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TENNIS

Nadal plays down expectations before Brisbane return in January

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Sheikh Joaan oversees preparations for World Aquatics Championships – Doha





HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee and the Local Organising Committee of the World Aquatics Championships – Doha 2024, visited Aspire Zone yesterday to oversee the final preparations for the event to be held from February 02-18, 2024. Sheikh Joaan was accompanied by Minister of Sports and Youth HE Salah bin Ghanem bin Nasser al-Ali, the Public Works Authority President Eng Saad bin Ahmed al-Muhannadi, Aspire Zone Foundation CEO Mohamed Khalifa al-Suwaidi and QOC Secretary-General Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain.

WEIGHTLIFTING

Won and Jiang clinch gold with stellar show

'The Qatar Cup IWF Grand Prix II is one of the most popular tournaments'

By Sports Reporter
Doha

North Korea's Hyon Sim Won yesterday clinched gold in the women's 45kg on day two of the Qatar Cup IWF Grand Prix II taking place at Aspire Zone.

Also yesterday, China's Huihua Jiang won the gold in the women's 49kg in what is an Olympic Games 2024 Paris qualifying tournament being contested by more than 400 lifters representing 102 countries.

Won produced neat lifts of 181kg (82kg snatch and 99kg clean & jerk) to win the gold ahead of Rose Jean Ramos Amis of the Philippines. Ramos Amis settled for silver with 155kg (70kg snatch and 85kg clean & jerk).

In the women's 49kg competition, China's Huihua won the gold medal with a total lift of 216kg (96kg and 120kg). North Korea's Song Gum Ri secured the silver with overall lift of 213kg (93kg and 120kg). Ri Song won the silver medal with a total of 213kg and China's Zhihui Hou's overall lift of 209kg saw her get the bronze (96kg and 113kg).

Meanwhile Ishaq Ibrahim Ishaq, President of the Bahrain Weightlifting Federation (BWF), yesterday outlined the upcoming competitions for the Bahraini national team lifters who are preparing for the 2024 Paris Olympics. He said the Bahraini team – which is contesting the Doha leg of the Paris 2024 qualifiers – will also feature in events to to be held in Malaysia, Uzbekistan and Thailand between December 2023 and April 2024.



China's Huihua Jiang in action during the 49kg competition at the Qatar Cup IWF Grand Prix II at Aspire Zone yesterday.

The visiting delegate – while speaking to the media – said his federation is addressing all the needs of the Bahraini squad and providing the necessary resources to overcome any obstacles. He expressed his confidence in the players' abilities and their potential to excel in international competitions.

The BWF is also exploring the possibility of hosting the World Weightlifting Championships in December 2024. The hosting file has been reviewed and discussions are underway to finalise the date, official name, and marketing and technical aspects of the championship. Roles and responsibilities will be assigned to various committees in the coming days, he said.



Podium finishers from the women's 45kg competition yesterday.

Also yesterday, Dr Ahmed al-Mubarqa, the Iraqi Minister of Youth and Sports, praised the organisation of the Qatar Weightlifting Federation for hosting the Dec 4-14 Olympic Games qualifier.

"The Qatar Cup IWF Grand Prix II is one of the most popular approved tournaments on the agenda of the International Weightlifting Federation. The presence of world's best lifters confirms the standing of the tournament," al-Mubarqa said.

Volunteer applications open for World Aquatics Championships Doha 2024

Doha: The World Aquatics Championships – Doha 2024 yesterday announced that volunteer applications are officially open. Between February 2 and 18, 2024, World Aquatics' flagship event will be hosted in the Middle East for the first time as the world's best aquatics athletes head to Qatar to compete in six different aquatic sports in three world-class venues across the city. The Doha 2024 Organising Committee is calling upon enthusiastic individuals, both locally and from across the globe, to join the team and contribute to the success of this landmark Championships.

Around 1,000 volunteers will play an integral part of creating a memorable experience for athletes, officials and spectators alike and will have the opportunity to choose the areas in which they want to contribute. The scale and significance of this global event means that volunteers will be able to help in a diverse range of areas, allowing them to align their skills and interests with a specific role.

Volunteers can also register to work on the World Aquatics Masters Championships, held between February 23 and March 3, 2024. This offers an opportunity to broaden their experience and contribute to the success of multiple aquatics competitions.

Volunteers will be able to work in a number of areas, including event logistics, spectator-facing roles and in the media and communications departments. Volunteers can apply to work at Doha 2024 via this link or through www.worldaquatics-doha2024.com

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Sadd knocked out despite Duhail's comeback win over Persepolis

Agencies
Tehran

Al Duhail came from behind to beat Persepolis 2-1 in the final game of Group E of the AFC Champions League at Azadi Stadium in Tehran yesterday. However, Duhail's win was of little value to their arch rivals Al Sadd, who failed to make it to the knockout stage of the continental event for the third consecutive edition.

Sadd – who had drawn against Uzbekistan's Nasaf in their last group match on Monday – were hoping to qualify to last 16 as one of the three best second-placed teams. But their hopes were crushed after Debutants Al Fayha joined Al Ain from Group A, with the Saudi Arabian side's defeat of Uzbekistan's Pakhtakor FC seeing them advance. Navbahor of Uzbekistan and Iran's Sepahan FC were the other two teams progressing as best runners-up.

Duhail had already been eliminated going into their final match while Persepolis' slim hopes depended on them collecting the three points at home, with the defeat ending their campaign. The game got off to a flying start in front of a massive home crowd on a cold Tehran night, with both teams finding the back of the net inside the opening 10 minutes.

It was the hosts who opened the scoring when Mehdi Torabi fed a short corner to Soroush Rafei who delivered a right-footed cross into the box that was met by an excellent header from Shahab Zahedi to put Persepolis in the lead in the seventh minute.

Within just two minutes, Duhail restored parity. Almoez Ali sent a defence-splitting pass for Lotfi Madjer to chase on. The youngster looked to apply the finish but was denied by a heroic save from Alireza Beiranvand, only for the ball to fall to Mohamed Muntari who buried it home for the leveller.

Persepolis had the perfect opportunity to secure their place in the Round of 16 when they were awarded a penalty with 10 minutes remaining after Musa brought down Mohamed Omari inside the box, but Gvelesiani hammered his shot from the penalty spot against the crossbar. Things went from bad to worse for the hosts when Olunga went on a solo run from the right flank all the way into the penalty box where he calmly finished with his left into the bottom corner, earning his side the three points.



Al Duhail's Mohamed Muntari (second right) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Iran's Persepolis during the AFC Champions League group stage match at Azadi Stadium in Tehran yesterday.

SPORT

SPOTLIGHT

Maxwell clings to Test team recall hopes

Reuters
Melbourne

Australia's **Glenn Maxwell** has not given up hope of playing Test cricket again and says his record in the subcontinent could earn him a recall for the first time in more than seven years when the team tour Sri Lanka in early 2025.

The subcontinent has been a happy hunting ground for Maxwell, who played all seven of his tests against South Asian teams.

His only Test hundred came in India, and he was one of the architects of Australia's triumph in the 50-overs World Cup in India last month.

Maxwell, who has not played Test cricket since September 2017, is under no illusions how difficult it is to break into Australia's test squad and the 35-year-old thinks he may have to bide his time for the Sri Lanka tour in a little over a year's time.

"I'm quite understanding the circumstances of the current side. They're playing some really good cricket, they're World Test Champions," the all-rounder said on Australian radio station SEN yesterday.

"There's not a lot of spots up for grabs as far as Tests at home, but I know that when it does come to a sub-continent tour I can be a real viable option to hopefully fill a role in that side.

"I don't think there's another sub-continent tour until early 2025. So, I'll keep trying to plug away and hopefully get an opportunity at that stage."

While Maxwell is hoping to set the Big Bash League alight with his explosive batting and crafty off-spin, some of his Australia team mates are preparing for the three-test home series against Pakistan.

"It would have been nice to play one at home, it's where I played all my first-class cricket and it felt like I toiled away for a few years there," Maxwell said.

"It's something that I wish I would have been able to do. But circumstances and timing I probably was more preferred in the white-ball area."

Buckingham replaces sore Neser for PM's XI clash

Michael Neser has been withdrawn from the Prime Minister's XI match against Pakistan with soreness as a precaution ahead of the Test summer, it was reported by the Australian Associated Press (AAP) yesterday.

Jordan Buckingham will replace the 33-year-old paceman in the side for the four-day game at Manuka Oval beginning today.

"We're taking a cautious approach with Michael," said chief selector George Bailey.

"The elevated risk of potentially another large bowling load in the four-day PM XI's fixture was deemed too high.

"We want to ensure that should the opportunity arise to play more Test cricket this summer that we are giving him the best chance to be ready to perform."

Queenslander Neser's most recent of his two Test appearances came against the West Indies in Adelaide last summer, taking five wickets for the match, and he was also called up to join the Australian squad for the World Test Championship final and early stages the Ashes tour on the back of his form for county side Glamorgan.

But West Australian Lance Morris, having recovered from a back injury, has usurped him in the squad for the first Test of the home summer against Pakistan from December 14 in Perth, joining Scott Boland as a back-up pace option.

Brisbane Heat medical staff are still weighing up Neser's Big Bash availability ahead of their KFC BBL|13 opener against Melbourne Stars tomorrow night, but it's understood he is set to play with a four-over spell in T20 cricket viewed as a much smaller risk compared to potentially 30 overs in a four-day game.



The Prime Minister's XI match doubles as a legitimate selection trial to replace David Warner at the top of the order after his planned Test retirement following the New Year's match against Pakistan at the SCG.

Marcus Harris, Matthew Renshaw and Cameron Bancroft – the three leading candidates to fill Warner's spot – have all been selected.

SQUADS

Prime Minister's XI squad:
Nathan McSweeney (c), Cameron Bancroft, Jordan Buckingham, Cameron Green, Marcus Harris, Nathan McAndrew, Todd Murphy, Jimmy Peirson, Matthew Renshaw, Mark Steketee, Beau Webster

Pakistan squad:
Shan Masood (c), Aamir Jamal, Abdullah Shafique, Abrar Ahmed, Babar Azam, Faheem Ashraf, Hasan Ali, Imam-ul-Haq, Khurram Shahzad, Mir Hamza, Mohammad Rizwan (wk), Mohammad Wasim Jnr, Noman Ali, Saim Ayub, Salman Ali Agha, Sarfaraz Ahmed (wk), Saud Shakeel and Shaheen Shah Afridi

CRICKET

Warner-Johnson spat adds spice to Aussie summer

Dashing opener is preparing for his final bow in Test cricket

Reuters
Melbourne



Home Tests against an undermanned Pakistan may struggle to excite even the most ardent Australian cricket fan but angst over **David Warner**'s farewell tour has given the series a much-welcomed boost.

Since his Test debut against New Zealand in 2011, Warner has been front and centre in Australian cricket, whether as a poster boy for brilliance or a whipping boy for the team's occasional transgressions.

The 37-year-old is in the spotlight once again as he looks to bow out of Test cricket on his own terms amid considerable doubt over his place in the side.

Former team mate Mitchell Johnson gave voice to that doubt with a sledgehammer column that highlighted Warner's waning output in Tests and suggested selectors were too close to the lefthander.

While Johnson's takedown drew a scathing response from some media pundits, many in the Australian cricketing community feel a lingering discomfort more than five years on from the Newlands ball-tampering scandal.

'Sandpaper-gate' was arguably the nadir of Australian cricket in the modern era, with Warner adjudged villain-in-chief after a Cricket Australia integrity probe.

Opening partner Usman Khawaja spoke for many when he said Warner, along with fellow ball-tampering conspirators Steve Smith and Cameron Bancroft, had "paid his dues" by serving a 12-month suspension.

Yet plenty of fans would agree with Johnson that indulging Warner with a "hero's send-off" in the third test at his home Sydney Cricket Ground would be hard to swallow.

Warner remains saddled with a lifelong leadership ban following Newlands, despite his campaign last year to have it rescinded.

That came to nothing when he angrily pulled out of the process, accusing a Cricket Australia-appointed panel of seeking to dredge up unsavoury details about 'Sandpaper-gate'.

He has kept his counsel amid the recent furore, declining interviews while allowing his long-serving manager James Erskine to defend his character and return fire at Johnson. Warner may hope his bat will do the talking, much as it did during the recent World Cup in India when his mountain of runs helped Australia to a record sixth title.

Test runs have been much harder to come by in recent years, barring a brilliant double-century in his 100th Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground against South Africa nearly a year ago. Former captain Ricky Ponting later said that would have been Warner's ideal swansong - but he battled on through an injury-blighted series in India and a middling Ashes in England. Runs rather than reputation may ultimately decide whether Warner gets the Sydney send-off he has long hoped for.

Former Australia wicketkeeper Ian Healy was famously denied a farewell 100th Test in Brisbane by selectors who opted for the emerging Adam Gilchrist instead.

However, as has long been in Warner's favour, replacements remain thin on ground, with none of the usual names producing compelling cases to dislodge one of the nation's all-time best openers.

CYCLING

Double world champion Alaphilippe to begin new season Down Under

AFP
Sydney

Double cycling world champion Julian Alaphilippe will begin his 2024 season at the Tour Down Under next month, event organisers said yesterday.

A six-time stage winner at the Tour de France, Alaphilippe won back-to-back men's world road race crowns in 2020 and 2021 but has been plagued by injuries since.

"I am very happy to be returning to Australia," said the 31-year-old Alaphilippe, who previously raced the event in 2014 on his professional debut.

The Tour Down Under for men and women will take place in and around Adelaide next month, with the men's race from January 16-21, featuring the brutal Willunga Hill climb twice and finishing on an ascent to Mount Lofty.

"There are many undulating roads and tough climbs throughout various stages of this race," added Alaphilippe, who won the King of the Mountains jersey at the 2018 Tour de France.

"I'm particularly excited to revisit Willunga Hill along with Mount Lofty for the first time," added Alaphilippe, who will be one of the favourites for the race leader's ochre jersey.

The Soudal Quick-Step rider is a one-day race specialist, but he has won two stage races - the 2016 Tour of California and the 2018 Tour of Britain.

He came agonisingly close to winning the Tour de France in 2019, losing the yellow jersey with just three days to go.

Race director Stuart O'Grady said of the Frenchman: "He is a true champion of our sport, and a born entertainer on a bike. We can't wait for him to race in Australia's greatest cycling race."

Alaphilippe is on the comeback trail after suffering broken ribs and a collapsed lung in a high speed crash in April 2022 and then injuring his knee in a tumble at the Tour of Flanders in March this year.

The women's Tour Down Under takes place from January 12-16.

Pakistan board gives Rauf green light for short Big Bash stint



Lahore: Pakistan's cricket board (PCB) have given fast bowler **Haris Rauf** permission to make a limited appearance in Australia's Big Bash League, ending a stand-off with the player.

White-ball specialist Rauf incurred the PCB's wrath after turning down an offer to be part of the squad for a three-test series in Australia beginning in Perth on Dec. 14. Haris came in for criticism from chief selector Wahab Riaz, while team director Mohamed Hafeez told players they must put national team duty above franchise cricket.

Rauf, fellow fast bowler Zaman Khan and leg-spinner Usama Mir have been cleared to play in the Big Bash competition until Dec. 28, the board said in a statement. "The PCB understands that this decision is in the best interests of all the stakeholders involved while balancing the importance of game time with workload management," it added.

Haris can play a maximum of five matches for Melbourne Stars, who play their last group match on Jan. 15.

He is then likely to join the Pakistan squad for a five-match T20 International series in New Zealand beginning on Jan. 12. The Stars play Brisbane Heat in the Big Bash opener tomorrow.

Pakistan team photo session in Canberra





Pakistan captain Shan Masood poses for official team portraits ahead of the three-match Test series against Australia starting Dec 14. **Right:** Pakistan's Babar Azam (left), Hasan Ali (centre) and Shaheen Shah Afridi.

BOXING

Female fighter Serrano vacates title

Reuters
New York

Featherweight champion Amanda Serrano yesterday relinquished her WBC title after they refused to allow her to compete in bouts under the same rule-set as men's boxing, with 12 three-minute rounds.

Women's championship fights are typically scheduled for no more than 10 rounds with each round lasting two minutes.

Serrano, who had unified the WBA, WBC, IBF, WBO, IBO and Ring Magazine titles, was among the women boxers who launched a campaign in October to have the choice to compete under the same rules as men.

The Puerto Rican fought Danila Ramos to a unanimous decision victory later that month, which was the first time a women's title fight was fought in 12 three-minute rounds.

WBC did not sanction the fight, while the other sanctioning bodies recognised the bout as a title defence for the 35-year-old.

"The WBC has refused to evolve the sport for equality. So I am relinquishing their title," Serrano wrote on Instagram.

"Moving forward if a sanctioning body doesn't want to give me and my fellow fighters the choice to fight the same as the men, then I will not be fighting for that sanctioning body."

WBC President Mauricio Sulaiman had earlier said that they would not sanction 12 three-minute rounds in women's bouts.

"Tennis, women play three sets. Basketball, the basket is shorter and the ball smaller and those are not contact sports. We stand by safety and well-being of the fighters," Sulaiman wrote on X, formerly Twitter, in September.

Both Serrano and Ramos were able to compete under the new rules without damage or incident, Serrano wrote on X.

TENNIS

Nadal plays down expectations before Brisbane return

'I believe I'm in a different moment, situation. I am in an unexplored terrain'

AFP
Paris



Former world number one **Rafael Nadal** yesterday said he expects "nothing" from himself before his return to the courts next month.

Nadal, 37, has been out with a hip injury since last January but is set to feature at Brisbane in the near year.

The Spaniard will use the tournament as a warm-up to the Australian Open in Melbourne having slumped to 663rd in the world before starting his final year before his expected retirement.

"I think I'm ready and I trust and hope that all goes well and it gives me the opportunity to enjoy myself on the court," Nadal said in a video on social media.

"I expect from myself to expect nothing.

"To have the ability not to demand myself what I have demanded myself throughout my career," the 22-time Grand Slam winner added.

Since being sidelined Nadal has been overtaken in the number of Grand Slam tournaments won by Serbian world number one Novak Djokovic, who now has 24 major titles.

Nadal will try to return to the highest level in Australia with the aim of competing at the French Open which he has won a record 14 times.

He is in line for a busy final season with the Grand Slams and the Olympic Games, where he won singles gold in Beijing in 2008 and doubles gold in Rio in 2016.

"I believe I'm in a different moment, situation. I am in an unexplored terrain," Nadal said.

"I have internalised what I have had throughout my life, which is demand myself the maximum.

"Right now what I really hope is to be able not to do that, to accept things are going to be very difficult at the beginning and give myself the necessary time," he added.

Rublev, Tiafoe headline ATP return to Hong Kong

Hong Kong: World number five Andrey Rublev will begin his 2024 season at the Hong Kong Open when the ATP Tour returns to the city for the first time in more than 20 years, organisers said yesterday.

The 26-year-old Russian will be joined by Grand Slam semi-finalists Frances Tiafoe and Karen Khachanov for the January 1-7 event at Victoria Park, an important warm-up for the Australian Open.

Men last competed for the Hong Kong Open in 2002 and former champions include Pete Sampras, Andre Agassi, Pat Cash, Ivan Lendl and Jimmy Connors.

Australian great Rod Laver won the inaugural edition in 1973.

The fiery Rublev, who will be top seed, won two titles this year, at Bastad in Sweden and Monte Carlo.

American world number 16 Tiafoe rose to prominence at the 2022 US Open, where he lost an epic five-set semi-final to eventual champion Carlos Alcaraz, having knocked out Rafael Nadal in the last 16. Russia's Khachanov also has recent Grand Slam pedigree.

He also reached the semi-finals of the US Open in 2022, losing to Casper Ruud, and got to the last four of this year's Australian Open where he lost to Stefanos Tsitsipas.

"I'm looking forward to helping bring back ATP Tour excitement to the city for the first time since the early 2000s," said Khachanov.

Veteran Croat and 2014 US Open champion Marin Cilic will begin his injury comeback at the event.

The 35-year-old had knee surgery after suffering injury in January this year and only played one match on tour subsequently in 2023, sliding to 666th in the world.

FOCUS

Sports bodies ask IOC to allow Russians as neutrals for Paris Games

AFP
Nairobi

Representatives of international sports federations and national Olympic committees yesterday called for Russian and Belarusian athletes to be admitted under a neutral flag for the 2024 Games in Paris "as soon as possible".

During the Olympic summit in Lausanne, athlete representatives also asked for "clarity" on the issue, according to a statement published after the meeting.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) still has to make a final ruling on whether athletes from Russia and Belarus, a key ally for Moscow in its offensive on Ukraine, will be permitted to compete next summer.

The IOC has repeated its stance that a decision will be taken "at the appropriate time".

Athletes from the two countries have faced sanctions from a multitude of sports since Russia launched its assault on Ukraine in February of 2022.

However, over the past year a number of Olympic sports have eased restrictions, allowing them to return to competition under certain conditions.

In March, the IOC lifted an outright ban on Russian and Belarusian athletes, allowing them to compete as neutral athletes provided they did not support the Ukraine conflict and had no ties to the military.

The IOC yesterday "confirmed that the participation of such AINs (individual neutral athletes) in the Olympic Games could happen only under the existing strict conditions".

"Neither the qualification system developed by the respective International Federations nor the number of allocated quota places to a sport will be changed for AINs with a Russian or Belarusian passport," it added.

The IOC suspended the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) on October 12 for violating the territorial integrity of the membership of Ukraine by recognising illegally annexed territories.

ROC has recognised regional organisations from four Ukrainian territories annexed since Russia's invasion began in 2022.

Russia's Olympic body last month launched an appeal against its suspension by the IOC at the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS).

In September, officials voted to allow Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete at next year's Paralympics under a neutral flag after deciding against an outright ban.

Doping watchdog appeals Jeruto's case to CAS

The Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) yesterday said it had filed an appeal with the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in the case of Norah Jeruto, the former steeplechase world champion who last month was cleared of doping.

Jeruto - gold medallist for Kazakhstan in the 3000m steeplechase at the 2022 world championships - had been provisionally suspended by the AIU in April "for the use of a prohibited product or method" after anomalies were identified in her biological passport.

A disciplinary tribunal lifted her suspension in early November after it ruled that the anomalies detected, which suggested blood sampling, were not sufficient to conclude that blood doping had occurred.

The AIU indicated on X, formerly Twitter, that it had filed an appeal with CAS to challenge the decision that the 28-year-old Jeruto did not commit an anti-doping violation.

Kenya-born Jeruto has represented Kazakhstan in competition since January 2022.

Kenya has seen a surge in doping cases, with nearly 70 athletes - mainly long-distance runners - being banned over the past five years.

In September, the AIU appealed to CAS against a decision to clear Nigeria's 100m hurdles world record holder Tobi Amusan of whereabouts failures.



beIN wins big at Sports Business Awards 2023 for its coverage of FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022

DOHA: beIN MEDIA GROUP 'beIN', one of the world's leading sports and entertainment broadcasters, was awarded 'Most Successful Sports Event Broadcast' at the 2023 Sports Business Awards for the group's flagship sports channel, beIN SPORTS, coverage of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. beIN SPORTS, the official broadcaster of the tournament in the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) provided extensive, exclusive, and easily accessible coverage of the quadrennial event, held for the first time the in the Arab World. With six new high-definition channels, 20-plus studios, more than 120 analysts, and comprehensive social and digital coverage dedicated to the tournament, beIN raised the bar for how broadcasters should cover a major tournament. Throughout the month-long tournament, beIN's linear channels recorded more than 5.4bn cumulative views, with the final watched by a record 242.8m viewers – equivalent to 68 per cent of Mena's adult population. On beIN SPORTS' official YouTube channel, the final match recorded a cumulative viewership of 25mn and set a regional record with 4.4mn simultaneous viewers. Across beIN SPORTS' social media platforms, beIN SPORTS' accounts generated 1.1bn video views and 5.5bn impressions.

Mohamed al-Subaie, CEO of beIN Mena, said: "We are truly honoured to receive this prestigious award, which underlines our commitment to providing unparalleled sports content to fans around the world. The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 holds a special place in the hearts of sports enthusiasts and we are proud to have played a pivotal role in bringing the magic of this event to our viewers in the MENA region."

The Sports Business Awards, judged by a panel of influential Chief Executives of Sport Governing Bodies, is designed to celebrate the influence of businesses within sport and recognise organisations, teams and individuals who excel in their roles. This latest accolade adds to beIN's growing list of achievements in the media and entertainment industry, with the network securing five awards this year for their exceptional coverage of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, at SPIA – Sports Industry Awards, Mena Digital Awards and the BroadcastPro ME Awards, highlighting its consistent commitment to excellence in broadcasting and digital content.



MARATHON

Kipchoge and Kiptum to go head-to-head in Paris

AFP
Nairobi

Two-time Olympic marathon champion **Eliud Kipchoge** and world record holder Kelvin Kiptum were named in Kenya's provisional marathon team for next year's Olympics Games in Paris.

An equally stacked women's squad sees the inclusion of defending Olympic champion Peres Jepchirchir, Boston and New York Marathon champion Hellen Obiri and the women's former world record holder Brigid Kosgei. Kipchoge is bidding to become the first athlete to win three Olympic marathon golds following his successes at Rio in 2016 and Tokyo in 2021.

He has never raced against Kiptum, the reigning London and Chicago city marathon champion who bettered Kipchoge's old marathon mark with a time of 2:00.35 in Chicago on October 8. Athletics Kenya (AK) director of competitions Paul Mutwii said the provisional list of 10 athletes in both the men's and women's categories will be whittled down in January to only five runners in each for the Games. "The team selection is based on the world rankings and the athletes' performances in the major marathon races this year," Mutwii said in a press release. "We have also considered consistency, anti-doping, discipline, willingness and championship mentality and attitude of the athletes."



Provisional Kenyan marathon squad

Men: Eliud Kipchoge, Kelvin Kiptum, Amos Kipruto, Geoffrey Kamworor, Vincent Kipkemoi Ngetich, Timothy Kiplagat, Bernard Koech, Cyprian Kotut, Titus Kipruto, Benson Kipruto

Women: Peres Jepchirchir, Brigid Kosgei, Ruth Chepngetich, Rosemary Wanjiru, Hellen Obiri, Joycilline Jepkosgei, Sheila Chepkirui, Judith Korir, Seley Chepyego Kaptich, Sharon Lokedi.

Qatar, Miami and China to host sprint races in 2024 F1 season

The Miami and Chinese Grands Prix will host sprint races in the 2024 Formula One season, organisers announced yesterday. There will be six sprints for the second straight year, after the format was added in 2021 to three race weekends. The Azerbaijan and Belgian races will miss out on the Saturday sprint having held one each last year.

"The addition of Shanghai will be a challenge for the teams and drivers as Formula One heads back to China for the first time since 2019, while a sprint in Miami will add a new dimension to an enthralling weekend," said Mohamed Ben Sulayem, president of motorsports' governing body the FIA.

The United States, Austrian, Brazilian and Qatari Grands Prix will again host sprints, which offer eight championship points to the winner. However, the shortened Saturday races are not universally popular in the paddock.

"I think it's clear that the sprints need to evolve a bit," Red Bull team boss Christian Horner said last month.

"I can understand the concept and it being action on all three days...But I think the sprints in some cases have been slightly underwhelming.

"There's no pit stop, it tends to stay in grid order and its a little bit like getting a medal for a long run."

Red Bull's Max Verstappen will bid for a fourth straight drivers' world title next year after a record-breaking 2023 campaign in which he won 19 of the 22 races and four sprints.

American team Trackhouse replaces RNF on MotoGP grid

Trackhouse Racing will replace RNF as an Aprilia affiliate team in MotoGP next year, the American team announced yesterday. Trackhouse, which already competes in Nascar, will retain Miguel Oliveira and Raul Fernandez, who both competed with RNF this season, as its two riders.

"Joining the MotoGP world championship is a very exciting moment for our young company," said Trackhouse founder and owner Justin Marks in a statement.

"Trackhouse has worked from day one to recognize unique and compelling motorsport opportunities and being able to expand to a global series like MotoGP is a massive step in scaling the company."

Marks added that Trackhouse wanted to "help grow and amplify this amazing sport to millions of new fans in North America and beyond."

The RNF team was excluded from the 2024 championship for "repeated infractions and breaches" affecting the competition's image, organisers said last week, the day after the final Grand Prix of the season, in Valencia.

RNF, founded by Malaysian Razlan Razali with the backing of state energy firm Petronas, entered MotoGP in 2019 under the name Sepang Racing Team. After losing the financial support of Petronas last year, Razali took over the team and renamed it RNF. Romanian company CryptoDATA then became its majority shareholder at the end of 2022.

Razali had announced his departure on social media at the start of the weekend in Valencia.

The team, which used Yamaha bikes until 2022, was home to world champion Fabio Quartararo for his first two years in MotoGP.

The Frenchman then made the step up to Yamaha's factory team in 2021, trading places with Italian great Valentino Rossi who brought the curtain down on his career with the Malaysian team.

The 2024 MotoGP season kicks off on March 10 in Qatar.

MOTORSPORT

QMMF unveils new-look Qatar International Rally

By Sports Reporter
Lusail, Qatar



Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) will host the opening round of the 2024 FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) on February 1st-3rd.

With the Oman International Rally moving to a later date in February, Qatar returns to its former position at the start of the season with events set to follow in Oman, Jordan, Lebanon and Cyprus.

Officials at the QMMF have laid on a revised three-day format that offers 13 timed special stages and 199.95km competitive kilometres in a route of 622.49km. Scrutineering facilities will be based at the Lusail Sports Arena with media and administration based out of QMMF's offices.

On Thursday, February 1st, the pre-event press conference (18.30hrs) and ceremonial start (19.00hrs) will take place at Lusail Boulevard for the first time. Competitors will then tackle a floodlit 3.27km super special stage at the LCSC Karting Academy from 20.00hrs on Thursday evening. On this occasion, two cars will tackle the stage at the same time and start and finish at opposite points of the circuit.

Qatar's demanding northern deserts will then host two days of frenetic action with two loops of three special stages scheduled for both Friday, February 2nd and Saturday, February 3rd. One stage remains unchanged from 2023, another will be run in the opposite direction and four feature minor tweaks for safety and sporting reasons. Drivers will tackle the two days in reverse to 2023 with the Waab Al Mashrab (15.32km), Al Waab (15.33km) and Umm Birka (21.38km) specials being used twice on Friday and split by a return to the Lusail Sports Arena for a regroup and midday service.

Saturday's timetable features two passes through each of the Al Khor (16.90km), Ras Laffan (15.93km) and Al Thakira (13.48km) special stages before the post-event press conference, prize giving and ceremonial finish take centre stage from 18.30hrs onwards at Lusail Boulevard.

The Al Thakira stage has also been defined in such a way that it will conform to any Power Stage requirements that may be introduced into the regional rally series in the 2024 FIA Regional Rally Sporting Regulations.

The rally will be held under the chairmanship of QMMF President Abdulrahman al-Mannai, senior committee member Abdulrazaq al-Kuwari and the QMMF's Executive Director Amro al-Hamad. Portugal's Pedro Almeida will again work as the Clerk of the Course alongside his deputy Rashid al-Sulaiti.

"We are delighted to be hosting the opening round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship this year," said QMMF Executive Director Amro al-Hamad. "Our event has consistently seen the strongest entry on any round of the championship and we have seen some fantastic competition in the last couple of years. Our team has again laid on a challenging route and I am sure that it will provide the perfect backdrop to the start of what we all hope will be an exciting season."

Supplementary regulations and further details are available from www.qmmf.com, with first entries closing on Wednesday, January 3rd. A final cut-off date has been set for Wednesday, January 17th.

The QMMF has also announced a series of generous concessions for international and GCC competitors. International entrants will be given a $6,000 shipping allowance, with GCC teams receiving $3,000, subject to all vehicles passing scrutineering and administrative checks.

In addition, the QMMF will arrange economy class flight tickets for both driver and co-driver, once entry fees are paid, and supply one twin room with breakfast for five nights. Start prizes will also be awarded: entrants who pass scrutineering and administrative checks and enter before the first cut-off date will receive QR5,000, and QR4,000 will be awarded to starters who enter after the early cut-off and before January 17th. For further information about the 2024 Qatar International Rally, contact the Qatar Motor and Motor Cycle Federation (QMMF), PO Box 8708, Doha, Qatar, Tel: + 974 443 79885 e-mail: info@qmmf.com.qa and www.qmmf.com

PREMIER LEAGUE

United coach denies unrest in dressing room

'You can't play such great football what we did lately if there is no unity'

AFP
London



Under-fire **Erik ten Hag** is confident he retains the backing of Manchester United's players after the club were angered by reports he had lost some of the dressing room. The Dutchman's challenging second campaign in charge continued on Saturday when his team fell to a meek 1-0 defeat at Newcastle.

A 10th defeat of the season in all competitions led to some reports that Ten Hag had lost the confidence of up to half of his players, with references to concerns over his style, tactics and signings.

As a result, the club banned four media outlets shortly before yesterday's press conference to preview the midweek Premier League clash against Chelsea.

United said the action was taken for not "contacting us first to give us the opportunity to comment, challenge or contextualise", adding they believed it was "an important principle to defend".

Asked if he believed he still had the requisite buy-in from his players to be successful, Ten Hag said: "Oh yes, I'm sure. But you can see, for instance, the comeback against Brentford, the Burnley game, the Fulham game, so every time the team is there, showed great character. Great determination, resilient, so yeah, we are together. And you can see you can't play such great football what we did lately if there is no unity."

Ten Hag downplayed Newcastle as "one bad performance" after the 3-0 league win at Everton and the 3-3 Champions League draw at Galatasaray, and addressed the bans handed out to journalists. "They should come to us first and not go around our back printing articles," the United manager said.

"That's not the right thing. I think we have another relationship, and then they should give that to us beforehand. We have a normal and professional discussion and debate about it."

Pushed on whether he was concerned there was truth behind reports of player unhappiness, the United manager said: "No. Of course there are always in every team players who are playing less, who are less happy....you have to wait for their chance and that can come, but, no, there are no issues."

There were no questions in the press conference about today's match against Chelsea, who are managed by Mauricio Pochettino – the man considered Ten Hag's main rival for the Old Trafford post in 2022. The former Ajax boss quickly oversaw improvements on and off the pitch at United, but this season there has been criticism about the manager's approach.

"I listen always to my players," the Dutchman said. "And I give them always the opportunities to tell (me). If the players have a different opinion, of course I will listen. But they haven't told me, or maybe one or two (have), but it's about in general, so the majority, they want to play like this - proactive, dynamic, brave. That is what they want. You can see the players are behind it because of the performances against Everton, Galatasaray, and we are really improving."

POCHETTINO WARNS CHELSEA TO BEWARE WOUNDED UNITED

Mauricio Pochettino has warned Chelsea to beware of a backlash from wounded Manchester United. Despite United's struggles, Chelsea boss Pochettino is adamant they remain a side to be feared.

"I wouldn't say it is a good moment to go there. We're going to face a team that's going to be tough because they want to win," Pochettino said. "They have very good players. They have pace with their offensive players and so we cannot allow them to transition. I think we need to be clever because they have pace through Marcus Rashford and Alejandro Garnacho who can transition really fast. We need to try to dominate and put pressure by playing in their half. That will be the challenge for us."

Chelsea are five points behind United after a slow start of their own this term. Pochettino was linked with becoming United manager prior to Ten Hag's appointment last year. He refused to be drawn on whether he was happy to have avoided the myriad of on and off-pitch problems that have hampered Ten Hag. "You try to make me talk too much! I don't want to make a mistake. I'm not the person to talk about what is going on at different clubs. I'm happy here in this project," he said.

The Argentine eventually took over at Chelsea ahead of the current campaign and Wednesday's clash will be his first meeting with Ten Hag since Tottenham's dramatic 3-2 Champions League semi-final win against Ajax in 2019.

Guardiola predicts Man City will win the league

London: A bullish Pep Guardiola says he believes Manchester City will win a record fourth consecutive Premier League title despite a three-match winless run.

The defending champions have drawn their past three league games, against Chelsea, Liverpool and Tottenham, and are three points behind leaders Arsenal ahead of today's match at Aston Villa.

City have been unusually leaky in defence, conceding eight goals over those three matches as they prepare for a tough test against Unai Emery's men, who have won their past 13 home league games in a row. Guardiola admitted that last season's treble winners need tighten up at the back but said they were still not losing many games. The City boss said despite their stumbles he was confident his men were on track to become the first team in English top-flight history to win four league titles in a row. "The motivation is to do it better," he said.

"I learned from where I come from that if you want to win you have to do it better than the opponent. We have to do much better. We have to try and not concede chances, or goals. My feeling today is we will win the Premier League, if you ask me. If we play at the level of Liverpool or Tottenham we are going to win it again. The people don't believe it after three draws but we are going to do it again, knowing it is not easy because no team have done it yet. That's why the difficulty is there."

City will be without suspended midfielder Rodri for the trip to Villa Park - they lost all three games earlier this season when he was previously suspended.

FOCUS

FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027 board holds first meetings

An important first step toward the FIBA Basketball World Cup 2027 has been taken with FIBA and the Qatar Local Organising Committee (LOC) convening for their first meeting at the Patrick Baumann House of Basketball.

The FIBA Basketball World Cup 2027 Board, set up to oversee the flagship event planning and to make key strategic decisions ahead of the 32-team tournament, held two days of meetings with the Qatar LOC on Thursday and Friday.

The focus of the meetings was on the governance and management structure of the event, as well as creating joint marketing and operational committees for the 2027 competition. Burton Shipley will serve as Chairman of the Board for the FIBA Basketball World Cup 2027. Shipley previously served as chairman of the FIBA Basketball World Cup 2019 Co-ordination Commission.

Shipley said: "The staggering success on all levels with this year's World Cup in Manila, Jakarta and Okinawa, for the fans, the players and media - everyone - raised the bar yet again for our main event. We're excited to begin preparations for Qatar."

Other members of the FIBA Basketball World Cup 2027 Board include FIBA Vice-President Anibal Manave and FIBA Secretary-General Andreas Zagklis.

Members of the Qatar LOC delegation include Qatar Basketball Federation President Mohamed Saad al-Meghaiseeb, Director of Marketing and Communication of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) Sheikha Asmaa Thani al-Thani and Director of Strategy and Projects Department of the Qatar Olympic Committee Engineer Fahad Ebrahim Juma Muhana. Qatar Basketball Federation Secretary-General Saadoun Sabah al-Kuwari was also present.

Al-Meghaiseeb underlined the importance of these meetings and said: "As the host country of the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027, we are excited that this journey has begun with the tip-off meeting. This early preparation phase is imperative and together with FIBA, we are committed to delivering a memorable event in 2027."



Qatar Basketball Federation President Mohamed Saad al-Meghaiseeb, Director of Marketing and Communication of Qatar Olympic Committee Sheikha Asmaa Thani al-Thani, Director of Strategy and Projects Department of QOC Engineer Fahad Ebrahim Juma Muhana and Qatar Basketball Federation Secretary-General Saadoun Sabah al-Kuwari pose after the board meeting of the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027 in Mies, Switzerland.

Qatar was awarded the hosting rights for the FIBA Basketball World Cup 2027 in April, with all games to be played in the city of Doha. The country's bid impressed with its elements around the compact geographical nature, unique flexibility with tournament venue scheduling to better serve the fans, and its emphasis on sustainability.

The official countdown to the FIBA Basketball World Cup 2027 got underway after the ball was formally handed to the Qatar LOC by former FIBA President Hamane Niang and Manual V Pangilinan, the Chair of the Philippines LOC, during this summer's World Cup Final. With all of the teams playing in the same city, fans will be able to plan everything far in advance and enjoy a unique experience since all venues are within 30 minutes of each other.

The FIBA Basketball World Cup 2027 takes place in Qatar from August 27 to September 12, 2027. It marks the first time in the competition's history that it is to be staged in the MENA region.

The qualification process for the FIBA Basketball World Cup 2027 will include six windows over a 15-month period, starting from November 2025 to February 2027, with 80 national teams competing for a spot in the World Cup.