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FOOTBALL

India's 26-member squad arrives in Qatar for Asia Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha



Indian team pose on their arrival at the Hamad International Airport in Doha yesterday.

Head coach Igor Stimac yesterday announced India's 26-member squad for the AFC Asian Cup Qatar. The Blue Tigers arrived in Doha yesterday, with India's large expatriate community welcoming the players at the Hamad International Airport.

India will be making their fifth appearance at the Asian Cup. They open their campaign with an Group B match against Australia on January 13 at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan before facing Uzbekistan on January 18 at the same venue. Stimac's men will then move to the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor to take on Syria on January 23. Sahal Abdul Samad made the cut with Jeakson Singh and Glan Martins missing out due to issues related to fitness. Top defensive midfielder Jeakson, who underwent shoulder injury in November, was always doubtful and so was Mohun Bagan's Martins, who got injured recently. Both of them were among the 50 probables.

However, Samad, who had also picked up an injury early this month, managed to get into the side that will be spearheaded by seasoned striker Sunil Chhetri.

"All these boys are very similar in terms of football quality. We are a team, a family. But no matter the talent, if there is no character, nothing can be achieved," Stimac said.

Sharing the areas he would want to improve upon ahead of the tournament, Stimac said: "The things we are looking to work on are defensive compactness, offensive transitions, and the set pieces, mostly. It will be very important to work on man-marking inside the box because I was not happy with that part of our game. In the last few games, we started leaking some unnecessary goals inside the box."

"All three of our opponents are very good technically, physically stronger with great speed. So, we are not going to have much difference in approach to all these three games, I can tell you that. We need to check the fitness level of our players at present and see how much we can develop in the next two weeks," he added.

Off the pitch, encouraging the Indian contingent will be their passionate fans. The Blue Tigers are no stranger to competing in Qatar, playing four of their 2022 FIFA World Cup Qualifiers matches there, including two against the hosts. Moreover, Chhetri and Gurpreet Singh Sandhu were part of the Indian squad at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup which was also held in Qatar. Chhetri scored a goal each against Bahrain and South Korea.

"I'm looking forward to seeing our Indian fans in Doha. They came in massive numbers to support the Indian team during the qualifiers, and that was one of the reasons why we had two great performances against Qatar here. So, I'm well aware that there will be massive support for our boys. Hopefully, we can pay them back and celebrate some good results," said Stimac.

SQUAD

AFC ASIAN CUP QATAR 2023™

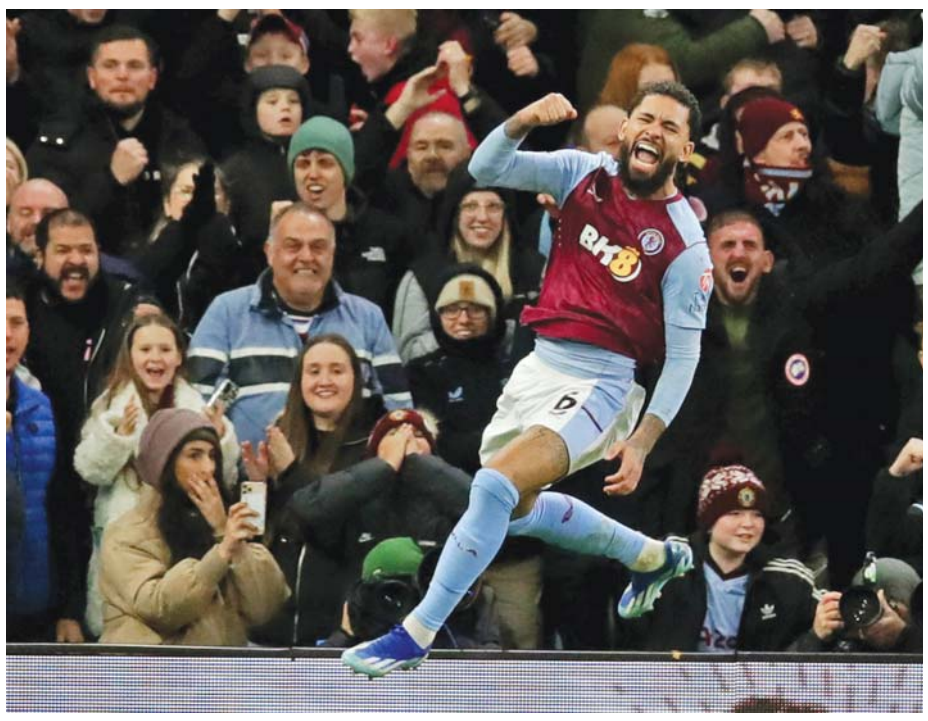
Goalkeepers: Amrinder Singh, Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, Vishal Kaith.
Defenders: Akash Mishra, Lalchungnunga, Mehtab Singh, Nikhil Poojary, Pritam Kotal, Rahul Bheke, Sandesh Jhingan, Subhasish Bose.
Midfielders: Anirudh Thapa, Brandon Fernandes, Deepak Tangri, Lalengmawia Ralte, Liston Colaco, Naorem Mahesh Singh, Sahal Abdul Samad, Suresh Singh Wangjam, Udanta Singh.
Forwards: Ishan Pandita, Lallianzuala Chhangte, Manvir Singh, Rahul Kannoly Praveen, Sunil Chhetri, Vikram Partap Singh.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Villa go joint top, City close on lead

Manchester United slump to 2-1 defeat at resurgent Forest

AFP
Manchester



Aston Villa's Douglas Luiz celebrates after scoring the winner against Burnley. *(Reuters)*

Douglas Luiz's late penalty took Aston Villa joint top of the Premier League with a 3-2 win over 10-man Burnley yesterday as Manchester City closed on the leaders by sweeping aside Sheffield United 2-0.

But Manchester United's thrilling comeback to beat Villa on Boxing Day proved to be a false dawn for Erik ten Hag's men as they slumped to a 2-1 defeat at Nottingham Forest. It looked like a festive season to forget for Villa was set to continue after dropping points at home for the first time this season to Sheffield United and blowing a 2-0 lead to lose 3-2 at United.

However, Luiz's spot-kick, that crept in off the underside of the bar, sent Unai Emery's men level on points with Liverpool at the top of the table. Leon Bailey's opener for the home side was quickly cancelled out by Zeki Amdouni for Burnley. Moussa Diaby restored Villa's lead before half-time and they had a man advantage for the final 35 minutes after Sander Berge saw a second yellow card. But Villa's high line is begging to be picked off by opponents and Lyle Foster timed his run to blast past Emi Martinez 19 minutes from time. There was a final twist, though, as Jhon Duran was upended inside the box and Luiz fired home.

Despite missing Erling Haaland for a seventh consecutive game due to a foot injury, City were never troubled by the bottom-of-the-table Blades. Rodri ended Sheffield United's resistance after just 14 minutes when the Spanish midfielder surged forward and fired low into the far corner. Julian Alvarez again ably filled Haaland's shoes as the Argentine tapped in his fourth goal in three games to make the points safe from Phil Foden's cross just after the hour mark.

City move alongside Arsenal on 40 points, just two points behind Villa and Liverpool, who are in action at home to Newcastle tomorrow.

United, by contrast, are 11 points off the top after losing for the 21st time in 2023.

A second win in three games under Nuno Espirito Santo lifts Forest five points clear of the relegation zone. Nicolas Dominguez swept the home side in front after a well-worked move on 64 minutes.

Marcus Rashford rolled home only his third goal of the season after Alejandro Garnacho pounced on an error from Forest goalkeeper Matt Turner to level with United's first away goal in four games. But the Red Devils were quickly cut open on the counter-attack as Anthony Elanga teed up Morgan Gibbs-White to fire home the winner from outside the box.

Chelsea snapped a run of four consecutive away defeats thanks to Cole Palmer's double but had to withstand a nervy finale to beat Luton 3-2. Powerful strikes from Palmer and Noni Madueke gave the visitors a 2-0 half-time lead. Mauricio Pochettino's men appeared to have ridden out a second half storm when Palmer's classy finish made it 3-0. But former Chelsea midfielder Ross Barkley sparked a Luton revival and Elijah Adebayo bundled home from close range to set up a thrilling finale.

Luton remain just one point adrift of safety as Everton slumped to a 3-0 defeat at Wolves. Max Kilman, Matheus Cunha and Craig Dawson were on target for Gary O'Neil's men, who secured a third win in seven days. Any fears that Crystal Palace could be dragged into the relegation battle were eased by the Eagles first win in nine games as Brentford were beaten 3-1 at Selhurst Park.

FOCUS

Qatar face Cambodia in friendly today

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's national football team will play a friendly match against Cambodia at the Thani Bin Jassim Stadium today as part of Al Annabi's preparations for the forthcoming AFC Asian Cup Qatar. It will be the first friendly for Qatar under new head coach Marquez Lopez. The team will wrap their Asian Cup preparations by meeting Jordan later on January 5.

Coach Lopez stressed on the importance of the friendly match against Cambodia. He told reporters that the match is important and will help in getting a good idea of the general conditions of the players. In the 26-man list of players, Lopez has summoned Al Wakrah goalkeeper Saud al-Khater, his teammate Mahdi Ali, and Al Duhail defender Sultan al-Breik, for the first time into the national side, while midfielder Assim Madibo and Karim Boudiaf have been excluded.

Meanwhile, the 21-year-old Osama al-Tairi, the youngest member in the Qatar squad, was ruled out with an ACL injury just two weeks before the Asian Cup. The Al Rayyan starlet was one of only four U-23 players in the preliminary squad

The Maroons were in action last month, recording a 3-0 win over India in a 2026 World Cup qualification clash while Cambodia lost 1-0 to Pakistan in their first-round World Cup qualifier in October. Qatar are the defending champions at the AFC Asian Cup and will begin their campaign on January 12 against Lebanon in Group A which also includes China and Tajikistan.

Meanwhile, Felix Dalmas, head coach of the Cambodian national football team, has said that the match against Qatar is a great way for Cambodia's top talents to raise their profile.

The visitors are likely to provide competitive opposition to Qatar although there is not much experience in their squad, with Soeuy Visal, Sareth Krya and Sos Suhana being the only three players to have represented the national side on more than 13 occasions.



Qatar's Almoez Ali and Hasan al-Haydos at a training session at the Aspire Academy, on the eve of their friendly against Cambodia.

SPORT

FOOTBALL

Salah leads Egypt into Africa Cup of Nations

Liverpool star Salah will be joined in attack by Al Ahly forward Mahmoud Kahraba

AFP
Cairo

Liverpool forward **Mohamed Salah** is the leading name in Egypt's squad for the Africa Cup of Nations released by the record seven-time titleholder's Portuguese manager Rui Vitoria yesterday. Salah will be joined in attack by Al Ahly forward Mahmoud Kahraba.

But out of the running for the January 13-February 11 competition in the Ivory Coast are Abdallah Said, of Egyptian club Pyramids, Mahmoud Hamdy from Zamalek, and Al Ahly duo Hussein El Shahat and Mohamed Magdy.

Egypt were beaten by Senegal in the last Cup of Nations final in 2021 and their last triumph dates back to 2010, so Vitoria was cautious about his side's prospects. "We will treat each game as a final," he said of his team who are drawn in Group B with Mozambique, Ghana and Cape Verde.



EGYPT SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Mohamed Elshenawy (Al Ahly), Ahmed El-Shenawy (Pyramids), Mohamed Abou Gabal (National Bank of Egypt), Mohamed Sobhi (Zamalek)

Defenders: Ahmed Hegazy (Al Ittihad), Mohamed Abdelmonemem (Al Ahly), Mohamed Hany (Al Ahly), Ali Gabr, Osama Galal, Ahmed Samy, Mohamed Hamdy Sharaf (all Pyramids), Omar Kamal Abdelwahed (Futur), Ahmed Fatouh (Zamalek)

Midfielders: Hamdi Fathi (Al Wakrah/QAT), Mohamed Elneny (Arsenal/ENG), Marwan Attia, Emam Ashour, Ahmed Nabil Koka (Al Ahly), Ahmed Sayed "Zizou" (Zamalek), Mahmoud Hamada (Al Masry)

Forwards: Mohamed Salah (Liverpool/ENG), Mostafa Fathi (Pyramids), Mahmoud "Trezeguet" Hassan (Trabzonspor/TUR), Omar Marmoush (Eintracht Frankfurt/GER), Mostafa Mohamed (Nantes/FRA), Mahmoud Abdel Moneim "Kahraba" (Al Ahly), Ahmed Hassan "Kuka" (Bendikspor/TUR)

Milan's Bennacer back in Algeria squad

AC Milan midfielder Ismael Bennacer is back in the Algeria squad for next month's African Nations Cup finals for the first time after undergoing knee surgery in May.

Bennacer returned to league action with Milan earlier this month after nearly seven months recovering from surgery on a cartilage injury to his right knee sustained during last season's Champions League semi-finals.

The 26-year-old last played for Algeria in the Nations Cup qualifiers in March. Algeria coach Djamel Belmadi also picked Al Ahli forward Riyad Mahrez, Wolverhampton Wanderers defender Rayan Ait Nouri and AS Roma midfielder Houssem Aouar, who has been sidelined due to muscular pain.

West Ham's winger Said Benrahma, named in Algeria's preliminary list last week, was dropped from the final 26-man squad announced.

Algeria kick off their Nations Cup finals campaign against Group D opponents Angola on Jan 15 before taking on Burkina Faso and Mauritania.

ALGERIA SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Anthony Mandrea (SM Caen), Rais Mbolhi(CR Belouizdad), Oussama Benbot (USM Alger)

Defenders: Youcef Atal (Nice), Kevin Guitoun (Metz), Rayan Ait Nouri (Wolverhampton Wanderers), Yasser Larouci (Sheffield United), Aissa Mandi (Villarreal), Mohamed Tougai (Esperance Tunis), Ramy Bensebaini (Borussia Dortmund), Ahmed Touba (US Lecce), Zineddine Belaid (USM Alger)

Midfielders: Nabil Bentaleb (Lille), Sofiane Feghouli (Fatih Karagumruk), Houssem Aouar (AS Roma), Fares Chaibi (Eintracht Frankfurt), Ramiz Zerrouki (Feyenoord Rotterdam), Hicham Boudaoui (Nice), Ismael Bennacer (AC Milan)

Forwards: Riyad Mahrez (Al Ahli), Adam Ounas (Lille), Mohamed Amoura (Union Saint-Gilloise), Amine Gouiri (Stade Rennais), Youcef Belaili (MC Alger), Baghdad Bounedjah (Al Sadd), Islam Slimani (Coritiba).

Celtic end Rangers' unbeaten run to take control of title race

Kyogo Furuhashi's stunning strike earned Celtic a 2-1 victory over Rangers in the Old Firm derby yesterday to open up an eight-point lead at the top of the Scottish Premiership.

A 16-game unbeaten start to Philippe Clement's reign as Rangers manager came to an end in his first taste of the Old Firm derby, but the 10-man visitors gave Brendan Rodgers' men a scare late on. Rangers still have two games in hand on their Glasgow rivals which could cut the gap at the top of the table.

However, Clement now has to deal with the first major setback since he replaced Michael Beale in October.

Paulo Bernardo's sweet hit separated the sides before half-time.

Furuhashi then lashed in his eighth goal against Rangers in the past year. Victory seemed assured for the Hoops when Leon Balogun was shown a straight red card for hauling down Daizen Maeda as he broke clear on goal.

But James Tavernier's stunning free-kick halved the arrears on 88 minutes and Celtic's nerves showed during 10 minutes of added time.

Back-to-back shock defeats to Kilmarnock and Hearts for Celtic earlier this month has opened the door for Rangers to haul themselves right back into the title race.

Celtic, though, have since steadied the ship with three consecutive wins to pull clear once more. "It feels great, it's a very important win for us," said Celtic boss Rodgers.

"The atmosphere in the game was fantastic. The players played well on the surface which was difficult - scored two great goals. My only downside was when we are playing against 10 men, we have to control the game much better than that.

"We invited pressure when there was no need, but other than that delighted for everyone."

A heavy snow shower before kick-off made conditions difficult for flowing football, but all three goals were of high quality.

Bernardo scored his first Celtic goal in a 3-0 win at Dundee on Boxing Day and opened the scoring in style midway through the first half.

A corner was only half cleared to the Portuguese midfielder at the edge of the box and he rifled a fierce effort into the far corner.

Celtic's talisman Furuhashi has endured a poor spell in front of goal of late, but the Japanese international showed he is still the man for the big occasion.

Furuhashi turned on the edge of the area before firing on his weaker left foot into the top corner from outside the box just two minutes into the second half. Tavernier responded with a similar moment of magic as he whipped a free-kick into Joe Hart's near post from a narrow angle for his 16th goal of the season.

But Rangers could not find a dramatic late leveller to leave them with plenty of work to do in 2023 to deny Celtic a 12th title in 13 seasons.

Clement was left frustrated by some decisions as he felt Bernardo and Alistair Johnston were lucky to escape also seeing red in the second half.

"A few strange decisions," said the Belgian. "We were not decisive enough in our finishing today and they were really decisive. The second goal is a quality goal."

(AFP)

CRICKET

South Africa name new skipper and seven uncapped players for New Zealand tour

Reuters
Cape Town

South Africa named uncapped Neil Brand as their captain for a two-match Test tour of New Zealand next month where the majority of their team will be missing, competing instead in the domestic Twenty20 league.

Half of the 14-man squad named yesterday have yet to play a test but get their opportunity because the tour clashes with the SA20, the T20 league that was launched by Cricket South Africa and Indian Premier League investors last year.

All but two of the players in the side that beat India in the Boxing Day Test are competing in the SA20 league but David Bedingham and Keegan Petersen will be going to New Zealand.

Bedingham scored a half century on his Test debut this week as South Africa beat India by an innings and 32 runs.

Of the party heading to New Zealand, batsmen Zubayr Hamza and Khaya Zondo have won previous Test caps, along with pace pair Duanne Olivier and Dane Paterson and spinner Dane Piedt. Brand led South Africa A to a 2-1 series win over West Indies A earlier this month.

Despite the lack of experience in the squad, coach Shukri Conrad insisted South Africa would prove competitive.

"The players picked for this tour have every chance of challenging New Zealand and we have full confidence they will do exactly that when we arrive for the first Test match at Mount Maunganui," he said in a statement announcing the team.

"Most of these guys participated in the recent 'A' series against West Indies where they showed that they have what it takes against players of international calibre. That experience will no doubt leave them in a better position for what we expect to be a testing series in New Zealand."

South Africa will play a three-day warm-up match against a New Zealand XI in Christchurch before the first Test at the Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui from Feb 4-8 and the second test at Seddon Park in Hamilton from February 13-17

SQUAD: Neil Brand (captain), David Bedingham, Ruan de Swardt, Clyde Fortuin, Zubayr Hamza, Tshepo Moreki, Mihlali Mpongwana (Western Province), Duanne Olivier (DP World Lions), Dane Paterson, Keegan Petersen, Dane Piedt, Raynard van Tonder, Shaun von Berg, Khaya Zondo.

COETZEE OUT OF THE ATTACK FOR SOUTH AFRICA

South African fast bowler Gerald Coetzee has withdrawn from the second Test against India after developing pelvic inflammation during the first Test win in Centurion this week.

The 23-year-old experienced discomfort in his pelvis, which got progressively worse while bowling on day three of the match on Thursday, where South Africa won by an innings and 32 runs.

He underwent scans on Friday which revealed the extent of the injury, a statement from Cricket South Africa said.

No replacement has been added to the squad.

Coetzee was part of a four-man seam attack for South Africa at Centurion where they bowled India out twice. But the second, and final, Test at Newlands in Cape Town will likely see the return of spinner Keshav Maharaj to the home line-up.

Hasaranga named Sri Lanka's T20 skipper, Mendis to lead ODI side



Sri Lanka appointed all-rounder **Wanindu Hasaranga** as the captain of their Twenty20 side yesterday ahead of their series against Zimbabwe next month, while batsman Kusal Mendis will lead their one-day international team.

Charith Asalanka was named as deputy to both Hasaranga and Mendis, Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) said in a statement. Hasaranga will make his comeback after missing the Asia Cup and the 50-overs World Cup earlier this year after picking up an injury in the Lanka Premier League in August. He succeeds regular skipper Dasun Shanaka who was named in their preliminary squads for three ODIs and as many T20 matches against the African side on home soil starting January 6. Mendis took over ODI captaincy two games into the World Cup in India after Shanaka was ruled out of the tournament due to a thigh injury. Sri Lanka had a disappointing tournament, finishing ninth out of 10 teams with two wins from nine games. The SLC had responded by naming a new selection committee led by former opener Upul Tharanga that also includes former player Ajantha Mendis. It also appointed former captain and batting great Sanath Jayasuriya as 'cricket consultant' on a year-long deal.

MOTORSPORT

4X4 Freestyle Drifting Championship: Al-Kubaisi emerges champion

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Abdulrahman al-Kubaisi emerged champions of the third round of 4X4 Freestyle Drifting Championship held at the Qatar Racing Club (QRC) track on Friday.

The round was organised under the gracious patronage of HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani, Chairman of QRC in which over 70 competitors participated, showcasing their leadership skills in a competition that lasted for more than five hours. Each participant was given one opportunity to enter the track to perform a set of manoeuvres within a specified time period.

Abdulrahman al-Shammari and Saud al-Merri came second and third. It was the first podium finish of the season for al-Shammari, while second for al-Merri. Abdullah al-Qahtani came fourth and Hassan al-Qahtani secured the fifth spot.



Action from the third round of the 4X4 Freestyle Drifting Championship.

At the conclusion of the competitions, Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani, the General Manager of Qatar Racing Club, crowned the top three winners. The last round of the championship will take place on March 21-22.

QRC will host the five rounds of the 2024 Arabian Drag Racing League. The opening round is set to be held on January 11 and 12, concluding with the final round on February 8 and 9.

The championship will witness the participation of drag race champions from Qatar and the Arabian Gulf. On the sidelines of the second round, the eleventh edition of the Qatar Custom Show is scheduled to take place from February 16-20, attracting a large number of car and motorcycle enthusiasts, automotive agencies, and sports teams from both within and outside the country.



Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani crowns the winners.

SPOTLIGHT

Murray longs to play against Nadal, Djokovic again

AFP
Brisbane

Andy Murray conceded yesterday he longed for the chance to play again on the big stage against superstars Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal.

Speaking ahead of the season-opening Brisbane International, the 36-year-old said he missed the days when he regularly met Djokovic, Nadal and Roger Federer at the business end of major tournaments. Murray matched it with the big three for a decade between 2006-16 before a run of injuries resulted in time off court and a slide in his ranking.

While the others powered on to title after title, the Scotsman, now ranked 42, was forced to battle his way back, his career never reaching its former heights.

The last time he met Nadal was in the semi-finals of the Madrid Masters in 2016 and while he played Djokovic in the Madrid Masters last year, he had not met him since 2017 before that.

"Obviously I would like the opportunity to play against them again, ideally in the latter stages of big tournaments," Murray said.


Britain's Andy Murray attends a training session ahead of the Brisbane International in Brisbane yesterday. *(AFP)*

"That's something that obviously I've missed, that feeling, not had that opportunity really.

"If I get the opportunity to practise with them, I still really, really enjoy that.

"It does bring back some good memories, but ideally, I'd want to be doing that in the tournaments, not in the first rounds."

Murray has been practising with Nadal in Brisbane as the Spaniard makes his comeback after almost 12 months away with injury.

He said Nadal was moving well and showing no signs of the hip injury that forced him off tour after the 2023 Australian Open.

Murray also said Nadal appeared to have made only minor changes to his game in his time away from the tour.

"His second serve is significantly harder than what he did earlier in his career," Murray said.

"But yeah, the rest of the game, unless there's a physical issue, there's not really much reason for him to make huge changes to that - it's been pretty successful.

"When he's fit and healthy, that game style is what has worked really, really well for him, looking for his forehand, trying to dominate with that shot.

"If he wants to be successful in the future, that's what he should be looking to do. That's how he was trying to play today."

Murray takes on second-seeded Bulgarian Grigor Dimitrov in the first round, a rematch of the 2013 Brisbane International final which Murray won in two close sets.

Dimitrov won their last encounter at this year's US Open.

"I need to play really well, certainly much better than there, if I want to get through it," Murray said.

Thiem advances in Brisbane after snake holds up qualifying match

Former US Open champion Dominic Thiem huffed and puffed his way into the main draw of the Brisbane International yesterday, but not before a hissing intruder slithered onto the court and briefly halted play.

Thiem lost the opening set of his qualifying clash against Australian youngster James McCabe before eagle-eyed fans spotted a snake near the courtside electrical wires, prompting officials to call in security staff and stop play.

A professional was brought in to catch the 50cm (20-inch) reptile, which local media identified as a deadly eastern brown snake, holding up play for 40 minutes.

"I really love animals, especially exotic ones," Thiem said. "But they said it was a really poisonous snake and it was close to the ballkids, so it was a really dangerous situation."

"It's something that has never happened to me and is something I'll definitely never forget," the former world number three told reporters after the match.

Thiem, who has slipped to 98 in the world amid injury struggles, fought back in the second set before sealing a 2-6 7-6(4) 6-4 win to reach the main draw of the Australian Open tune-up tournament.

The year's first Grand Slam begins on Jan. 14 in Melbourne.

Former world number one Rafa Nadal will return to tennis at the Brisbane tournament on Sunday when he plays a doubles match alongside Marc Lopez, whom he partnered in 2016 to claim an Olympic gold medal.

The 22-times Grand Slam champion drew a qualifier in the singles draw as he geared up for the first stop of what could be his farewell tour, after shaking of a niggling hip injury that required surgery in June.

Naomi Osaka, Japan's four-times major winner, is also returning to tennis in the women's draw after her maternity break and plays Tamara Korpatsch.

UNITED CUP

Recharged Swiatek helps Poland sweep past Brazil 3-0

Zheng upsets Wimbledon champ Vondrousova

AFP
Perth

World number one Iga Swiatek helped Poland sweep past Brazil 3-0 at the United Cup in Perth yesterday with Zheng Qinwen stunning Wimbledon champion Marketa Vondrousova as China beat the Czech Republic.

Swiatek led her top-seeded nation to the opening group win, crediting a calming few weeks away from the game after lifting the year-end women's championships last month in Mexico.

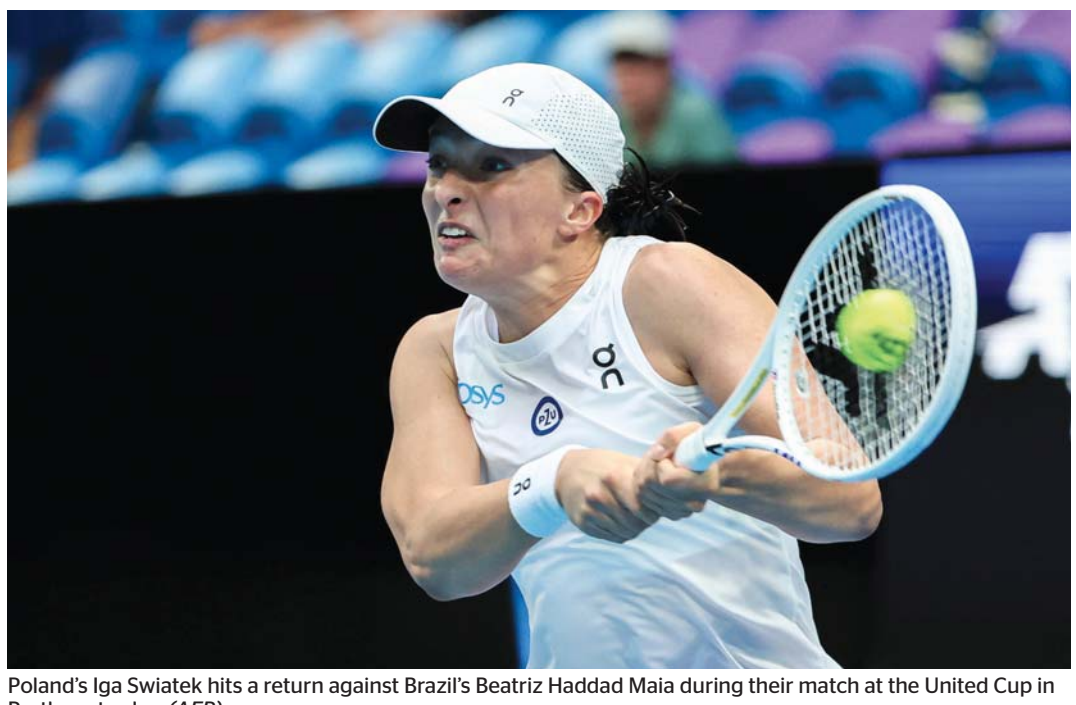
"It was peaceful for the first time, I was able to focus on practice and rest," Swiatek said after dominating Beatriz Haddad Maia 6-2, 6-2. "I hope to be more dangerous this season - I'll do my best," she said. "I'm having such fun here and can concentrate on tennis," added the 22-year-old three-time French Open champion.

Swiatek said the victory over Haddad Maia showed off her recharged mental strength. "I worked hard in the pre-season and gained a lot of confidence. I was able to play freely without any other thoughts to mess up my game."

Teammate Hubert Hurkacz secured the day's second win with a 6-7 (4/7), 6-2, 6-3 comeback over Thiago Seyboth Wild to put the tie out of reach.

'JUST A NORMAL MATCH'

Earlier, Zheng served up an upset 6-1, 2-6, 6-1 win over the seventh-ranked Wimbledon titleholder Vondrousova. "It was just a normal match for me," said Zheng, the WTA's 2023 Most Improved Player who has risen to be world number 15. "It doesn't matter who I face. I'm happy with the win and excited for my team," the 21-year-old added.


Poland's Iga Swiatek hits a return against Brazil's Beatriz Haddad Maia during their match at the United Cup in Perth yesterday. *(AFP)*

It followed teammate Zhang Zhizhen defeating Jiri Lehecka 5-7, 6-3, 6-4 in China's maiden appearance at the mixed teams tournament.

Zhang held his nerve against Lehecka in a heavy-hitting clash, with the world number 58 dictating from the baseline.

Alexander Zverev battled back from a set down to beat Italy's Lorenzo Sonego 6-7 (5/7), 6-3, 6-4 and earn a point for Germany in Sydney to get his season off the a winning start. Jasmine Paolini had given Italy a 1-0 lead, surviving a bout of cramps to defeat Angelique Kerber 6-4, 7-5 in the first match of the German former world number one's comeback after having a baby. In the deciding mixed doubles, Kerber and Zverev combined to beat Angelica Moratelli and Sonego 6-3, 6-0.

"It was a special day for me, coming back after so long, playing singles and having such a high level in doubles," Kerber said.

"It was great to get my first win since coming back - it feels great."

Casper Ruud, the top-ranked Norwegian in history after reaching a career-high two by making the 2022 US Open final, was a level above Dutchman Tallon Griekspoor in a 6-3, 6-4 win at Sydney.

He converted three of seven break points to clinch victory in 72 minutes against a player who has risen to 23 in the world on the back of ATP Tour titles in Pune and Hertogenbosch this year.

It helped Norway level the tie after the Netherlands' Arantxa Rus downed Malene Helgo 7-6 (7/4), 6-1 in the women's singles.

Ruud, now ranked 11, returned to partner Ulrikke Eikeri in the mixed doubles, but they were unable to overcome Demi Schuurs and Wesley Koolhof who rallied from a break down in each set to win 7-6 (7/5), 7-5.

FOCUS

Djokovic relishing being back in his 'happy place' Australia

AFP
Perth

Novak Djokovic called Australia his "happy place" yesterday as he prepared to kick off his season at the United Cup with a tricky clash against China's fast-improving Zhang Zhizhen.

The world number one holds no grudges heading into the mixed team event nearly two years after being refused entry to the country over his stance on Covid-19 vaccinations.

"Always felt like...(Australia) was my happy place where I felt great, other than that situation two years ago where obviously it wasn't really enjoyable," he said.

"But other than that, I have always enjoyed myself, played the best tennis, and so my feelings coming into Australia this year are really positive."

The 36-year-old said he is looking forward to facing the 58th-ranked Zhang in Sunday's group tie in Perth.

Djokovic is targeting a record 11th Australian Open title next month, but his focus for now is on Zhang, vowing to give "always 100 percent".

China laid down a marker yesterday with a defeat of the Czech Republic, which featured Wimbledon champion Marketa Vondrousova.

"I never faced Zhang," he said. "I think he now is probably the most successful Chinese male player of all time.

"That's great, as well, because we want to see the men's tennis in China picking up. They are a strong team, very strong team."

But the 24-time Grand Slam winner warned: "Hopefully I can start the new season with a win."

The Serbs, trained by former player and Djokovic friend Viktor Troicki, have been in the city for several days trying to acclimatise.

"Australia is not really around the corner for us Europeans, so we need a little bit of time to get used to the time difference," said Djokovic.

"Obviously different conditions here than any other place where I trained or played an exhibition recently.

"China had a clean sweep today," he added. "There's a big Chinese community here and also Serbian community, so hopefully we can feel the energy in the stands and support for both nations."


Serbia's Novak Djokovic taking a selfie with quokka on Rottnest Island ahead of the 2024 United Cup in Perth. *(AFP)*

Sabalenka says room for improvement ahead of Australian Open defence

Aryna Sabalenka admitted yesterday she was feeling the pressure after a breakthrough 2023 saw her claim a maiden Grand Slam title at the Australian Open, but a new mindset was helping her deal with it.

The 25-year-old Belarusian also finished runner-up at the US Open and made the semi-finals of Wimbledon and Roland Garros on her way to becoming world number one. Currently ranked second in the world behind Poland's Iga Swiatek, Sabalenka is top seed at the season-opening Brisbane International, which begins today. She said she had been working hard during the off-season in a bid to become the first woman to win consecutive Australian Opens since countrywoman Victoria Azarenka in 2012 and 2013. But she conceded to feeling added pressure as defending champion at Melbourne Park. "Last year I did an amazing job, it wasn't easy to do," Sabalenka said.

"It's not going to be easy this season. Just having this kind of thought in the background of your mind, actually having a title to defend, makes it actually not easy.

"I'm trying not to put pressure on myself. I'm just trying to prepare myself as good as I can - it's not an easy thing to do, especially with the Grand Slams."

Sabalenka put her stellar 2023 down to a change of attitude. "I kind of accept the fact that I can lose, that everyone can go out there and beat me if I'm not bringing my best tennis," she said. "Accepting this fact gives you more belief - you're more calm on the court in those crucial moments.

"Worst case, what happens?" she asked. "I'm going to lose a Grand Slam, lose some points, drop a little bit in the rankings.

"But there's so many tournaments ahead. I'm going to try to do my best to be in another Grand Slam or in other tournaments.

"That's why I like my mindset, you can beat me, but I'm going to prepare every match and have huge chances to win match after match, probably to hold the trophy." Sabalenka has a first round bye in Brisbane and will play either Italian Lucia Bronzetti or American Ashlyn Krueger in the second round.



Fiery Rublev aims to 'be nicer' as he targets tennis top four

Fiery Andrey Rublev admitted yesterday that he needed to control his temper and "be nicer" to himself if he wants to challenge the world's top four in 2024. The Russian finally felt he belonged at world number five in 2023, but added he still had plenty to improve to get to the very top, including putting a lid on his explosive on-court emotions. The 26-year-old Russian enjoyed tournament victories in Monte Carlo and Bastad in a consistent 2023 that saw him reach four other finals.

He begins his 2024 campaign as top seed at next week's Hong Kong Open with the first Grand Slam of the year just a fortnight away in Australia. After reaching the quarter-finals of the US Open in September, Rublev reached the final of the Shanghai Masters and the semi-finals in Vienna and Paris, only losing the latter in three tight sets to Novak Djokovic.

"After this year's US Open, I started to feel that I was really raising my level," Rublev told reporters in Hong Kong, where he will have a bye into the second round.

"I started to feel that it doesn't matter who I have in the draw, if I will be smart and control my emotions, I will have a chance to win the match."

"They (the top four) accept when things go wrong much better than I do," he said of his mental approach. "The next step is to be nicer to myself on court, especially for my left knee, because it is suffering."

HORSE RACING

In-form Habes claims End of Year Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Abdulaziz Saleh al-Jaber-owned Habes continued his good run of form as he took the 1300m Graduation for Local Purebred Arabians, landing the End of Year Cup. At Al Uqda Racecourse, the six-year-old wrapped up the 2023 racing action completing a quick-fire double for trainer Hadi al-Ramzani and jockey Jefferson Smith, who emerged victorious in the last two races of the day.

Habes won the 1,300m race for the four-year-plus by beating Al Jeryan Stud-owned and M H K al-Attiyah-trained AJS Haizum by three quarters of a length. Munhamik, owned and trained by Nasser Owaida Salem al-Hajri and was ridden by Abdulla Rashid al-Hajri came third. Habes had won the Local Purebred Arabian Novice Plate (Class 5) on November 23 and finished runners-up four times in 2023.

Faisal Mohamed M A al-Naeimi-owned and Hadi al-Ramzani-trained Chrome won the race for the Purebred Arabian Handicap (65-85) for three-year-old+. Jefferson Smith guided the eight-year-old bay horse to victory in the 2,000m race.

Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi, Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC) Racing Manager, presented trophies to the winners.



Jefferson Smith leads Habes to End of Year Cup at the Al Uqda Racecourse. **PICTURES:** *Juhaim*



Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi, QREC Racing Manager, presented trophies to the winners.

RESULTS NINTH AL UQDA MEETING: END OF YEAR CUP DAY
WINNERS (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1 - End Of Year Cup, Local Purebred Arabian Graduation Plate
Habes, Hadi al-Ramzani, Jefferson Smith
2 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (65-85)
Chrome, Hadi al-Ramzani, Jefferson Smith
3 - Thoroughbred Handicap (60-80)
Opera Legend, Hamad al-Jehani, Szczepan Mazur
4 - Thoroughbred Handicap (50-70)
De Bruyne, Gassim Ghazali, Soufiane Saadi
5 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate
Lagtaifia, Hamad al-Jehani, Rashid Ali al-Marri
6 - Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate
Khaeer Al Shahania, Abdulla Mesfer al-Shahwani, Rashid Ali al-Marri
7 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (45-65)
Elighe De Zamaglia, Mohamed Ghazali, Hamed al-Busaidi

HATHAB

Albaker bags Big Tour, Sheikh Khalifa shines in Open Class



Ali al-Rumaihi, deputy head of the Hathab's organising committee, poses with the podium finishers of the Big Tour Class.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Mohamed Khalifa Albaker astride Lissabon 56 claimed the Big Tour Class on the last day of the eighth round of the Longines Hathab – Qatar Equestrian Tour Season 7. Sheikh Khalifa al-Thani and Abdulhadi Salah Alyafei also excelled at the QEF Outdoor Arena claiming victories in the Open and Amateur classes, respectively.

Albaker and Lissabon 56 were flawless completing the course in 66.40 secs as rest of the contenders picked up penalties during the Big Tour event. Khalid Mohamed al-Emadi on Chikita was fastest in 64.09 secs but he had to content with second place after committing four faults, while Rashid Towaim al-Marri, riding Navaronne, also had four errors finishing third with a time of 67.12 secs.

Later in the Open Class, Sheikh Khalifa teamed up with Emiro Delle Sementarecce to seal win followed by Cyrine Cherif (Triple T Calamando Blue) and Nasser al-Ghazali (Dexter) on second and third positions respectively.

Meanwhile, Alyafei was also impressive with Caballero in the Amateur Class, clocking an error-free 28.04 in the second phase to take the title. Hadi Nasser al-Shahwani, astride Beyonce, was second with a time of 29.40 with Saoud Ahmed al-Boinin finishing third on Diademe De B'neville with a time of 29.51.



Sheikh Khalifa al-Thani astride Emiro Delle Sementarecce en route to victory in the Open Class yesterday.

SERIE A

Pulisic earns Milan win over Sassuolo

Milan are in third place with 36 points, nine behind leaders Inter

Reuters
Milan

Christian Pulisic ensured AC Milan ended the year on a high by scoring a second-half goal that secured a 1-0 home win over Sassuolo in Serie A yesterday.

In the 59th minute, the American broke the deadlock by skilfully chipping the ball over Sassuolo keeper Andrea Consigli after receiving Ismael Bennacer's defence-splitting pass. Milan are in third place with 36 points, narrowing the gap to leaders Inter Milan to nine after they played out a 1-1 draw at Genoa on Friday. Sassuolo are 16th with 16.

Milan manager Stefano Pioli fielded a depleted back line, with Fikayo Tomori, Malick Thiaw and Pierre Kalulu all sidelined due to injuries. The hosts had an early effort disallowed when Olivier Giroud was offside as he delivering a cross for Bennacer to slot home.

Another Milan attempt on goal was disallowed as Rafael Leao's finish was cancelled out for offside in the build-up. Sassuolo had their best chance moments later when Domenico Berardi's curling shot required a diving save from keeper Mike Maignan who tipped it over the bar. The hosts sat back after Pulisic's goal, limiting Sassuolo to long-range attempts, and they comfortably held out for the win.

Earlier on Saturday, Bologna's recent momentum was ended as they suffered a 3-0 loss at Udinese. Thiago Motta's side, vying for a top-four spot, were left in fifth place, trailing Fiorentina in fourth by two points.

On Friday night, leaders Inter were held to a 1-1 draw away to Genoa as Marko Arnautovic's first league goal for the club was cancelled out by a header from Radu Dragusin. Inter are top with 45 points but the result gives second-placed Juventus, on 40, an opportunity to close the gap as they were hosting AS Roma late last night. Genoa are 13th with 20.

Inter broke the deadlock after 42 minutes when Austrian Arnautovic found himself in the right place to tap home a rebound off the post following Nicolo Barella's volley. He opened his account for the club in Serie A after being sidelined for several matches due to a hamstring injury following his loan move from Bologna in the close season.



AC Milan's Christian Pulisic (right) controls the ball next to Sassuolo's Marcus Pedersen during the Italian Serie A match at the San Siro stadium in Milan yesterday. *(AFP)*

However, Genoa equalised in first-half stoppage time when Dragusin's powerful header from a corner eluded Yann Sommer despite the goalkeeper getting both hands on the ball. "We knew the type of game that we were going into. Genoa are in great shape, both physically and mentally, it was a hard-fought match," Inter manager Simone Inzaghi said.

"The second half probably would have been different without conceding at that moment (in first-half added time). We wanted to win, we are not happy with the point, but we must continue and remember that every match holds dangers."

The game was interrupted for about eight minutes just after the start with the release of several flares resulting in dense smoke that reduced visibility following heavy rainfall.

As the smoke cleared Genoa showed little respect for injury-hit Inter, who were missing key players like Lautaro Martinez and Federico Dimarco, and came close to scoring several times.

Having already managed to hold Juventus to a 1-1 draw earlier in the month at Stadio Luigi Ferraris, Genoa were again driven forward by an enthusiastic home crowd.

Inter started to gain momentum around the hour mark and Francesco Acerbi almost put them back in front with a header only for Josep Martinez to make a fine save.

The match then fizzled out with few clear-cut chances and both sides appeared content to end the year with a draw.

In Friday's other late game, Lazio recovered from a goal down to beat visiting Frosinone 3-1 courtesy of Valentin Castellanos, Gustav Isaksen and Patric in a 14-minute spell late in the match. Maurizio Sarri's side are eighth on 27 points.

Turkish Super Cup final in Riyadh postponed amid row

Istanbul: The Turkish Super Cup final between Galatasaray and Fenerbahce scheduled to be played in Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh on Friday was postponed over what the clubs described as "some problems" in the event's organisation.

At the heart of those issues, according to media reports, was the wish of the two Istanbul teams to wear T-shirts featuring the founder of modern Turkiye, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, during the warm-up ahead of the evening kick-off.

Turkiye media said Saudi officials had rejected this demand, though it was not clear why, and that the clubs refused to play in the Super Cup final at the King Saud University venue, which is also known as Al Awwal Park stadium, as a result.

Saudi state TV cited a statement by organisers the Riyadh Season saying the cancellation of the final was the result of the teams not adhering to match regulations.

The scheduled final coincides with the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the secular Turkish Republic. There was no immediate comment from Saudi officials.

It was not clear where or when the final would be staged. The joint statement thanked Saudi Arabia's football federation and authorities for efforts they made to organise the event.

There had also been media reports that Turkey's national anthem and flag would not be allowed at the final but the TFF earlier said they would feature.

FOCUS

Arsenal must do better in both boxes to win Premier League: Arteta

Reuters
London

Arsenal's 2-0 defeat to West Ham United was a missed opportunity to return to the top of the Premier League and manager Mikel Arteta said his side must improve at both ends of the pitch to have any hope of winning the title.

Despite holding 75% possession and taking 30 shots with eight on target, Arsenal failed to score against their sixth-placed London rivals at home on Thursday. They also registered 77 touches in the West Ham box, the most for a team in the top flight that failed to score since 2008-09.

Last season's runners-up now sit two points behind co-leaders Liverpool and Aston Villa and are level with Manchester City after yesterday's matches. "There's no panic, it's about trying to do more and do better and win games," Arteta told reporters.

"If the team is playing like this, then you're going to go and win a lot of games. If we don't improve in the boxes, then no (we won't win the league). Because, in the end, that (the West Ham result) is what it is. But generating the rest, it was a record. So I don't think there are many teams in the league who have done that over many years, so it's something positive I think."

Arsenal's next match is against Fulham, who are off the back of three straight defeats, today. While the schedule might be packed, Arteta insisted his players remain "fresh".

"They are young, if they are 35, then maybe it's a different question. But they have a lot of energy and can keep going, that's for sure," the Spaniard said. "Without a spark, you don't generate what the team generated (against West Ham). It is the final thing, the final touch, the final touch that puts the ball in the back of the net or not. That's what we need."



Arsenal players at a training session in London yesterday.