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WORLD AQUATICS CHAMPIONSHIPS DOHA

Fink wins 100m breaststroke title as Peaty takes bronze

American Douglass retains women's 200 medley, Germany's Kohler bags women's 100 butterfly

Reuters
Doha

Briton Adam Peaty's hopes of a confidence-boosting win in the 100 metres breaststroke were dashed yesterday as the Olympic champion was forced to settle for bronze behind American winner Nic Fink at the World Aquatics Championships Doha.

On the comeback trail after taking a mental health break last year, world record holder Peaty qualified fastest for the final at the Aspire Dome with a time of 58.60 seconds but was half a second slower with the title on the line.

Veteran Fink, meanwhile, bravely fended off Peaty and Italian runner-up Nicolo Martinenghi to win in 58.57. "I think I pushed it a little too far in the first 50 (metres) but at the end it's good to be a part of (this)," said Peaty, who is aiming for a third successive gold in the event at this year's Paris Games. "Definitely not an easy race to do ... Of course, we've got a long way to go."

American Kate Douglass retained her 200m individual medley title, burning away in the final freestyle leg to beat Canada's Sydney Pickrem by a body length. A winner in two minutes and 7.17 seconds in Fukuoka last year, Douglass shaved her personal best to 2:07:05. "That definitely hurt a lot. A lot more than it usually does at the end of the race," she said. "I'm really happy with it."

Germany's Angelina Kohler won the women's 100m butterfly title in a relatively weak field missing Canadian world champion Maggie MacNeil and the Fukuoka minor medallists, Zhang Yufei and Emma McKeon. The 23-year-old Kohler burst into tears in the pool after winning in 56.28 seconds, 0.33 seconds ahead of American silver medallist Claire Curzan.

A day after electrifying the championships with the 100m freestyle world record in the men's 4x100m relay, China's Pan Zhanle failed to reach the semi-finals of the 200m, an event he was expected to contend for medals. The 19-year-old never got out of second gear, posting a time of 1:51.03, more than six seconds off his personal best.



Nic Fink of the US celebrates after winning the men's 100m breaststroke final during the World Aquatics Championships Doha at the Hamad Aquatic Centre yesterday. (AFP)

Pan's surprisingly anaemic performance may be with a view to the 100m freestyle for which he will be a strong favourite. The heats start tomorrow.

Lithuania's Danas Rapsys emerged as a surprise top seed for the men's 200m freestyle final, clocking 1:44.96 to edge South Korea's Hwang Sun-woo. The women's 100m breaststroke world champion Ruta Meilutyte also disappointed, crashing out of the preliminaries.

The Lithuanian, who won gold in the event at the 2012 London Olympics as a 15-year-old, was 17th quickest in the heats and more than three seconds off her championship swim in Fukuoka last July. Meilutyte's setback followed Olympic champion Ahmed Fahnaoui bombing out of the men's 400m freestyle preliminaries on the

opening Sunday in a major shock.

World record holder Meilutyte will defend her 50m breaststroke title later in the meet. China's Tang Qiantang topped qualifying for the 100m breaststroke final with a swim of 1:05.36. In the absence of world champion Ryan Murphy and world record holder Thomas Ceccon, American Hunter Armstrong capitalised to qualify fastest for the men's 100 backstroke final in 53.04 seconds.

American Claire Curzan was fastest for the final of the women's event, storming to victory in her semi in 58.73. With title-holder Katie Ledecky skipping Doha, Italy's former world champion Simona Quadarella is in the box seat for a second 1,500m freestyle gold, qualifying quickest in the heats.



Second-placed Claire Curzan (right) of the US consoles Germany's Angelina Kohler, who burst into tears at the medal ceremony after winning the Women's 100m butterfly gold at the Hamad Aquatic Centre yesterday. (Reuters)



American Kate Douglass won the women's 200m individual medley. (AFP)

TRAGIC

Kenyan marathon world record-holder Kiptum killed in car crash

AFP
Nairobi

Tributes poured in yesterday for Kenyan running sensation Kelvin Kiptum after the marathon world record-holder was killed in a car crash at the age of 24.

The death of Kiptum just months before the Paris Olympics has shocked Kenya and the world of athletics, with his rival, the legendary marathon runner Eliud Kipchoge saying he was "deeply saddened".

Kiptum, a father of two, was driving from Kaptagat to Eldoret in the Rift Valley, the heartland of Kenyan distance running, around 11pm on Sunday when his car careered off the road and hit a tree. Police said Kiptum and his Rwandan coach Gervais Hakizimana were killed on the spot while a woman passenger was injured.

"He lost control and veered off-road entering into a ditch on his left side. He drove in the ditch for about 60 metres before hitting a big tree," said an official police report from Elgeyo Marakwet County where the accident occurred. Images on Kenyan media showed the mangled wreck of the vehicle, its windscreen shattered, the roof and doors buckled and almost ripped off.

From herding goats just a decade ago, Kiptum had announced he would attempt in April to become the first man to run an official marathon under the mythic two-hour mark. He burst onto the marathon scene when he ran a world record 2:00:35 in Chicago in October, slicing 34 seconds off Kipchoge's previous record. He was just



Kelvin Kiptum burst onto the marathon scene when he ran a world record 2:00:35 in Chicago last October, slicing 34 seconds off Eliud Kipchoge's previous record. (AFP)

23 at the time, and competing in only his third marathon.

Kiptum also won his other two efforts – his debut in Valencia in 2022 and a follow-up in London the following year – recording three of the seven fastest marathon times in history. Kipchoge, regarded as one of the greatest marathon runners of all time, described his younger rival as a "rising star". "An athlete who had a whole life

ahead of him to achieve incredible greatness," Kipchoge said on X.

Kiptum and 39-year-old Kipchoge were expected to face off for the first time at the Paris Olympics. As the tributes flowed, mourners gathered at the family home in the Rift Valley village of Chepsamo, consoling his father Samson Cheruiyot and his wife Asenath Rotich.

Cheruiyot told local station that he last



Asenath Rotich, wife of Kelvin Kiptum, holds one of his trophies at their home in Chepsamo, Kenya. (AFP)

spoke to his only son on Saturday and that Kiptum had said "if he was to run, he could do it in one hour 59/58 minutes since his body was feeling fine".

Kenyan President William Ruto described Kiptum as "one of the world's finest sportsmen who broke barriers to secure a marathon record". "An extraordinary sportsman has left an extraordinary mark in the globe," he said on X.

World Athletics said Kiptum's Valencia debut was the fastest in history and mourned the loss of "one of the most exciting new prospects to emerge in road

running in recent years". "An incredible athlete leaving an incredible legacy, we will miss him dearly," said its president Sebastian Coe, who last week had been in Chicago to officially ratify Kiptum's historic time.

Kenyan 1,500m record-holder Faith Kipyegon left a wordless tribute on X: three crying emojis and a Kenyan flag, while two-time Olympic 800m champion David Rudisha said Kiptum's death was a "huge loss".

"We had been looking forward to welcoming him into the Olympic community at the Olympic Games Paris 2024 and seeing what the fastest marathon runner in the world could achieve," International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach said on X.

Ten years ago, barely a teen, Kiptum herded goats and sheep and then began following Hakizimana and other runners as they trained in the legendary high-altitude Eldoret region. By 2019, Kiptum ran two half-marathons in two weeks in Europe. He began training with Hakizimana, who stayed in Kenya when the Covid-19 pandemic struck.

Kiptum's death is the latest in a saga of tragedies to hit Kenya's athletics hopefuls. In 2011, Kenyan marathon great Samuel Wanjiru died at the same age in a mysterious accident at his home after capturing the title at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

In 2021, distance running star Agnes Tirop was found stabbed to death at the age of 25 at her house in Iten, near Eldoret. Her husband Ibrahim Rotich went on trial for her murder in November last year.

MOTORSPORT

Alonso feels he can compete until 50

Reuters
London

Fernando Alonso feels he could be fit enough to race in Formula One until he is 50, with Aston Martin already keen on extending his contract to 2026, but is unsure how long he wants to continue.

The 42-year-old Spaniard is signed to the end of 2024 but already talked of as a possible successor to Lewis Hamilton at Mercedes when the seven-times champion joins Ferrari next year.

Few Formula One drivers have competed in their 40s in the modern era, although 1992 champion Nigel Mansell was a race winner at 41 in 1994.

Double world champion Alonso is the most experienced of all time and the oldest on the current grid, starting his 22nd season and 378th race in March. He told reporters ahead of yesterday's launch of Aston Martin's AMR24 F1 car that he was fitter than ever.

"The numbers we achieve in all the physical tests that we do every season, they were the best ever this year," said the winner of 32 Grands Prix, who has added a nutritionist to his team.

He said he needed to prepare himself better than ever to be fully ready if he were to commit to a project for years to come.

"I will not drive a few more years in Formula One just to drive and to have fun. I am not that kind of driver, I'm not that kind of person," he said.

One of three active world champions but the only one still on the



market for 2025, Alonso said he would talk first with Aston Martin if he decided to continue.

"A few years ago I would say that maybe 42 or 41 was the limit. Now after I saw myself last year motivated and performing well, I was thinking maybe that I can keep racing a few more years," he said.

"Now this winter I've been exceeding a little bit the expectations in terms of all the physical tests and everything that I did, so I would say that if you are motivated

and if you want to commit you can drive maybe until 48 or 49 or even 50.

"But at the same time you have to give up everything in life. Formula One needs total dedication... and I gave my life for 24 years to this sport, which I'm happy and okay with.

"I can keep doing it for a few more years but I don't know if I will be racing until 50 with such a demanding calendar and things like that. Not for the ability, but be-

cause there are other things in life that I am curious (about)."

Alonso ended last season fourth overall and stood on the podium eight times - three second places and five thirds. Aston Martin team boss Mike Krack recognised Hamilton's move had made the driver market more complicated but told reporters: "We love Fernando, we have a very good relationship... we would be delighted, honestly, to continue with Fernando into 2025 and the year after."

Alonso says Hamilton can bring something extra to Ferrari

London: Fernando Alonso can see Lewis Hamilton ringing some extra fight to Ferrari when the seven-times world champion joins Formula One's most successful team in 2025.

The 42-year-old Spaniard, now at Aston Martin, spent five seasons at Ferrari from 2010-14 but was unable to deliver a championship to Maranello.

Ferrari have not won a title since the constructors' in 2008, with Kimi Raikkonen the last driver to take a title in 2007.

"I hope he enjoys the experience, I think it's a very special team," double world champion Alonso told reporters ahead of yesterday's launch of Aston Martin's 2024 car at Silverstone.

"It is more special when you win and that's the thing. You need to win and it's a few years already that they have a very fast car and were fighting for big things and maybe Lewis can bring that extra to fight for the championship.

"The car is there. At the end of last year even with a very dominating Red Bull car, Ferrari were still able to match the lap time and be faster than them in most of the qualifying.

"So I think the car should be fast enough."

Hamilton's move from Mercedes to Ferrari on a multi-year deal was announced on Feb 1.

The 39-year-old Briton said later that driving for the Italian team

would allow him "to fulfil another childhood dream."

Alonso said he had been busy training on the day the news was announced and so missed all the excitement.

"It probably was a surprise, I will not lie, but not because the change itself. Just because from the outside it seemed like he was very linked with Mercedes and very loyal to them.

"It was not his childhood dream 12 months ago, or two months ago, I guess, because it was a different dream," he added.

Alonso could now be on the list of possible replacements for his former McLaren team mate at Mercedes, with the Spaniard out of contract at the end of the season and declaring himself fitter than ever.

Asked about any direct contact with Mercedes about the seat, he said there had been "nothing at all".

Alonso did point out, however, that he was the only world champion available for 2025 on the driver market and said he would talk first with Aston Martin once he had decided whether to continue.

"If we cannot reach an agreement and I want to commit to race in Formula One, I know I have a privileged position. I am probably attractive to other teams, the performance that they saw last year, the commitment," he added.

NFL

Mahomes guides Chiefs to Super Bowl glory

San Francisco 49ers lose 25-22 in extra time

Reuters
Las Vegas

Patrick Mahomes threw a touchdown pass to Mecole Hardman in overtime to give the Kansas City Chiefs a 25-22 win over the San Francisco 49ers in a 'Sin City' Super Bowl thriller on Sunday, cementing their status as an NFL dynasty.

The blockbuster finish in Las Vegas was worthy of the biggest show on the Strip, as the Chiefs won a third Super Bowl in five years and became the NFL's first repeat champions since the New England Patriots in February 2005.

After 49ers rookie kicker Jake Moody had booted a field goal to open overtime Mahomes marched the Chiefs down the field and, with a sold-out Allegiant Stadium on the edge of their seats, ended the drama with a three-yard strike to Hardman in the final seconds of the first overtime period.

The win made pop queen Taylor Swift's mad dash from Tokyo, where she performed on Saturday, to Las Vegas to watch boyfriend Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce all worthwhile.

The pop superstar showed no signs of jetlag, jumping up and down and cheering throughout the entire contest before joining Kelce on the field where they embraced under a shower of confetti.

While viewership numbers will not be known until today, broadcasters expect the combination of Swift and the NFL to have produced the biggest TV event in the US since Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon in 1969.

The Apollo 11 moon landing was the most-watched US television event in history, drawing nearly 150 million viewers.

Kelce, who caught nine passes for 93 yards, said he always believed quarterback Mahomes would lead the Chiefs victory.

"Never a doubt in my mind," said Kelce.

"We got the best quarterback in the league, the best offensive mind (coach Andy Reid) in the league and we got the most determination out of any team in the NFL."

While Swift and Chiefs supporters celebrated it was more heartbreak for Niners fans, who were looking to claim a record equalling sixth Super Bowl title only to be denied by Kansas City once again.

At the Super Bowl in 2020 it was also the Chiefs who sent the 49ers home empty handed when they scored 21 unanswered points in the fourth quarter for a 31-20 victory in Miami.

"They should learn by now that when we down by 10, we turn into a different animal," said Hardman.

"They counted us out, they said we down, we nothing, we washed up. They said the receivers were done.

"But look now, back-to-back champs... don't ever count us out."

Mahomes' game winning 75-yard drive



Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes (15) hoists the Vince Lombardi Trophy after defeating the San Francisco 49ers in Super Bowl LVIII at Allegiant Stadium. (USA TODAY Sports)

proved yet again why he is rated the best quarterback in the business, earning Super Bowl Most Valuable Player honours for a third time.

"The guys never faltered," said Mahomes. "I'm proud of my guys man, this is awesome, it's legendary.

"It's the start of (a dynasty), we're not done. "I know we're going to celebrate tonight but we got a young team, we going to keep this thing going."

After a glitzy week of high-octane partying and obsessing over Swift's travel plans the spotlight finally turned to the action on the field.

San Francisco dominated the opening half where the highlight for Chiefs supporters was Swift chugging down a drink and slamming down the cup as Niners fans booed.

Neither team were able to find their stride in a scoreless first quarter where both quarterbacks turned to the ground game.

The 49ers took charge in the second, opening up a 10-0 lead on a Super Bowl record field goal and bit of 'razzle-dazzle'.

Moody nailed a 55-yarder before Niners coach Kyle Shanahan reached into his bag of tricks with a play that saw receiver Jauan Jennings, a former high school quarterback, throwing the ball across field to running back Christian McCaffrey, who scampered 21 yards for the score.

Kansas City got on the scoreboard just before the end of the half with kicker Harrison

Butker chipping a 28-yard field goal to send the Chiefs into the break down 10-3.

Coming out of the break the Chiefs' play remained scrappy but their determination did not waver and Butker booted a Super Bowl record 57-yard field goal to trim the 49ers' lead to 10-6.

Just before the end of the third quarter Kansas City got the break they had been waiting for - a punt brushing off the leg of Niners Ray-Ray McCloud and the Chiefs recovered.

Mahomes quickly made San Francisco pay for the error, hitting Marquez Valdes-Scantling with a 16-yard touchdown to take the lead for the first time at 13-10.

San Francisco answered with a 75-yard drive that was capped by a 16-yard touchdown pass from Brock Purdy to Jennings to put the 49ers up 16-13.

But Moody then missed the extra point to leave the Chiefs needing only a field goal to tie the contest.

That miss would prove costly as the Chiefs followed with another Butker field goal to leave it deadlocked at 16-16.

Moody redeemed himself with a pressure-packed 53-yard field goal with just under two minutes to play in regulation time, giving San Francisco a 19-16 lead.

Butker showed he too has nerves of steel by banging home a 29-yarder with three seconds on the clock to send the Super Bowl to overtime for just the second time.

CRICKET

India's Rahul out of third Test vs England

Reuters
Rajkot

Indian batter **K L Rahul** has been ruled out of the third Test against England after failing a fitness Test and has been replaced in the squad by Devdutt Padikkal, the Indian cricket board (BCCI) said yesterday.

Rahul, who has played 50 Tests for India and scored eight centuries, missed the second Test of the five-match series due to an injury.

"Mr Rahul has reached 90 per cent of match fitness and is progressing well under the supervision of the BCCI medical team," the BCCI said in a statement.

"He will continue his recovery process at the National Cricket Academy (NCA) in Bengaluru to be completely match-fit for the fourth and fifth test."

Rahul is the second major Indian batsman to be out of action during the third Test, after Virat Kohli



pulled out of the series due to personal reasons.

England spinner Jack Leach will also miss the rest of the series due to a knee injury.

Padikkal, who has replaced Rahul in the squad, has represented India in T20 cricket but is yet to make his Test debut.

India and England are tied 1-1 in the series as the third test gets underway in Rajkot on Thursday.

SPOTLIGHT

Bangladesh's Najmul named as skipper

AFP
Dhaka

Bangladesh yesterday reappointed Najmul Hossain Shanto as national cricket captain for all three formats for the coming year due to uncertainty over the availability of regular choice Shakib Al Hasan.

Najmul, 25, a top order batter, led Bangladesh in their last two series against New Zealand at home and away, but he had been expected to hand over the charge to Shakib.

"Shakib was obviously our first choice as captain, but we did not want to live with any uncertainty," Bangladesh Cricket Board president Nazmul Hassan told reporters.

Nazmul referred to Shakib's eye problem he developed during the World Cup in India last year and that forced him to seek treatment in Britain and Singapore.

Shakib also missed several matches in the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League Twenty20 tournament due to the issue.

Bangladesh will play at least 14 Tests, nine one-day internationals, and 21 Twenty20 internationals this year, which includes the Twenty20 World Cup in the United States and West Indies.

The BCB appointed former national captain Gazi Ashraf Hossain as the new chief selector.

Bangladesh will host Sri Lanka

for three ODIs, three T20Is, and two Tests in their next series in March and April.

Afghanistan announces squad for Sri Lanka Twenty20I series

Afghanistan yesterday announced a 16-man squad for the three-match Twenty20 international series against Sri Lanka, aiming to prepare strongly for this year's World Cup. Ibrahim Zadran will continue to lead the squad as regular Twenty20 skipper Rashid Khan is still recovering from a back surgery.

The three matches will be played - all in Dambulla - on Febr 17, 19 and 21 following the conclusion of one-day international series tomorrow. Missing Rashid badly, Afghanistan lost the one-off Test and trail the three-match ODI series 2-0 against hosts Sri Lanka.

The Twenty20 World Cup will be held in the United States and the West Indies in June this year.

Another key spinner Mujeeb Ur Rahman also misses out on the squad after sustaining a sprain in his right hand before the start of the ODI series against Sri Lanka.

Squad: Ibrahim Zadran (captain), Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Mohamed Ishaq Rahimi, Hazratullah Zazai, Gulbadin Naib, Mohamed Nabi, Najibullah Zadran, Azmatullah Omarzai, Karim Janat, Sharafuddin Ashraf, Fazalhaq Farooqi, Fareed Ahmad, Naveen-ul-Haq, Noor Ahmad, Wafadar Momand, Qais Ahmad

ARABIAN DRAG RACING LEAGUE

Al-Tamimi claims round four of Index 4.0 category



All the winners of the fourth round of the Arabian Drag Racing League pose with Director of Qatar Racing Club Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

With strong participation of drag racing champions from Qatar and the Gulf region, the fourth round of the 2024 Arabian Drag Racing League, sponsored by HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani, Chairman of Qatar Racing Club, concluded with exciting high level competition.

With the announcement of an additional round, the competition for the overall championship title in the nine categories has been intensified.

In the strongest category, the Index 4.0, Salem al-Tamimi won the final race for the first time. Musallam al-Qallaf. Despite al-Qallaf's third arrival at the final race this season, a wrong start deprived him of the first title, allowing al-Tamimi to be crowned the champion of the fourth round. The third place went to the champion of the previous two rounds,



Jaber al-Maghribi.

Al-Maghribi returned to the podium for the second time in this round, managing to reach the final race in the Super Street Outlaw category, facing Hussein Akbar, who won the race, securing his third title this season, while al-Maghribi settled for second place, and the third place went to the racer Mohamed Qasim.

In the Index 4.80 category, for the second round in a row, Qatari Ahmed al-Abdullah claimed his first title in the championship winning the final race against compatriot Youssef al-Abdullah, while the third place went to Mohamed al-Fraih for a second successive time.

In the Index 4.50 category, for a second round in a row, the title went to Basil Abbas who defeated the racer Msaaid al-Raish in the final race, while Fawaz Ibrahim Ahmed Ali claimed the third place, the same position he had achieved in the previous round.

The Index 8.50 category witnessed a new champion for a fourth consecutive round, as Nasser Adel al-Ghanim won the title, leaving the second and third places on the podium for Abdulaziz al-Suwailim and Mohamed Sulaiman, respectively.

The Index 9.0 category, Qatari Majid al-Sharshani won as compatriot Mohamed Jawad finished second, while Mohamed al-Ansari

completed the podium by finishing third, making it a purely Qatari podium.

In the bike competitions, Mashari al-Turki claimed Super Street Bike category title after winning the final race against Bad-er bin Eidan, while the champion of the previous round, Ahmed bin Bilal, secured his presence on the podium by finishing third.

The champion of the opening round for the Street Bike category, Mohamed Bo Rashed, returned to claim his second title in the championship, with the second and third podium positions going to Bin Eidan and Bin Bilal, respectively.

In the Index 8.5 category, three new names were crowned for the first time with Zaid al-Dosari winning the first place, followed by Munir in second place. Saud al-Wahibi finished third.

At the end of the competitions, Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani, the director of Qatar Racing Club, crowned the top three winners in each category amidst a wonderful festive atmosphere.

Sheikh Jabor: A new round added to ADRL



Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani, the director of Qatar Racing Club (QRC), confirmed that a new round has been added to the Arabian Drag Racing League (ADRL). He said: "We have closely followed the opinions of the participants over the past weeks, who have expressed their desire for an increase in the number of championship rounds. Despite the club's busy schedule with races until the end of the season, we have decided, upon the directives of the club's chairman, HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani, to add a new round to the championship, scheduled for the February 21, 22, and 23 of this. This decision comes due to the great success of the previous rounds and the presence of competition among the champions of this sport from Qatar and the Gulf countries. This will contribute to expanding the competition circle for category titles, especially since the battle

for the season championship title has not been decided yet in any of them. "On the other hand, we are preparing today (Tuesday) to host the national finals of the "Red Bull Car Park Drift" championship, an event eagerly awaited annually by motorsport enthusiasts, with the participation of elite drift drivers in the country, amidst exceptional competitions on the club's drift track filled with obstacles and challenges. The goal is to win the title and represent Qatar in the global finals of the championship, scheduled to be held in the Sultanate of Oman. These events come simultaneously with a number of events organised by the club on the sports day, as an invitation to all sports enthusiasts in general and motorsport enthusiasts in particular to join us at the club for a full day of fun and excitement with the most powerful skill exhibitions and the roar of engines that takes your breath away."

PREVIEW

Haaland, De Bruyne returns prime City to conquer Europe again

AFP
Manchester, United Kingdom

The return of the Champions League comes at the perfect time for Manchester City with Erling Haaland and Kevin De Bruyne's comebacks from injury making the holders look formidable.

Pep Guardiola's men head to FC Copenhagen for the first leg of their last 16 tie today on the back of 10 consecutive wins in all competitions.

A run that began while Haaland and De Bruyne were still sidelined by injury has only gained momentum since they made their return.

Haaland scored his first goals since November as City eventually broke down Everton to win 2-0 at the Etihad on Saturday.

De Bruyne had started on the bench with the Champions League in mind as Guardiola manages the Belgian's minutes after his season began with a hamstring tear that ruled him out for five months.

But the 32-year-old has looked like his old self since returning with seven goal contributions in eight games this season. De Bruyne was the provider for Haaland's second goal on Saturday and the Norwegian is delighted to have his delivery to feed off once more.

"I try to do the same runs with everyone, but with him it's a bit more like I know I'm going to get it perfect. I know the ball is going to come," said Haaland. "You can see I don't even look at the ball for two seconds when he has it because I'm focusing on running towards the goal. That's the difference, nothing bad towards other players, but it's the small difference of knowing that the ball will come."

City became just the second English side to ever win the treble of Champions League, Premier League and FA Cup last season.

Guardiola scoffed at the suggestion they could defend all three earlier in the campaign, but they remain well on course to do so. The Premier League title race is fascinatingly poised with the top



three separated by just two points, but City will edge ahead of Liverpool and Arsenal should they win their game in hand against Brentford next week.

A trip to Luton awaits in the FA Cup fifth round and Copenhagen are not expected to pose many problems to the English champions despite their success against the other side of Manchester this season. The Danes stunned Manchester United 4-3 in November as the Red Devils crashed out in the group stage.

But City are a different beast as they look to become only the second club in the Champions League era to retain the trophy, after Real Madrid's three-in-a-row between 2016 and 2018.

Guardiola has a fully fit squad to choose and a wealth of options at his disposal. Kyle Walker, Bernardo Silva, Jack Grealish and Josko Gvardiol started alongside De Bruyne on the bench at the weekend. Phil Foden believes he is in the form of his life after netting a hat-trick in last week's 3-1 win at Brentford.

And midfield anchor Rodri has not been on the losing side in 51 games for club and country stretching back to March last year.

All of City's three league defeats this season came when the Spaniard was suspended in the autumn.

But in keeping with their best seasons under Guardiola, City are rounding into form as the business end of the campaign approaches.

After making their Champions League breakthrough last season, even the best that Europe has to offer will do well to stop them lifting the trophy once more at Wembley on June 1.

REVIEW

Ivory Coast savour AFCON triumph but future is unclear

AFP
Abidjan

Ivory Coast's stunning Africa Cup of Nations triumph was a fitting end to the most thrilling edition of the tournament in recent memory but the manner of their victory makes it impossible to imagine what the long-term impact could be.

The Elephants really should have been eliminated from their own competition in the group stage after losing 4-0 to Equatorial Guinea on January 22, their heaviest ever home defeat.

That would have made them just the second host country in 30 years to go out of the AFCON in the group stage, but instead they squeezed through as the last of the four best third-placed teams.

Their group-stage showing led to the departure of veteran French coach Jean-Louis Gasset, who had been in charge since May 2022. He was replaced by Emerse Fae, a former Ivorian international who had never coached before. Yet Fae oversaw an incredible turnaround in the team's fortunes, as the Ivorians came from behind to beat holders Senegal in the last 16 and overcame a 1-0 deficit with 10 men to beat Mali in the quarter-finals.

After beating the Democratic Republic of Congo 1-0 in the last four, it felt somehow inevitable that they would win the final, and it was apt that they came from behind to beat Nigeria 2-1 to lift the trophy.

"We are miracle survivors, but I think we had to go through everything we went through in order to really understand that it all could end at any moment," said midfielder Seko Fofana.

"Take the example of Senegal, who had won all their games and then got knocked out by us. We were in difficulty, with two defeats in the group stage. We adapted to a difficult context and did what we had to do to make the country proud."



Ivory Coast's forward Max-Alain Gradel lifts the Africa Cup of Nations trophy on the podium after they won the final against Nigeria at Alassane Ouattara Olympic Stadium in Ebimpe, Abidjan. (AFP)

HALLER COMEBACK STORY

It also felt fitting that the match-winner in the semi-final and final should be Sebastien Haller, given how remarkable the Borussia Dortmund striker's own story has been.

A year ago he was just returning to action after treatment for testicular cancer. Seen as the leader of the Ivorian team here, he suffered an ankle injury with his club in December and played no part during the group stage.

It is Ivory Coast's third Cup of Nations triumph, putting them level with Nigeria and behind only Egypt, Cameroon and Ghana as teams with the most victories. Ivorians will feel a sense of pride at their victory as well as with the success of the tournament, which with 119 goals scored was more prolific than either of the two previous editions since the AFCON was expanded to 24 teams.

An average of 2.29 goals per

game was the highest at a Cup of Nations since 2012. The focus remained entirely on the football, two years after the AFCON in Cameroon was marred by a deadly crush at the Olembe Stadium in Yaounde which left eight people dead.

"They all have a special taste, but you have to say that there is nothing more beautiful than winning an AFCON at home," said Max-Alain Gradel, the only survivor along with Serge Aurier from the last Ivorian team to win the title in 2015.

"I don't think we could have dreamed of a better outcome."

WHAT NEXT?

It remains to be seen if Fae will keep the job permanently, something he had refused to discuss before the final. "The honest truth is that I asked those in charge not to talk to us about what is going to happen after the competition," said the French-

born Fae.

Whoever is in charge going forward, the Elephants, Africa's eighth-ranked side, should build on their AFCON success to qualify for the 2026 World Cup.

They already top a group containing Kenya, Gabon, Burundi, Gambia and Seychelles as they aim to become one of nine African nations to advance directly to the expanded 48-team tournament.

Before that they are supposed to defend their Cup of Nations crown in Morocco next year. The only question, and not a small one, is when exactly that AFCON will take place, something Confederation of African Football president Patrice Motsepe refused to confirm last week.

Morocco is preparing to host the competition in June and July next year, but a clash with FIFA's new, expanded Club World Cup could yet mean it gets brought forward to January and February.

HORSE RACING

Eleven runners to vie for coveted HH The Amir Sword

26 races will be run at Al Rayyan throughout the three days of the HH The Amir Sword Festival

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Forty eight hours prior to kick off of the HH The Amir Sword Festival at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC), the declarations of the Festival races, to be run from this Thursday till Saturday, February 17, at the Al Rayyan Racecourse were announced.

All the races promise to be enthralling and thrilling with local horses reaching the peak of their potential at this time of the season and international riders targeting victories in the international races of the prestigious Festival.

Race declarations reveal the final names of the horses, connections and jockeys involved in each race. Trainers decide their final and optimum plans based on the abilities of their own horses as well as those of other horses in race and seek to come up with the tactics, which would assist their runners land the spoils.

INTERNATIONAL RUNNERS ARRIVE

International horses started their work at the Al Rayyan. The training grounds were busy in the morning with horse connections paying careful attention to all details. The number of international horses has been on the increase throughout the years and this year sees the largest number so far.

AL GHADEER VS ABBES

Twenty-six races will be run at Al Rayyan throughout the three days of the HH The Amir Sword Festival.

While all races will see tough contesting, the finale will take centre stage with several headline events topped by the HH The Amir Sword for Arabians, a Group IPA run over 2400m, with a purse of \$2.5mn on offer. The world's most valuable race for Purebred Arabians is also the third and final stage of the Doha Triple Crown. As officially announced through the declarations, 11 runners head to the starting gates in the Sword race.

All eyes are on Al Shaqab Racing's Al Ghadeer, who bids to become the first winner of the Doha Triple Crown since Ebraz landed the legendary title in 2020. Wathan Racing's Abbes, the title holder, will also take centre stage in the prestigious event as he seeks to retain the Sword glory for the second straight year following his impressive victory in last year's renewal.

The list of runners also includes Al Shaqab Racing's Mezown and Al Tammtam, His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Thani's Al Doha, HE Sheikhha Iman bint Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani's Hareeb, HE Sheikhha Yasmeen bint Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani's Divine Prin-



International horses and jockeys started their training yesterday for HH The Amir Sword Festival at the Al Rayyan Racecourse.



Al Shaqab Racing's Al Ghadeer is bidding to become the first winner of the Doha Triple Crown since Ebraz landed the legendary title in 2020.

cess, HE Sheikhha Reem bint Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani's AA Feel The Burn, Sultan Ali al-Senaidi's Djalnor, Wathan Racing's Bin Al Tair and Abdullah bin Fahad A H al-Attiyah's Ch'ezza.

LARGE SCALE INTERNATIONAL PRESENCE IN THE TROPHY

The other feature is the HH The Amir Trophy for Thoroughbreds, a Qatari Group 1,

not only over the same distance and offering the same prize money as the Sword race, but will also see the same number of runners. Of all 26 races of the Festival, the Trophy race has the largest number of international runners with six countries represented.

The challengers are headed by Mike Cheung Shun Ching's Russian Emperor, who returned from Hong Kong to defend



Wathan Racing's Abbes is seeking to retain the Sword glory for second straight year.

his title as the winner of the Trophy last year and will bid for retaining the Trophy for the second year in a row.

However, his task will not be easy with other tough challengers, including Wathan Racing's trio of Jeff Koons, Simca Mille and Haunted Dream, the Japanese trio of Noboru Iyama's North Bridge, Shadai Race Horse Co. Ltd's Zeffiro and Hajime Satomi's Satono Glanz, the UK raider Shad-

well's Israr, the Godolphin's duo of Rebel's Romance and Passion and Glory, and from Ireland Coolmore's Point Lonsdale.

TOP QUALITY RACING AT AL RAYYAN

The action kicks off on Thursday, with eight races taking centre stage, of which six to be run over 1700m and two over 1200m. The Sand Championships are an excellent chance to see the very best fight it out, with fantastic prize money up for grabs. The evening is headlined by the finale, the Thoroughbred Sand Championship, for four-year-old and upwards.

Day two is a bumper edition, with 10 races set to be run over a variety of distances. The Thoroughbred Open Sprint Cup opens the proceedings, but the main events come in the form of our final three races. The Purebred Arabian Sprint Cup, Al Zubara Trophy and finally the Al Rayyan Breeders Cup never fail to impress and this year could well be the best yet.

Saturday features another high-class eight races, with no less than three G1's on the card. The first of which comes in the form of our second race, the Qatar International Cup, a 1600m contest for Purebred Arabians. The HH The Amir Trophy, for Thoroughbreds, is the penultimate and is held over 2400m. Our finale is the HH The Amir Sword, over the same distance, but this time for Purebred Arabians, bringing to an end to what will no doubt be an exhilarating three days racing.

QATAR TOTALENERGIES OPEN

Top seed Swiatek sweeps past Cirstea

Agencies
Doha

Two-time defending champion Iga Swiatek needed just 61 minutes to open her latest campaign at the Qatar TotalEnergies Open with a victory yesterday, as the World No.1 defeated Romania's Sorana Cirstea 6-1, 6-1 in second round yesterday.

Swiatek is one of five women who've won the singles title in Doha twice, and is seeking to become the first to win three titles at the event, which dates back to 2001. The Pole is trying to become the first player to win at any WTA Tour event for a third consecutive year since Serena Williams won in Miami from 2013-15.

She got off to the races quickly towards that overall goal. Against Cirstea, she won five straight games in the first set, and six in a row to take the second to advance to a third-round meeting with either Erika Andreeva or No.14 seed Ekaterina Alexandrova.

Earlier, Naomi Osaka put last week's first round defeat in Abu Dhabi behind her with a straight sets defeat of 15th seed Caroline Garcia. This was former world number one Osaka's second win from the five matches she has played since returning last month after a 15-month time out on maternity leave from the tour.

The Japanese four-time Grand Slam winner was exacting a small measure of revenge on Garcia with this 7-5, 6-4 success in Doha as it was the French star Garcia who knocked her out in the first round of last month's Australian Open. And she reckons she is beginning to find her stride again after becoming a mum.

"I feel like I'm a much better player now. In Australia, my returns weren't as good and I don't feel like I was as focused as I am now," said the match winner.

On coming back physically after pregnancy she added: "It's been a really tough journey. I felt like I was chasing myself in the past and it honestly wasn't really healthy to do. After giving birth, I feel I trained really quickly. I'm a very big perfectionist and it's tough when you don't see results as quickly. I felt like I was driving a car that wasn't mine. So my body didn't feel like the body that I was used to. It was in that journey I felt like I learned how to love myself as I



Iga Swiatek whips a forehand during her match against Sorana Cirstea during the Qatar TotalEnergies Open at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex in Doha. (Reuters)

am now. I got to wake up every day and see my daughter and know that I was strong enough for her to come into this world."

Osaka's next assignment on her comeback trail is a second round date with Petra Martic of Croatia. This is the second time the pair have crossed swords but it comes a decade after their first encounter.

A 16-year-old Osaka prevailed on that occasion, a final qualifying round match at Stanford in 2014. The omens did not look great for Osaka on Monday as Garcia won her first 11 service points but she knuckled down and finally broke the Spaniard when she was serving for the set to level at 5-5.

She then fended off two break points before wrapping up the set with a love break. A further break of serve in the last game of the match earned her the pick-me-up win she needed after her early knockout a week ago.

"Every time I had a break point opportunity, I was very accurate on my shot," said Garcia. "And I was able to take this opportunity in Australia and today I was not. The same as Australia, it was played on very few points alone. Those points she was a better player today."



Japan's Naomi Osaka reacts after her win against France's Caroline Garcia. (Reuters)

FOOTBALL

Injury crisis 'can motivate us', says Madrid's Ancelotti

AFP
Leipzig, Germany

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said yesterday his side's injury crisis could motivate them in today's last 16 Champions League match at RB Leipzig. Star midfielder Jude Bellingham became the latest addition to the list, injuring his ankle in Saturday's 4-0 league win over Girona. Bellingham joins an injury list which includes goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois, centre-backs David Alaba, Nacho Fernandez and Eder Militao, but Ancelotti said "this is something that can motivate us."

"Bellingham is an important player for us, like Cortois, like Militao" Ancelotti told reporters. "To play without Bellingham is difficult of course, but we have (Brahim) Diaz and other players that can replace him."

Madrid sit five clear after Saturday's win, having lost just once in 24 league games all season. Midfielder Toni Kroos, who has won four Champions Leagues with Real, said "I don't know if we are the favourites, but we are in a good position to win the title. But as we've seen in previous years, a bad day is enough to be booted out. It's a difficult title to win."

Earlier, RB Leipzig coach Marco Rose shut down suggestions the hosts would be outsiders in today's match, saying his side were "not afraid" of Real Madrid. "The topic of us being outsid-

ers wasn't worth considering for me at all, because football games need to actually be played," Rose told reporters ahead of the first leg of the last-16 tie. "Incredible things have happened in football."

Leipzig are struggling for form ahead of the visit of La Liga leaders Madrid, having won just one of five games since Christmas to slide to fifth in the Bundesliga. Despite this, Rose said his side had "no fear" against the 14-time European champions. "We are not afraid at all, we're looking forward to it. It's what we want. It's what we worked hard for last season and what we fought for in the group stage."

Leipzig goalkeeper Peter Gulacsi said Real still had "incredible quality, even if Jude (Bellingham) is injured." "I could name their entire midfield."

Rose, who coached Bellingham at Borussia Dortmund during the 2021-22 season, did not rule out the England international making a surprise appearance despite the injury. "I'll only believe that Jude is ruled out when I don't see him in the stadium tomorrow. I know Jude, I know he'll do everything to play a Champions League game, even if it means that today he's searching around to try and be treated by a doctor here. I've read plenty (about his absence), but we'll see."

Bellingham moved from Dortmund to Madrid in the summer and has become a crucial part of Carlo Ancelotti's side, topping the scoring charts with 16 goals so far in the league.