we're no longer at the same level we were a month and a half or two months ago. Tomorrow is a great opportunity. We can confirm our place in the round of 16 after five matches. It could be a turning point."

Barcelona are without teenage midfielder Gavi for the rest of the season after he sustained a devastating cruciate ligament injury while on Spain duty. Goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen is also a doubt for the Porto game after he hurt his back while away with Germany.

"Ter Stegen will be tested tomorrow to see how much he's suffering and if he's ready for the match. He's virtually not trained with the group but he's always there to bring something extra to the team," said Xavi.

SERIE A

Juve and Inter share spoils in top-of-the-table clash


Inter Milan's Lautaro Martinez (left) vies for the ball with Juventus Weston McKennie (centre). *(AFP)*

Reuters
Turin

Juventus and Inter Milan's top-of-the-table Serie A encounter ended in a 1-1 draw after Inter's Lautaro Martinez cancelled out Dusan Vlahovic's goal in Turin on Sunday. In the 27th minute, Vlahovic broke the deadlock for Juve, receiving a pass inside the box from Federico Chiesa and calmly slotting it into the bottom corner.

Six minutes later, Inter equalised as Martinez made an intelligent run into the box, took control of a cross from Marcus Thuram, and fired an angled shot in at the near post. The result keeps Inter at the top on 32 points and Juve second on 30 points after 13 matches each.

"It's very difficult to score against Juve, especially when they have taken the lead," Inter manager Simone Inzaghi said. "The team remained concentrated, we scored a great equaliser. We didn't create a great deal in the second half, but against a strong Juve side who are deservedly second in the table, we will take the point."

Chiesa had the first chance of the match for Juve when he received the ball just inside the box only to fire his effort over the bar, and Inter's Hakan Calhanoglu then narrowly missed the target with a bold long-range strike. The two sides probed in vain for vulnerabilities in their opponent's defences at the start of the second half, with play becoming increasingly fractious as they each struggled to break through the other's lines.

The stands erupted in boos when Inter sent on Juan Cuadrado, who joined the club in June after eight years at Juve, late on in the match. "We conceded a very naive goal, especially as it was only a few minutes after our opener. Inter have already shown that when they have spaces to run into, it makes it easier for them," Juve manager Massimiliano Allegri said.

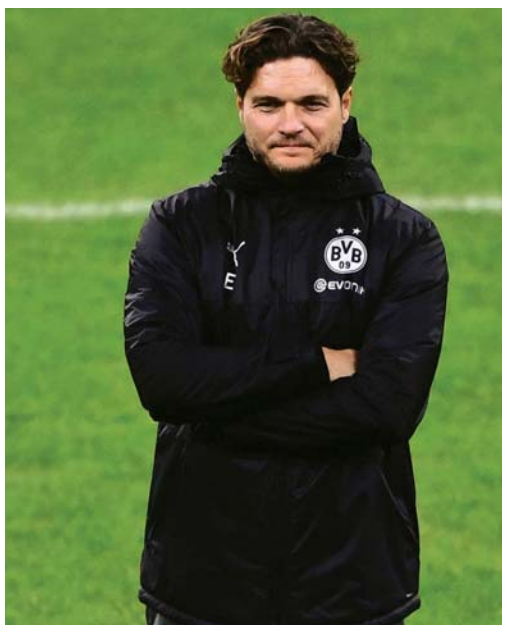
"Fortune favours the brave, so we had to be solid and aggressive. We are finding a better sense of balance than in the early games of the season. We must continue to improve, and a solid defence is very important."

Juve will next visit Monza on Friday while Inter will travel to face Benfica in a Champions League clash tomorrow before visiting Napoli on Dec 3.

FOCUS

Dortmund's Terzic seeking positive spark against Milan

AFP
Berlin



Edin Terzic's Borussia Dortmund can seal a spot in the Champions League last 16 by winning at AC Milan today, sparking some positivity amid a stuttering domestic campaign. Already ten points behind league leaders Bayer Leverkusen with just 12 games played, Terzic's men have however impressed on the European stage this season.

Dortmund sit first in a Champions League group which includes Milan, Paris Saint-Germain and Newcastle, having conceded just two goals in four matches. In the league however they are shipping more than 1.5 goals per game on average and look out of the title race with only a third of the season gone.

Now at the helm for almost a year and a half, Terzic has faced heavy criticism in Germany, with some calling for the 41-year-old's head. Terzic and those in charge at Signal Iduna Park can help to silence the chatter by securing progress to the knockout phase against last season's semi-finalists.

Speaking at Dortmund's AGM on Sunday, club CEO Hans-Joachim Watzke contrasted his side's performances in the league with their showings in Europe. "We were hoping for two or three more points (in the league) at this stage," Watzke said, "but the sky isn't falling."

"We are in first place in the (Champions League) group which cannot be over-estimated. The group is fragile and anything can happen. On Tuesday, we have a chance to qualify early with a win. I wouldn't have dared to dream of that at the time of the draw. That's the truth."

Watzke said the club had "been exposed to a media barrage for months that I have not experienced in ages. "I have to double check every week that we're not fighting relegation!" The CEO, who took over in 2005 and helped save Dortmund from financial ruin, said: "We beat Newcastle, but even then they say 'well they're not that good either.'"

Despite the criticism, Watzke has been Terzic's main advocate, often calling for patience for the Dortmund-born-and-raised coach. The CEO has drawn parallels between Terzic and former mentor Jurgen Klopp, who did not finish in the top four until his third season in charge, when he won the league.

Dortmund drew the reverse fixture 0-0 with Milan in October and another draw, or a loss, would most likely mean the German side need to beat Paris at home in December to progress. Besides the morale boost that would come from making it through this season's strongest Champions League group, qualifying has huge financial importance for the member-run club.

Dortmund, who were European champions 26 years ago, ended a run of three matches without a win in the league on Saturday but made tough work of it, coming from two goals down to beat Borussia Moenchengladbach 4-2 at home. "It was extremely important that we started the next block of games with a win," Terzic said on Saturday.

Terzic joked with reporters after the Gladbach game that "it definitely won't be boring with us this season" before crediting this side's "spirit, energy and faith" in the comeback.

Dortmund have now rescued 11 points from losing situations this season, the second-highest in the Bundesliga. They face a season-defining set of fixtures in the lead-up to Christmas, taking on Milan, league leaders Leverkusen, third-placed Stuttgart in the German Cup, RB Leipzig and PSG.