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FOCUS

# Afif credits Qatar’s experience as Lopez lauds team’s speedsters



Qatar's Akram Afif during the warm up before the semi-final match against Iran. (Reuters)

‘The Asian Cup is the second tournament we’ve played at home and now we have that experience’

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Qatar’s debut appearance in the FIFA World Cup on home soil just over 13 months ago may have ended in three defeats but the experience gained, believes Akram Afif, is powering their bid to defend the AFC Asian Cup title.

Afif and his teammates moved within one match of lifting the coveted AFC Asian Cup trophy for a second time after a breathtaking 3-2 win over Iran in their semi-final on Wednesday, with Qatar showing confidence and composure despite the weight of expectations.

Afif said Qatar’s FIFA World Cup experience has helped them deal with the pressure of playing the Asian Cup at home. “Every tournament that we play, we learn a lot from,” said Afif. “The World Cup was our first time. Yes we hosted it but frankly that was difficult.

“Now the Asian Cup is the second tournament we’ve played at home and now we have that experience and we’re showing that we can improve with every passing tournament.”

Just like in the UAE 2019 edition, the 27-year-old forward has played an integral part in Qatar’s journey to the final against Jordan with the Al Sadd star appreciative of the support the team has received.

“Congratulations to our fans and all those who stood by us. The vic-

tory was not easy. We’re very proud of ourselves but hopefully, the best is yet to come.”

His thumping strike against Iran took his tournament tally to five, one behind Iraq’s Aymen Hussein in the race for the Golden Boot but as far as Afif is concerned, what matters is lifting the trophy tomorrow and given that Qatar are much wiser and more experienced now, that is well within their reach.

Meanwhile, coach Marquez Lopez was delighted his decision to start without skipper Hassan al-Haydos paid off against Iran.

Lopez felt Homam Ahmed, Yusuf Abdurisag, Akram Afif and Almoez Ali had the pace needed to break down Iran’s backline, a decision that delivered handsome dividends for the defending champions.

“First off, I’m very happy

for Qatar, the people of Qatar, the fans and the players,” said Spaniard Lopez. “The match was very complex but we played a big match, the players didn’t spare any effort. Now we have one final step left to defend our title. We tried to play with great speed in attack. We put four players in attack who we know are quick.

“We tried to find spaces behind the Iranian defence. We were successful at times and luck was with us today. We will celebrate this victory today and tomorrow we will start preparing for the final match.”

Despite the shock of going behind to an early Sardar Azmoun goal, Qatar refused to break and drew level through Jassem Gaber before an Afif thunderbolt gave them the lead going into half-time.

An Alireza Jahanbakhsh penalty levelled the tie but Ali ensured it would be Qatar taking on Jordan in the final with his winner nine minutes from time.

Despite having steered Qatar into a second successive AFC Asian Cup final, a modest Lopez paid tribute to his predecessors Felix Sanchez and Carlos Quieroz.

“Yes, I took over a short while ago but the one thing that really helped me is that I already know the players well. I have great respect for all my colleagues, I respect Carlos and Felix who were here before me and did fantastic jobs. I took over on December 24. I have my own philosophy and way but I cannot say this is my success alone, I’m just someone who tried to implement my ways with the players to achieve the best result.”

His ways may well see Qatar becoming only the fifth team to win back-to-back AFC Asian Cup titles.

Qatar’s coach Marquez Lopez gestures during the semi-final against Iran at Al Thumama Stadium in Doha on Wednesday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

## ‘Jordanian Messi’ al-Taamari key to their hopes in final

Reuters  
Doha

Few would have picked Jordan’s Musa al-Taamari to be one of the standout players at the Asian Cup in Qatar but the energetic forward has lit up the tournament and helped guide his side into their first ever final.

Jordan qualified for the knockout stages as one of the four best third-placed teams but since they entered the last 16, they have charted a spectacular rise with Montpellier winger al-Taamari leading from the front.

In a tournament that was headlined by Premier League stars such as South Korea’s Son Heung-min and his national teammate Lee Kang-in of Paris St Germain, it was the 26-year-old al-Taamari who stole the spotlight in their semi-final win. The hard-working al-Taamari is key to Jordan’s press, harrying defenders with his pace and ability to read their opponents’ passing patterns to force mistakes.

It was al-Taamari’s interception that created the first goal in their 2-0 victory over South Korea when he pinched the ball high up the pitch, while his sensational solo run minutes later wrapped up the win to set up a showdown with hosts Qatar tomorrow.

His skills when he first came through the ranks in the Cypriot First Division earned him the nickname ‘Jordanian Messi’ and under Jordan coach Hussein Ammouta he has flourished. “The coach instilled tactical discipline in us. He gave us confidence, we gave South Korea respect but we pressed them from the first second. Spirit and patience are the most important things,” al-Taamari said.

“But this was not an individual effort, this was a group effort. I can’t deliver this performance if the back line and midfield didn’t give me those balls. When these opportunities arise, I like to run at goal without fear and thankfully I could score a beautiful goal.”

That fearless attitude is exactly what has taken Jordan, ranked 87th in the world, to the brink of glory. The majority of Jordan’s squad plays in the Gulf while al-Taamari is the only player based in Europe and he hopes to chart a path for his compatriots to follow. “Jordanian players deserve to play in Europe... It’s good to be in the final because everyone speaks about my country in France, this is important for me and I hope we can do well in the final,” he added.

Ammouta is one of the reasons why Jordan have shined, overcoming intense criticism following a poor record in 2023 before guiding them to the final with shock wins over Iraq and South Korea. The Moroccan is also hopeful of seeing more Jordanian players in Europe’s top leagues and though he recognises there is work to be done back home, he hopes their success at the Asian Cup is a stepping stone.

“Before the tournament, I spoke about the issues at the club level and many players weren’t ready. However, despite that we accomplished this,” he said. “We need to invest in infrastructure, in players, in football across age categories. Right now we have Musa in the French league, hopefully in the next few years we have Jordanians in the Premier League or other European leagues. We need to discuss how we produce players who can play in the world’s biggest leagues and reaching the final is a building block towards that.”



Jordan’s midfielder Musa al-Taamari (right) and South Korea’s Son Heung-min fight for the ball during the AFC Asian Cup semi-final at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan, west of Doha, on Tuesday. (AFP)



FORMULA ONE

# Silverstone to host British GP until 2034

AFP  
London

The British Grand Prix will be held at Silverstone for the next 10 years after the announcement of a new long-term deal with the venue yesterday.

Silverstone's five-year contract with Formula One's American owners Liberty Media was up for renewal this year.

The Northamptonshire track, owned by the British Drivers' Racing Club, has battled speculation that it could lose the prestigious Grand Prix in recent years.

But yesterday's fresh deal, worth a reported £30mn (\$37mn) per year, keeps the race at Silverstone until at least 2034.

"I am delighted to announce that the British Grand Prix will remain on the calendar for 10 more years with this agreement," F1 president Stefano Domenicali said.

"Silverstone is an iconic venue at the heart of F1 history and as it

approaches its ninth decade hosting Grands Prix, the event continues to attract fans from around the world for fantastic racing on track and the amazing fan experience off it."

The British Grand Prix has been an ever-present on the F1 calendar, dating back more than 70 years, with Silverstone staging the sport's first world championship race in 1950.

A record-breaking crowd in excess of 150,000 watched Max Verstappen win last year's British Grand Prix, with nearly half a million spectators passing through the gates over the course of the weekend.

Silverstone chief executive Stuart Pringle added: "This long-term commitment reflects the importance of the British Grand Prix to Formula One and their acknowledgement of our ability to deliver a world-class experience.

"The cheers of support for the home teams, and particularly for the British drivers on the grid, makes the Silverstone atmosphere



Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton celebrates after winning the British Grand Prix at Silverstone Circuit, Britain, on July 18, 2021. (Reuters)

unique." Liberty has flirted with the idea of staging a street race in London, but a number of road-blocks have thwarted any serious progress.

The American company's commitment to Silverstone comes just weeks after a new race in Madrid was confirmed from 2026.

The new F1 season starts in Bah-

rain on March 2, with Silverstone hosting the British Grand Prix on July 7.

**Gasly knew about Hamilton talks with Ferrari**

Alpine's Pierre Gasly said he knew about Lewis Hamilton's talks with Ferrari and the announcement of the Briton's move from Mercedes

to the Italian Formula One team for 2025 was not a surprise to him.

Speaking to reporters at the launch of the Renault-owned team's 2024 car on Wednesday, Frenchman Gasly said it had been a well-kept secret.

The move was announced last Thursday.

"I was aware of some talks with Ferrari. Ultimately he (Hamilton) is towards the end of his career, so it was either now or never," said Gasly, who celebrated his 28th birthday on Wednesday. "I think it was kept secret for quite a long time. I wish him the best."

Hamilton, 39, will replace Spaniard Carlos Sainz alongside Charles Leclerc at Ferrari. Gasly and Leclerc are old friends and the pair are online gamers with Hamilton.

In 2020, the Frenchman revealed in an ESPN podcast that he regularly exchanged messages and questions with Hamilton, seeking the Briton's advice.

"What's fair in F1?" he replied on Wednesday when asked if the situation had been fair to Sainz.

"Carlos is a great driver, Lewis is a fantastic driver, the best of all time," Gasly said.

"There was an opportunity on both sides. I think Ferrari and Lewis took it together. It leaves Carlos in a more tricky situation and it's not easy."

A winner with Toro Rosso at Monza in 2020, Gasly finished third last season at the Dutch Grand Prix for his first podium with Alpine.

The new car has yet to run but Alpine described it as bold and aggressive.

Gasly, who joined the team last year in what he admitted was a disappointing season, said it might be a bit harder in the opening races but there would be plenty of potential to unlock later in the year.

"You got to take risks at some point if you want to get bigger rewards. So that's the strategy we decided to go for," he added.

Gasly said he now felt in the best shape he'd ever been and a "completely different place" compared to last year, knew everyone in the team and the way of working.

PREVIEW

# Sri Lanka readies for challenge in Afghanistan ODIs

Both teams are prepared for the white-ball series starting today

AFP  
Kandy

Sri Lanka won their one-off Test match against Afghanistan by 10 wickets, but skipper and captain Kusal Mendis said yesterday they face a tougher challenge on the eve of their three-match ODI series.

Afghanistan are making a name for themselves in white-ball cricket, and will take the field with several of their key stalwarts.

"In ODIs, we know Afghanistan will be tougher opponents," Mendis told reporters ahead of the first match at home in Kandy today.

In the two previous series against Sri Lanka, Afghanistan drew 1-1 in 2022, and were beaten 2-1 in 2023.

But Afghanistan came sixth in last year's ICC Cricket World Cup, where they beat three former champions - England, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

"They have a lot of experience nowadays thanks to league cricket," Mendis added.

"They compete against good players and play in all sorts of conditions. They have come a long way, and there's not much room for error with them."

Afghan skipper Hashmatullah Shahidi said he was confident that his side - the world's ninth-ranked team - is capable of pulling off a series win over Sri Lanka, ranked seventh. "We are confident... We have our experienced guys back in the side," Shahidi said. "We are playing good cricket in ODIs, as we showcased in the last World Cup. We have proved that we are one of the best teams in ODI cricket," he added.



Sri Lanka's captain Kusal Mendis (left) and Afghanistan's captain Hashmatullah Shahidi pose with the one-day international trophy at Pallekele International Cricket Stadium in Kandy yesterday. (AFP)

Both teams will play three One Day Internationals at Pallekele in Kandy, with the next two matches on 11 and 14 February, followed by three T20 matches in Dambulla.

Afghanistan's opening batsman Rahmanullah Gurbaz, all-rounder Mohamed Nabi, former captain Gulbadin Naib, left-arm quick Fazalhaq Farooqi and chinaman bowler Noor Ahmad are all back in the team for the ODI leg of the tour.

"Quite a few of their experienced campaigners are returning to the side," Mendis said. "They have a couple of batters who are in form too - but we are confident of doing well in our own backyard."

Sri Lanka has dropped former

captain Dasun Shanaka due to poor form, but have Wanindu Hasaranga, Chamika Karunaratne and Dunieth Wellalage as all-rounders.

"They are all capable players," Mendis said, adding that "hopefully one of them will do the job for us".

But while they were determined to win, Mendis said, there is no immediate goal from the ODI series.

Sri Lanka were knocked out of the 2025 Champions Trophy - scheduled to be hosted by Pakistan - by finishing ninth in the ODI World Cup.

"We have struggled in ODI cricket quite a bit in the last few

years," said Mendis, adding that the island nation was "so disappointed" not to qualify for the Champions Trophy.

"Our next aim is to build a team for the (ODI) World Cup, which is three years away," he said.

"We know the World Cup is in South Africa, so we need to build an attack based on fast bowlers"

**Sri Lanka vs Afghanistan ODI series**  
Fri, 09 Feb - 1st ODI • Pallekele  
Sun, 11 Feb - 2nd ODI • Pallekele  
Wed, 14 Feb - 3rd ODI • Pallekele

**T20 series**  
Sat, 17 Feb - 1st T20I • Dambulla  
Mon, 19 Feb - 2nd T20I • Dambulla  
Wed, 21 Feb - 3rd T20I • Dambulla

MOTORSPORT

# Bagnaia sets new lap record on final day of Malaysia MotoGP test



Ducati Italian rider Francesco Bagnaia takes a corner during the third day of the pre-season MotoGP test at the Sepang International Circuit in Sepang yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Sepang, Malaysia

Reigning MotoGP world champion Francesco Bagnaia fired a clear warning as the man to beat for the 2024 season after the Italian ended the final day of pre-season test yesterday in Malaysia by setting the track's unofficial fastest lap record.

The 27-year-old racer needed less than half an hour to achieve the feat as he zipped through the 5.543 kilometre tricky Sepang circuit in 1 min 56.682 sec on his eighth lap to become the day's pacesetter.

The Ducati Lenovo star led a quarter of riders who ended the last testing day below the 1 min 57 mark, with Jorge Martin coming in second with 1 min 56.854 sec.

Wednesday's timesheets leader Enea Bastianini came in third after clocking 1 min 56.915 sec, with Alex Marquez finishing fourth.

Aleix Espargaro completed the top five as the only rider outside the 1 min 56 mark as he secured his fastest lap of 1 min 57.091 sec.

But the final day belonged to the two-time world champ Bagnaia, who showcased his ability against what could unfold as a highly competitive field ahead of the season's curtain raiser at the Qatar GP in March.

The Turin-born, who also holds the official fastest lap record on two wheels in Sepang set at last year's Malaysian GP, was modest about his blistering pace.

"I am happy obviously. It's an

incredible time in my first time at - tack of the season. But I am a guy that doesn't think too much about a good performance in a test.

"But I feel great with my bike. We are at 80 percent in terms of consistency. We move to Qatar in good shape," he said.

Martin, meanwhile, forecasted this season will not be another two-horse title race between him and Bagnaia. "It is difficult to analyse as a lot of the riders had great pace. It won't be only Pecco and me, there will be others too," he said, referring to Bagnaia by his nickname. "But I feel ready for everything. I did a great lap today, going under 1 min 57 was nice"

The second phase of the MotoGP pre-season test will next move to Qatar from February 19-20.

**Pre-season MotoGP testtimes yesterday at the Sepang Circuit (5.543km)**

1. Francesco Bagnaia (ITA/Ducati) 1 min 56.682 sec
2. Jorge Martin (ESP/Ducati) 1 min 56.854 sec
3. Enea Bastianini (ITA/Ducati) 1 min 56.915 sec
4. Alex Marquez (ESP/Ducati) 1 min 56.938 sec
5. Aleix Espargaro (ESP/Aprilla) 1 min 57.091 sec
6. Marc Marquez (ESP/Ducati) 1 min 57.270 sec
7. Brad Binder (RSA/KTM) 1 min 57.307 sec
8. Fabio Di Giannantonio (ITA/Ducati) 1 min 57.343 sec
9. Pedro Acosta (ESP/KTM) 1 min 57.365 sec
10. Joan Mir (ESP/Honda) 1 min 57.374 sec

BOTTOMLINE

# Australia Olympic chief backs review of Gabba rebuild for the 2032 Games

Reuters  
Sydney

The Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) has welcomed a review by the Queensland government into the rebuilding of Brisbane's Gabba cricket ground as the centrepiece of the 2032 Olympics.

The rebuilding of the stadium to host the ceremonies and athletics at Australia's third Summer Olympics was part of a A\$2.7bn (\$1.76bn) redevelopment of the Woolloongabba suburb from which it gets its name. In one of his first acts as the new Queensland premier in mid December, Steven Miles announced that the redevelopment plan would be paused until after a review that is scheduled to report

on March 18. Miles, an enthusiastic backer of the project, this week conceded that he had failed to convince the Queensland public of its necessity and suggested an alternative plan to a full rebuild might end up being a better option.

President Ian Chesterman said yesterday the AOC fully supported the review of the Gabba rebuild, suggesting it did not fit with International Olympic Committee (IOC) expectations of host cities in the modern era.

"The IOC's New Norm process is designed to ensure the Games are both affordable and sustainable, with a strong preference for the use of existing or temporary facilities," he said in a statement.

"We believe there are other, more creative solutions than rebuilding the Gabba for the Games which provide a legacy for



our sports and even greater access for fans to an exceptional Olympic and Paralympic Games. We will put these ideas to the review committee."

Brisbane was granted the right to stage

the Olympics in 2021 under the New Norm process, a more targeted bidding procedure aimed at saving hundreds of millions of dollars for host cities and increasing long-term sustainability. Some 80% of the

venues for the 2032 Games are already in place with the Gabba redevelopment and a federal government-funded A\$2.5bn arena to host the swimming the only two major construction projects planned.



FOCUS

# QOC, Mexico Olympic Committee sign MoU to enhance sports co-operation

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) and the Mexican Olympic Committee (COM) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) yesterday to enhance sports co-operation between the two National Olympic Committees (NOCs).

The signing ceremony took place at the Aspire Dome on the sidelines of the 2024 World Aquatics Championships in Doha.

The MoU was signed by HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the QOC and President of the Organising Committee of the World Aquatics Championships – Doha 2024, and Maria Jose Alcalá, President of the COM.

The QOC President said: “The Qatar Olympic Committee is pleased to sign this Memorandum of Understanding with the Mexican Olympic Committee, which will pave the way for enhanced co-operation between our two NOCs. We are committed to ensuring the effective implementation of this MoU, and we will spare no effort in



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) and President of the Organising Committee of the World Aquatics Championships – Doha 2024, and Maria Jose Alcalá, President of the Mexican Olympic Committee, after signing a MoU in Doha yesterday. **Right:** QOC chairman meets Sadyr Mamytov, President of the National Olympic Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, on the sidelines of the 2024 World Aquatics Championships, which is currently taking place in Doha.

supporting all partners in the Olympic Movement in our two countries. Our sporting journey in Qatar is based on the experience and knowledge we have gained over the past decades and working in collaboration with members of the Olympic family.”

On the occasion, Maria Jose Alcalá expressed her gratitude to

His Excellency for this opportunity that will boost the collaboration among the Olympic Committees of both countries for the benefit of their athletes and for the strengthening of world sports. With the company of the ambassador of Mexico, Guillermo Ordorica, she also referred to the importance of the bonds of friend-

ship and co-operation between Mexico and Qatar in the sports arena

The signing of the MoU is a significant step forward in the relationship between the QOC and the COM. It is a testament to the shared commitment of the two countries to developing and promoting sports.

**Sheikh Joaan meets President of National Olympic Committee of Kyrgyz Republic**

HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC), met with Sadyr Mamytov, President of the National Olympic Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, on the sidelines of the 2024 World Aquat-

ics Championships, which is currently taking place in Doha.

The meeting discussed ways to enhance sports co-operation between the two countries. Sheikh Joaan also met with Daniel Gyurta, a member of the International Olympic Committee's Athletes' Commission and a former Hungarian Olympic swimming champion.

WORLD AQUATICS CHAMPIONSHIPS

# Wang twins win fourth artistic gold in Doha

Chinese edge Netherlands' Brouwer sisters in an absorbing battle of the two twins

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

China's gold medal tally swelled to 12 at the World Aquatics Championships Doha after Wang Liuyi and Wang Qianyi clinched the women's duet free title, while Yang Hao and Lian Junjie won a thrilling men's 10m synchronised platform diving final yesterday.

For Liuyi and Qianyi it was their fourth gold medal in Doha as they edged Dutch pair Bregje de Brouwer and Noortje de Brouwer in an absorbing battle of the two twins.

The de Brouwer twins missed out on the title by a mere 0.2750 as the Wang sisters completed a duet double, while Great Britain's Kate Shortman and Isabelle Thorpe took bronze.

It has been an incredible World Championships for the Wang twins having topped the podium in both the women duet technical and women duet free as well as helping China to mixed team acrobatic routine and mixed team technical titles. At Fukuoka 2023, the Chinese duo picked up one medal from the duet competitions courtesy of a silver in the duet free but they have been back to their very best at the Aspire Dome.

Wang siblings received 158.0229 for elements and 92.7500 for artistic impression to a degree of difficulty of 42.150 for a winning score of 250.7729. It takes their overall world title tally to 10 stretching back to when they won team free combination bronze at Budapest 2017.

“I feel so excited about what we achieved here,” said Wang Liuyi. “To win four out of four gold medals can't be easy. This achievement was based on our hard training on every single day and also thanks to our great team, which inspired us to show our best version. We had won four straight gold medals in Budapest 2022, too, so we knew that we could do it again. This time our main goal was to also combine it with a great performance in each event.”

There was unfinished business for the de Brouwer sisters having finished one place short of a medal in the women duet



China's Wang Liuyi and Wang Qianyi compete in the final of the women's duet free artistic swimming event during the World Aquatics Championships at Aspire Dome in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

technical. The scored 250.4979, including 159.9479 for elements and 90.5500 for artistic impression to a degree of difficulty of 43.700.

Later at the Hamad Aquatics Centre, Yang Hao and Lian Junjie won their third consecutive world title together with a dominating 48.4-point margin of victory.

They won ahead of the British hero Tom Daley and his partner Noah Williams. Daley won his second medal of the competition, following gold in the team event, just six months after a return from a two year diving hiatus. The Ukrainian pair of Kirill Boliukh and Oleksii Sereda, one of the youngest duos in the competition, took bronze.

Meanwhile, the Australian team of Moesha Johnson, Chelsea Gubecka, Nicholas Sloman and Kyle Lee took down defending champions Italy in the final open water swimming event of the World Aquatics Championships – Doha.

Australia won a scrapping fight over Italy and Hungary to close out the open water



Australia's Moesha Johnson, Chelsea Gubecka, Nicholas Sloman and Kyle Lee pose with their gold medals after winning the mixed 4X1500m relay open water at Old Doha Port.

swimming schedule at the Old Doha Port.

It was Australia's first-ever gold medal in the open water team relay at the World Championships at 1:03:28.0 as Lee got the final touch over the Italian team in silver at 1:03:28.2.

The Italians won the silver for their fifth straight medal in this relay with the team of

Giulia Gabbrielleschi, Arianna Bridi, Gregorio Paltrinieri, and Domenico Acerenza.

Hungary lost touch with the lead pack but won the bronze for the third straight medal at the championships with the team of Bettina Fabian, Mira Szimcsak, David Betlehem, and Kristof Rasovszky touching at 1:04:06.8.

TENNIS

# beIN Sports to telecast Qatar TotalEnergies Open 2024



beIN Sports will broadcast the WTA 1000 Qatar TotalEnergies Open next week live from Doha's Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex. The event will begin from this Sunday until February 17.

beIN will broadcast approximately seven-and-a-half hours of live coverage daily with Arabic commentary and studio analysis, as well as live tournament coverage with English commentary.

Fans will also be able to enjoy daily Arabic programming including 26-minute highlights episodes, daily mini-matches and a trio of five-minute fillers.

beIN's coverage starts this Sunday with an hour-long preview show from 2:30pm, followed by on-court coverage from 3:30pm until 10pm. Presented by Areej Sleem, the first female Arab presenter to cover all four Grand Slam tournaments, the broadcaster's coverage will also feature guest commentators including former tennis professionals such as Tunisia's second-highest ranked female of all time Selima Sfar, Kuwait's Adel al-Shatti, and Saudi Arabia's Fahad al-Saad and Morocco's Anass Lamrani.

This year's WTA 1000 Qatar TotalEnergies Open will feature 11 Grand Slam winners, including two-time defending champion and World No 1 Iga Swiatek, as well as last month's Australian Open winner Aryna Sabalenka, who won in Doha in 2020.

Arab No 1 Ons Jabeur, a two-time quarterfinalist in Doha, will also be in action as the Tunisian returns to a tournament, where she has enjoyed de facto home-court support in previous years.

BOTTOMLINE

# Alfardan Premier Motors official transport provider for Qatar TotalEnergies Open

Alfardan Premier Motors Co., the official retailer of Jaguar Land Rover in the State of Qatar is honoured to renew its partnership as the official transport provider for the 2024 edition of Qatar TotalEnergies Open for the 14th consecutive year. The premier tennis tournament, which will take place this year from February 11 to 17 at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex, is set to witness the participation of the top tennis champions from around the globe.

The partnership stems out of the company's eagerness to support sports tournaments hosted by the State of Qatar and to reinforce

Qatar's position as a leading sports hub. For fourteenth consecutive years, Alfardan Premier Motors has provided a fleet of luxury vehicles to enhance the level of comfort for the movement of players and teams to and from the stadium. For this year's partnership, Alfardan Premier Motors will be providing a fleet of 30 luxurious Land Rover Defender 130 vehicles for the championship.

The Defender 130 is ready for any adventure with premium interior practicality for up to eight occupants, across three rows of seating.

Samer Bou Dargham, General Manager for Alfardan Premier Mo-

tors, said: “We are delighted to renew our partnership with the Qatar Tennis Federation for the 14th consecutive year as the official transport provider for the players of Qatar TotalEnergies Open 2024. By providing a fleet of Land Rover Defender vehicles, we strive to provide the highest standards of luxury and excellence in one of the most important championships on the agenda of the Women's Tennis Association.”

Saad al-Mohannadi, Tournament Director of the Qatar TotalEnergies Open, said: “Today we renew our partnership with Alfardan Premier Motors which, through its brands, adds to the ex-



Samer Bou Dargham, General Manager for Alfardan Premier Motors, with Saad al-Mohannadi, Tournament Director of the Qatar TotalEnergies Open, after a sponsorship deal in Doha.

cellence and luxury of this tournament in all its aspects and supports our continued readiness and aspirations to elevate the tournament to the highest level. This year's tournament is set to witness the participation of top world class tennis players, which reflects the importance of Qatar TotalEnergies Open on the global sports map.”

Alfardan Premier Motors represents the world's leading names in luxury car brands and has been closely associated with major happenings in Qatar, which underscores the company's commitment to be a key partner in the important sporting, national and international events taking place in town.



GOLF

# Wu, Lombard share lead after first round at Qatar Masters

Dylan Frittelli, who won in Bahrain last week, is five shots off the lead following a level par round

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Living up to the reputation of South African golfers in Doha, Zander Lombard shot a 5-under 67 to take a share of the lead after the first round of the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters yesterday.

At the Doha Golf Club (DGC) where six South Africans have won the Mother of Pearl trophy since the inception of the Qatar Masters in 1998, the No. 100-ranked Lombard maintained his strong start to 2024 by making a bogey-free round to be tied with Ashun Wu of China. The South African began with three birdies on the front nine, and holed another two from the final three holes. "I drove it nicely and I hit a lot of greens which makes it pretty easy in this breeze, I didn't have to up and down much," Lombard said.

The 29-year-old finished second at the Bahrain Championship last week, sixth at the Dubai Invitational in his first event of the year and finished in the top 20 at the Dubai Desert Classic. "I've got no weakness in the bag at the moment. Everything is really good and nothing that is really great so I put it down to real consistency over the last six months, so hopefully keep doing what I'm doing," Lombard, who battled the afternoon wind, said.

Wu also had five birdies and no bogeys like Lombard, who rolled in a 6-footer for birdie at the last after also picking up a shot on the short par-4 16th when he drove onto the green and two-putted from 25 feet. The 38-year-old Wu hit three birdies going out and another two after the turn to take the early lead alongside Lombard, with Niklas Norgaard of Denmark, Jaco Prinsloo of South Africa, Haydn Barron of Australia and Clement Sordet of France all one shot back.

Sordet carded six birdies and one bogey to briefly sit alongside Wu through 15 holes, but the Frenchman found trouble at the next to slip one back at four under.



South Africa's Zander Lombard tees off during the first round of the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters at the Doha Golf Club yesterday.

"It was a great day today. A lot of greens, a lot of quality shots on the tees, on the fairways and good putts too. Five birdies and bogey-free today is a really good start," Wu, who has four European Tour titles to his name, said.

Wu had missed three cuts and made only one top-20 finish in his opening six tournaments of the 2024 Race to Dubai Rankings before surging to the top yesterday.

"I wasn't here last year but I think the course has changed a little bit, moved the tee a little bit further back and made the fairways a bit wider and more water around the greens so it is great right now, it is perfect," he said.

Dylan Frittelli, who won in Bahrain ahead of compatriot Lombard, is five shots off the lead following a level par round which included four bogeys.

Prinsloo bounced back from last week's missed cut at the Bahrain Championship to climb into a share of third place following an opening 68.

The South African, who was in the first group of the day, birdied the seventh but immediately gave that shot back – the only one he dropped yesterday – before adding further gains at the tenth, 11th, 15th and 16th to sit one behind clubhouse leaders



Ashun Wu of China.

Wu and Lombard at four under.

"It was an early one, that's for sure! The conditions were definitely favourable this morning. First nine we didn't have much wind, back nine it picked up and funny enough that's when I played better but happy to be done and have the afternoon off," Prinsloo said.

"The greens are pretty firm so you have to pick your landing spots. Some tricky pins out there so you have to know where to pitch your ball and try and be on the safe side. There was a group of seven players at three under, consisting of Harrison Endycott, Tom McKibbin, Paul Waring, Rikuya Hoshino, Maximilian Rottluff, Sung Kang and Daniel Hillier.

## LEADING FIRST-ROUNDS SCORES

- 67: Wu Ashun (CHN), Zander Lombard (RSA)  
68: Niklas Norgaard (DEN), Jaco Prinsloo (RSA), Haydn Barron (AUS), Clement Sordet (FRA)  
69: Maximilian Rottluff (GER), Kang Sung (KOR), Rikuya Hoshino (JPN), Pau Waring (GBR), Tom McKibbin (IRL), Harrison Endycott (AUS), Daniel Hillier (NZL)

## SPOTLIGHT

# Al-Khelaifi unanimously re-appointed to UEFA Executive Committee

The 48th UEFA Congress held in Paris yesterday has unanimously ratified the re-appointment of European Club Association (ECA) Chairman **Nasser al-Khelaifi** (President of Paris Saint-Germain), together with the appointment of ECA Board Member Miguel Angel Gil Marin (CEO of Atletico de Madrid), to the UEFA Executive Committee, where they will represent ECA for a four-year term until February 2028. The decisions were unanimously ratified by UEFA Congress.

Yesterday's UEFA Congress vote followed the ECA Board's unanimous decision last year to elect both al-Khelaifi and Marin on behalf of ECA to represent the views of Europe's professional clubs as sitting members of the UEFA Executive Committee, reflecting their leading roles within ECA and commitment to driving progressive re-



forms within European football.

Throughout the last four years of ECA representation on UEFA's Executive Committee, ECA has played a central role in developing the footballing landscape, building positive relationships and partnerships with a diverse and grow-

ing number of stakeholders. This includes landmark new memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with both UEFA and FIFA until the end of the decade and overseeing the rapid growth of ECA's membership to nearly 500 clubs.

Commenting on the appointments to the UEFA Executive Committee, ECA Chairman al-Khelaifi, said: "It is an honour and privilege to be reappointed to the UEFA Executive Committee for a second term until 2028, together with fellow ECA Board Member Miguel Angel Gil Marin. This is an important time of positive reform and progress for European football; and we look forward to continuing to work hand-in-hand with UEFA – ECA's most important partner – to develop professional club football and protect the European Sports Model in the interests of all."

## FOOTBALL

# PSG to rest Mbappe before Champions League showdown

AFP  
Paris

**K**ylian Mbappe is expected to sit out Paris Saint-Germain's Ligue 1 meeting with Lille tomorrow as the club does not want to risk his injured ankle with a Champions League last 16 tie looming.

The PSG star suffered the injury in his side's French Cup last 16 win over Brest last night in which Mbappe scored the opening goal. Initial medical tests were reportedly "reassuring" but PSG coach Luis Enrique will not want to risk his prize asset ahead of the Champions League visit of Real Sociedad five days later.

Further tests on the player who is being linked to a move to Real Madrid when his contract expires at the end of the season are scheduled today. While Mbappe's future is uncertain, so too is PSG's continued presence at their Parc des Princes home. The club's bid to buy



the stadium from owners the Paris City Council appear to have been quashed after a meeting yesterday. "It's finished now, we want to leave the Parc des Princes," said the club's president Nasser al-Khelaifi.

Lille, sitting fourth, will give Enrique's men a decent test ahead of next Thursday's important European date. The culprit for Mbappe's injury was Brest defender Lilian Brassier, who was sent off after a second yellow card and was then subjected to racist attacks on social media.

PSG, vying for their third

straight domestic league title and 12th in all, are coasting at the top, eight points clear of Nice, who host south coast rivals Monaco.

Nice thrashed Montpellier 4-1 in the French Cup in midweek. Today's sole fixture gives Marseille the perfect opportunity to secure their first win of 2024 when relegation-threatened Metz turn up at their Velodrome headquarters.

Marseille are looking to bounce back after last weekend's defeat to fallen giants Lyon who are away to Montpellier. A win would ease nerves at Marseille where various crisis meetings have been held as they have slipped down to eighth.

## FIXTURES (ALL TIMES GMT)

**Today:** Marseille v Metz (2000)  
**Tomorrow:** Lens v Strasbourg (1600); Paris Saint-Germain v Lille (2000)  
**Sunday:** Le Havre v Rennes (1200); Toulouse v Nantes (1400); Clermont v Brest (1400); Lorient v Reims (1400); Montpellier v Lyon (1605); Nice v Monaco (1945)

## UEFA president Ceferin won't seek re-election in 2027

**Paris:** Aleksander Ceferin said yesterday he would not seek a fourth term as UEFA president in 2027 despite the approval of controversial reforms that would allow him to extend his mandate. "I decided around six months ago that I'm not planning to run in 2027 anymore," the 56-year-old Slovenian lawyer said at a press conference following the UEFA Congress in Paris. "The reason is that after some time, every organisation needs fresh blood, but mainly because I was away from my

family for seven years now."

Ceferin also said he was "tired of Covid, tired of two wars" and of plans for a rival Super League that he called a "nonsense project". His surprise announcement came shortly after UEFA member nations voted overwhelmingly in favour of a series of statute amendments, including a measure that would have let Ceferin potentially stay in his role until 2031.

"I intentionally didn't want to disclose my thoughts before, because firstly, I wanted to see the

real face of some people and I saw it," said Ceferin, first elected in 2016 following the downfall of Frenchman Michel Platini. "I didn't want to influence the Congress. I wanted them to decide (on the statutes) not knowing what I'm telling you today."

The key amendment passed does not erase the three-term limit but stipulates that terms of office started or served before July 1, 2017, shall not be taken into account. Ceferin was re-elected unopposed for a third term last April.

## HORSE RACING

# Delozier leads Al Shahania Stud's Zamer to Al Arish Cup triumph

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The trainer-jockey duo of Rudy Nerbonne and Lukas Delozier emerged as winners in yesterday's feature as Zamer registered an impressive victory to clinch the Al Arish Cup at Al Uqda Racecourse.

The Al Shahania Stud-owned horse showcased slick pace throughout the 1300m Purebred Arabian Conditions race, finishing almost three lengths ahead of second-placed Safi Al Zaman, ridden by Jefferson Smith. Soufiane Saadi guided Ahmed Kobeissi-trained Battash De Faust to third place.

It was the second title of the day for Delozier as he also teamed up with Mohamed Hussain Afroz-trained Espirito to win the Thoroughbred Handicap, one of the eight races contested during Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's 20th Al Uqda Meeting.

## RESULTS

- 20th Al Uqda Meeting: Al Arish Cup Day**  
**WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)**  
1 - Al Arish Cup, Purebred Arabian Conditions Zamer, Rudy Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier  
2 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (75-95) Nadir, Dr. Fahad Salman FS al-Hajri, Jefferson Smith  
3 - Thoroughbred Handicap (60-80) Al Wakrah, M al-Sulaiti, Abdelkabar Benlarbi  
4 - Thoroughbred Handicap (60-80) Espirito, Mohamed Hussain Afroz, Lukas Delozier  
5 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (40-60) Mosayter, Hadi al-Ramzani, Jefferson Smith  
6 - Thoroughbred Novice Plate, Fillies Tomorrownevercomes, Bader al-Balushi, Mohamed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik  
7 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate, Fillies & Mares Shwaimasah, Jean de Mieulle, Olivier D'Andigne  
8 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate Majeab, Alban de Mieulle, Soufiane Saadi

