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Asian champions Qatar surge to 37th in latest FIFA rankings

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HH THE AMIR SWORD FESTIVAL

Al Shaman wins Thoroughbred Sand Championship on Day 1

ACCOUNT CAME SECOND, WHILE LOCAL LAW, THE SIX YEAR-OLD GELDING, FINISHED THIRD



HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, the Minister of Sports and Youth, and Issa bin Mohamed al-Mohannadi, QREC chairman, arrive at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club for the day one of the HH The Amir Sword Festival. **PICTURES:** *Juhaim*



Tom Marquand guides Al Shaman to Thoroughbred Sand Championship win during the HH The Amir Sword Festival at the Al Rayyan Park yesterday.

RESULTS
HH the Amir Sword Festival 2024 - Day 1

WINNERS: 25th Al Rayyan Meeting- Sand Championships
1 - Thoroughbred Sand Championship, 4YO+, 1700m
Horse: Al Shaman
Owner: Hamad Ahmed Hassan al-Malki al-Jehani
Trainer: Ahmed al-Jehani
Jockey: Tom Marquand
2 - Purebred Arabian Sand Championship
Horse: Sun Amer (FR)
Owner: Khalid Mohammed S al-Harami
Trainer: Bader al-Balushi
Jockey: Soufiane Saadi
3 - Local Thoroughbred Sand Championship
Horse: Dhergham Bu Thaila
Owner: Sabhea Awad Ibrahim
Trainer: Ibrahim Khaled Elahmed
Jockey: Lukas Delozier
4 - Local Purebred Arabian Sand Championship
Horse: Makarim
Owner: Rashid Mohamed al-Athba
Trainer: Bader al-Balushi
Jockey: Lukas Delozier
5 - Thoroughbred three-year-old Sand Championship
Horse: Jungle Mate
Owner: Saeed Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki
Trainer: Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki
Jockey: Tomas Lukasek
6 - Premium Maiden Cup, Purebred Arabians
Horse: AJS Falak
Owner: Al Jeryan Stud
Trainer: MHK al-Attiyah
Jockey: Szczepan Mazur
7 - Premium Maiden Cup, Local Thoroughbreds
Horse: Al Faisal (QA)
Owner: Abdulatif Hussain MZ al-Emadi
Trainer: Bader al-Balushi
Jockey: Maxime Guyon
8 - Premium Maiden Cup, Local Purebred Arabians
Horse: Munhamik (QA)
Owner: Nasser Owaida Salem al-Hajri
Trainer: Owaida Salem al-Hajri
Jockey: Faleh Bughanaim

By Sports Reporter
Doha

On a day of thrilling action, the feature produced an impressive race as the Hamad Ahmed Hassan al-Malki al-Jehani-owned Al Shaman won the Thoroughbred Sand Championship with a bit to spare on the first day of the HH The Amir Sword Festival at Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's (QREC) Al Rayyan Park yesterday.

Trainer Ahmed al-Jehani landed the day's feature event, for the four-year-old+, as Tom Marquand always looked confident aboard the ten-year-old and got him to sprout wings in the final 100m to land the spoils by three quarters of a length.

Khalifa Hassan al-Jehani owned Account came second, while Saif Rashid Saif al-Khayarin's Local Law, the six year-old gelding, finished third.

In the day's penultimate race, The Purebred Arabian Sand Championship saw one of the day's best performances as the Khalid Mohamed S al-Harami-owned Sun Amer bolted up under jockey Soufiane Saadi by seven lengths, completing a treble on the day for trainer Bader al-Balushi.

Earlier, the Sabhea Awad Ibrahim-owned Dhergham Bu Thaila ran out a comfortable one-length winner of the Local Thoroughbred Sand Championship for trainer Ibrahim Khaled Elahmed and completed a quick-fire double on the card for jockey Lukas Delozier.



Hamad bin Abdulrahman al-Attiya, President of the Asian Equestrian Federation and Vice-Chairman of QREC, crowned the winners of Thoroughbred Sand Championship.

Al-Balushi was in the winners' enclosure earlier, as he saddled Rashid Mohamed al-Athba's homebred Makarim to prevail by a length in the 1700m open race under Lukas Delozier and land the Local Purebred Arabian Sand Championship.

Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki saddled Jungle Mate to win the Thoroughbred three-year-old Sand Championship, which saw a close finish, but it was the Saeed Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki-owned gelding who stuck on the best under jockey Tomas Lukasek, just defeating the Hadi al-Ramzani-trained Foehn by a head.

The Premium Maiden Cup for Purebred Arabians also saw a stunning performance from Al Jeryan Stud's homebred AJS Falak, who opened his account with an impressive victory as he stretched four and a half lengths clear of the field under jockey Szczepan Mazur for trainer M.H.K al-Attiyah.

Owner and breeder Abdulatif Hussain M Z al-Emadi, trainer Bader al-Balushi and jockey Maxime Guyon were quickly on the board as Al Faisal took the Premium Maiden Cup for Local Thoroughbreds by a length ahead of the nearest rival.

The 2024 edition of the festival began with the Premium Maiden Cup race for Local Purebred Arabians and it was the Nasser Owaida Salem al-Hajri-owned Munhamik who took the first prize for trainer Owaida Salem al-Hajri. Faleh Bughanaim rode the six-year-old to a cosy length victory.

The second day of the Festival will feature 10 races today, concluding with the US$400,000 Al Rayyan Breeders Cup for Local Thoroughbred (Class 1).



Sun Amer under jockey Soufiane Saadi cruises to Purebred Arabian Sand Championship victory.



Bader Mohamed al-Darwish, QREC Acting CEO, presents the trophy to a connection of Sun Amer, which won the Purebred Arabian Sand Championship at the Al Rayyan Park yesterday.



Saif al-Nuami, Operations Manager at Al Shaqab, poses with the connections of Dhergham Bu Thaila, which won the Local Thoroughbred Sand Championship.

SPORT

THIRD TEST

Rohit and Jadeja to the rescue as India reach 326/5

England's Wood grabs three wickets as debutant Sarfaraz scores 62

Reuters
Rajkot


India's Ravindra Jadeja (left) with captain Rohit Sharma during the first day of the third Test against England in Rajkot yesterday. *(AFP)*

Captain Rohit Sharma and middle-order batter Ravindra Jadeja smashed defiant hundreds to drag India out of the doldrums and into a comfortable 326 for five on the opening day of the third Test against England yesterday.

India were reeling at 33-3 inside the opening hour after Mark Wood proved the value of extra pace on a docile track at the Saurashtra Cricket Association Stadium.

Rohit and Jadeja rebuilt the innings with a 204-run stand to drag the hosts back into the contest.

Jadeja was batting on 110 at stumps, his fourth Test hundred, with nightwatchman Kuldeep Yadav on one at the other end.

Rohit's stellar 131 contained three sixes, 14 fours and plenty of drama.

The opener suffered a blow to his helmet, was dropped in the slip and succeeded in having an lbw decision against him reversed en route to his 11th test hundred innings.

With the five-match series poised at 1-1, Rohit's decision to bat on a flat surface was hardly surprising but Wood tormented the batters with his express speed.

The fast bowler had Yashasvi Jaiswal (10) caught in the slip in his second over and Shubman Gill fell caught behind for a duck in Wood's next.

England captain Ben Stokes, playing his 100th Test, introduced spin in the ninth over and was rewarded immediately as Tom Hartley dismissed Rajat Patidar for five.

Wood continued to bowl with relentless hostility at the other end, hitting Rohit on his helmet grille on one occasion.

The opener got a life on 27 when he edged Hartley and Joe Root spilled the catch at slip.

Rohit was adjudged lbw to James Anderson but the decision was reversed after replays confirmed the ball had hit bat first.

Rohit and Jadeja denied England a breakthrough in the second session dragging India back into the contest.

Rohit took 157 balls to bring up his hundred and the muted celebration indicated his resolve to carry on but Stokes and Wood combined to scupper that plan.

The short-ball tactics they pursued against Rohit paid off as the batter slapped the ball from Wood to Stokes at midwicket. Debutant Sarfaraz Khan shrugged off early jitters and raced to a 48-ball fifty before his entertaining knock of 62 was cut short.

Jadeja was on 99 when his hesitation led to Sarfaraz being run out. A furious Rohit was seen hurling his cap on the floor in the pavilion after the dismissal.

Wicketkeeper Dhruv Jurel also made his Test debut for India in the match.

SCOREBOARD

India 1st innings

Y. Jaiswal c Root b Wood	10
R. Sharma c Stokes b Wood	131
S. Gill c Foakes b Wood	0
R. Patidar c Duckett b Hartley	5
R. Jadeja not out	110
S. Khan run out (Wood)	62
K. Yadav not out	1
Extras (b1, lb3, nb2, w1)	**7**
Totla (5 wickets, 86 overs)	**326**

Still to bat: D. Jurel, R. Ashwin, J. Bumrah, M. Siraj

Fall of wickets: 1-22 (Jaiswal), 2-24 (Gill), 3-33 (Patidar), 4-237 (Rohit), 5-314 (Sarfaraz)

Bowling: Anderson 19-5-51-0 (nb1), Wood 17-2-69-3 (w1, nb1), Hartley 23-3-81-1, Root 13-1-68-0, Ahmed 14-0-53-0

Toss: India

Sarfaraz says 'father's dream' fulfilled after India debut


India's Sarfaraz Khan plays a shot during the first day of the third Test against England in Rajkot yesterday. *(AFP)*

Rajkot, India: India's Sarfaraz Khan yesterday said his Test debut has been dream fulfilled for his father after he impressed with an attacking 62 against England in the third match.

A prolific run-getter in Indian domestic cricket, Sarfaraz got his Test cap from former captain Anil Kumble with his teary-eyed father, Naushad Khan, and wife looking on in Rajkot.

Sarfaraz made the most with his 48-ball fifty to take the attack to the opposition bowlers and shine on a day of centuries by skipper Rohit Sharma (131) and Ravindra Jadeja (110 not out).

"I felt really happy," Sarfaraz told reporters.

"Coming to the ground for the first time and got the cap in front of my father. I was six years old when he started my cricket," the 26-year-old said.

"It was my dream to play for the Indian team in front of him. It was a dream to play for India during his lifetime."

Sarfaraz, often criticised for being overweight, has been knocking on the selectors doors for more than three years while scoring in the domestic Ranji Trophy and has a first-class average of over 69 in 45 matches and a best of 301 not out.

Sarfaraz came out to bat after Rohit's departure and, following a nervous start, found his rhythm with boundaries to entertain the crowd.

He reached his 50 after a dominant show against the spinners and raised the bat to his family and the applauding dressing room.

"I was padded for almost four hours. I kept thinking that I have kept so much patience in life and there is no harm in keeping some more," he said.

"After I went in, was nervous for first few balls but I have practised and worked so hard that everything went well."

Controversies and weight issues

Sarfaraz burst into limelight with a record 439 in school cricket in 2009 but his career later hit roadblocks and controversies.

Hailing from a small town in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, Sarfaraz was once charged with age-fudging after failing a bone Test report and was later booted out of a training camp due to indiscipline.

He played the Indian Premier League and was once selected by Royal Challengers Bangalore, but could never cement his place in the XI and was also advised by skipper Virat Kohli to lose weight.

But Sarfaraz, who plays domestic cricket for Mumbai, is happy to realise a dream his father had set out to achieve.

"It was my father's dream to play for India but unfortunately it couldn't happen due to some reasons and there wasn't much support from home then," Sarfaraz said.

"Then he worked very hard on me and is now doing on my brother. It was the proudest moment of my life."

Sarfaraz was finally run out after a mix-up with Jadeja, but his innings left the opposition camp impressed.

"I thought Ben (Stokes) wanted to keep attacking fields so we could create a chance. And fair play to him, he had the courage to go over the top on a few occasions," England assistant coach Paul Collingwood said.

"He sweeps really well and put the bowlers under pressure. On debut, it takes a lot of courage to come out and play like that," Collingwood added.

Bedingham hits ton as SA hand NZ tricky run chase

Hamilton: David Bedingham scored his maiden Test century as South Africa handed New Zealand a victory target of 267 on a tricky pitch on the third day of the second and final Test at Hamilton's Seddon Park yesterday.

Bedingham's 110, mostly scored in a 98-run partnership with Keegan Petersen for the fifth wicket, drove the inexperienced Proteas to 235 all out to give them a fighting chance of levelling up the series at 1-1.

New Zealand openers chipped 40 runs off the target in the last hour but Devon Conway was dismissed lbw for 17 by spinner Dane Piedt in the final over of the day.

Conway's fellow opener Tom Latham will resume on 21 not out today as the Black Caps look for the 227 runs they need to secure a first series win over South Africa in 72 years of trying.

Debutant paceman Will O'Rourke, the only New Zealander with less experience than most of the South Africans, took five for 34 as the last six Proteas wickets fell for 33 runs but the day belonged to Bedingham.

The 29-year-old made his debut in the two-match series against India over New Year but was one of only two players to back up in New Zealand as Cricket South Africa preferred to keep the cream of their talent at home for the SA20 tournament. Thrashed by 281 runs in the first Test last week, South Africa had bowled brilliantly yesterday to take a first-innings lead of 31 runs but New Zealand had them wobbling on 88-3 at lunch.

BRIEF SCORES

South Africa 1st innings: 242
New Zealand 1st innings: 211
South Africa 2nd innings: 235
New Zealand 2nd innings: 1 for 40 after 13.5 overs on day three
Match situation: New Zealand need another 227 runs for victory

PCB ANNOUNCEMENT

Hafeez out as team director

AFP
Lahore

Pakistan cricket authorities said yesterday they would not renew the contract of national team director Mohamed Hafeez, showing him the door after disastrous tours of Australia and New Zealand.

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) appointed 43-year-old Hafeez in late 2023 after the side crashed out of the World Cup in India.

But in his brief tenure Pakistan were whitewashed 3-0 in a Test series in Australia and lost 4-1 in the Twenty20 series in New Zealand.

"Hafeez's contract expired after the New Zealand series last month so PCB is not extending it," PCB media director Aaliya Rasheed said yesterday.

A losing streak has prompted a major shakeup for Pakistan in recent months, with skipper Babar Azam stepping down from all three formats in November and foreign coach Mickey Arthur also getting sacked.

The PCB has also seen major changes at the helm, with a revolving door of chairmen.

The PCB yesterday also terminated the central contract of fast bowler Haris Rauf after he refused to join the Test team for the tour of Australia, which coincided with his stint at Australia's Big Bash League (BBL).

Right-arm pacer Rauf, who played for Melbourne Stars in the franchise league, did not join the Pakistan team for a three-match Test series against Australia between Dec 14 and Jan 7.

"Haris' central contract has been terminated from December 1, 2023 and no NOC (No objection certificate) to play any foreign league will be granted up to June 30, 2024," the PCB said in a statement.

"The PCB management provided a chance for a personal hearing to Haris in compliance with the principles of natural justice on 30 January 2024 and his response was found unsatisfactory."

The 30-year-old's refusal had caused a standoff with PCB which ended when the board granted him permission to make a limited appearance in the BBL before joining the national squad for a five-match T20 series against New Zealand in January.

Rauf, 30, has so far played one Test, 37 ODIs and 66 Twenty20 internationals for Pakistan.

Pathways back to PGA for LIV golfers discussed daily: Woods


Tiger Woods of the US during a Pro-Am prior to The Genesis Invitational at Riviera Country Club in Pacific Palisades, California. *(AFP)*

Los Angeles: The contentious issue of how players who embraced the LIV Golf League might return to the US PGA Tour as the global game evolves remains under "daily" discussion, superstar Tiger Woods said yesterday.

"We're looking into all the different models for pathways back," Woods said at a press conference on the eve of the Genesis Invitational at The Riviera Country Club, where he's set to play his first official PGA Tour event since the Masters last April.

"What that looks like, what the impact is for the players who have stayed and who have not left and how we make our product better going forward, there is no answer to that right now."

Four-time major champion Rory McIlroy, long a scathing critic of LIV Golf, said in January that he believed golf needs to reunite top players, even it delays sorting out any penalties for those who abandoned the established PGA Tour and DP World Tour for the big money offered by the upstart league backed by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF)

However, at the Phoenix Open last week, Scottie Scheffler and Justin Thomas joined the list of players insisting that LIV golfers – including two-time major winner Dustin Johnson and reigning Masters champion Jon Rahm – should face some consequences for their defections.

"I want the best product and the best players," Thomas said. "I would say that there's a handful of players on LIV that would make the tour a better place, but I'm definitely not in the agreement that they should just be able to come back that easily."

Scheffler, meanwhile, said he thought it would be an unpopular decision to let LIV golfers come back "like nothing ever happened."

Woods, one of six player-directors on the US PGA Tour's policy board, indicated the topic was a hot one.

"We're looking at very different, varying degrees of ideas and what that looks like in the short term, we don't know," he said of a potential plan for reintegrating LIV players.

"We don't even know in the longer term what that looks like.

"Trust me, there's daily, weekly emails and talks about this and what this looks like for our tour going forward."

The discussion continues as the PGA Tour forges ahead with its new partnership with Strategic Sports Group (SSG) – a consortium of billionaire sports team owners that agreed a $3bn deal with the tour to create a for-profit commercial entity that will allow nearly 200 PGA Tour players the chance to become equity holders.

Woods said yesterday that SSG brings the know-how to improve the PGA Tour "entertainment product" while honouring the history and traditions of the tour.

While the deal with SSG is done, Woods said the hope was to complete negotiations to make the PIF "part of our tour and a part of our product."

The PGA Tour has been negotiating with PIF since June, when the details of a framework merger agreement were announced to the astonishment of PGA Tour players, who had no idea such a plan was in the works.

"Ultimately we would like to have PIF be a part of our tour and a part of our product," Woods said.

FOCUS

Sheikh Joaan meets Mardini, World Aquatics Refugee team athletes

HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani yesterday met with World Aquatics Refugee team athletes Mohamed Eyad Masoud and Alaa Maso and World Aquatics Championships – Doha 2024 ambassador and former refugee athlete Yusra Mardini at the Qatar Olympic Committee.

HE Sheikh Joaan, President of the Doha 2024 Organising Committee and Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) welcomed the athletes for the first-ever World Aquatics Championships to be held in Qatar and the Middle East and reiterated Qatar's long-standing commitment to supporting refugees through sport.

The QOC is a proud partner of the Olympic Refuge Foundation (ORF), and HE Sheikh Joaan serves as a board member of the organisation which supports the training of refugee athletes across the globe. During the meeting the athletes shared their experiences of competing in Doha with Masoud competing in the men's 50m and 100m butterfly and Maso in the men's 50m and 100m freestyle in Doha. Mardini retired from competitive swimming following her participation at Tokyo 2020 in the Refugee Olympic team, but the UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador is here in Doha as an Ambassador to encourage more young people in the region to get involved in aquatics.

HE Sheikh Joaan said: "It is inspiring to see both Mohamed Eyad Masoud and Alaa Maso compete at the World Aquatics Championships, and it was a pleasure to speak with them and former Refugee Olympic Team athlete Yusra Mardini.

"We praise World Aquatics and an increasing number of International Federations, in opening up their events to refugee athletes. This is vitally important not just in giving refugee athletes access to sport and its transformative power, but also in giving them a platform to showcase their talent, raise awareness, and inspire millions around the world."



Masoud currently lives and trains in New Zealand and Maso in Germany with both athletes supported by the ORF, who also helped Mardini achieve her Olympic dream.

During the meeting, HE Sheikh Joaan focused on the important role that sport can play in unifying different cultures and its position as a powerful tool to help refugees and other displaced people integrate into their new societies. After the meeting, Masoud emphasised the role of the ORF in ensuring refugees across the world can continue training and competing and thanked all ORF's partners for their continued support.

"Unfortunately, conflicts across the globe have destroyed sports facilities and forced athletes to flee their homes, and their countries. With the support of the ORF and World Aquatics athletes like myself, Alaa and Yusra are able to achieve our dreams, despite the difficulties we have faced. We cannot thank them enough." Masoud said.

SWIMMING

China's Pan claims 100m freestyle gold

AMERICAN CURZAN WINS NON-OLYMPIC 50M BREASTSTROKE GOLD

Reuters
Doha

China's Pan Zhanle backed up his men's 100m freestyle world record by winning the world title in Doha yesterday in a warning to rivals for the Paris Olympics gold medal.

The 19-year-old did not threaten the stunning 46.80 seconds mark he set with the leadoff swim in Sunday's relay at the World Championships but 47.53 was enough to secure his first individual world gold at the Aspire Dome pool.

He had to fight for it, though, with Italian runner-up Alessandro Miressi and Hungary's bronze medallist Nandor Nemeth threatening to upset the Chinese favourite in a furious finish.

"I was a bit nervous because this is my first individual final at the World Championships," Pan told reporters.

"My time was just so-so. I tried my best but my level was not that strong. I know it's only the beginning. Let's meet in Paris."

Pan was strong favourite for the title but Canadian Finlay Knox's 200 metres individual medley title was something of a surprise.

The United States' Fukuoka runner-up Carson Foster had bigger claims but Knox took him down from lane seven in the final freestyle leg to win in 1:56.64.

Italy's Alberto Razzetti claimed bronze.

"Historically, I'm pretty slow with backstroke (but) the last 50 everyone knows you just have to dig deep and go for it," said Knox.

In a modest field lacking all of the Fukuoka medallists, Briton Laura Stephens won the women's 200m butterfly title in 2:07.35, pipping Denmark's Helena Bach by less than a tenth of a second.

Bosnia's 18-year-old Lana Pudar took bronze and enjoyed the biggest cheers of the night from a rowdy pocket of Bosnian fans.

CURZAN WINS AGAIN

American Claire Curzan continued her fruitful campaign by winning the non-Olympic 50m breaststroke in 27.43 seconds, pipping Australian surprise package Iona Anderson by 0.02 seconds.

Having missed out on a spot in the United States' World Championships team to Fukuoka last July, Curzan now has four medals, including golds in the 100m backstroke and mixed medley relay.

Olympic silver medallist Siobhan Haughey eased into the women's 100m freestyle final, a day after becoming Hong Kong's first swimming world champion with her 200m win.

Haughey, runner-up behind Mollie O'Callaghan in the 100m at last year's event in Fukuoka, qualified second behind the Netherlands' Marrit Steenbergen.

World record holder Sarah Sjostrom was entered in the 100m but did not swim. The Swedish veteran told home media this month she is not planning to compete in the event at Paris.

With world champion Tatjana Schoenmaker skipping Doha, American Kate Douglass is on track for a second title at the meet, qualifying second for the 200m breaststroke final on Friday.

The Netherlands' Tes Schouten is top seed with a time of 2:21.50.

Douglass, who won the 200m individual medley this week, was runner-up to South African Schoenmaker in the 200m breaststroke last year.

Finland's Olympic bronze medallist Matti Mattsson qualified fourth for the men's 200 breaststroke final on Friday, with American Jake Foster top seed with a time of 2:08.78.



China's gold medallist Zhanle Pan (centre), Italy's silver medallist Alessandro Miressi (left) and Hungary's bronze medallist Nandor Nemeth pose on the podium of the men's 100m freestyle swimming event during the 2024 World Aquatics Championships at Aspire Dome in Doha yesterday. *(AFP)*



US gold medallist Claire Curzan poses on the podium of the women's 50m backstroke swimming event during the 2024 World Aquatics Championships at Aspire Dome in Doha yesterday. *(AFP)*

Mbappe tells PSG directors he plans to leave: Source

France captain Kylian Mbappe has told officials at Paris Saint-Germain that he intends to leave when his contract expires at the end of the season, a source close to the Ligue 1 champions said yesterday.

The 25-year-old, who arrived in Paris from Monaco in 2017, had extended his contract in 2022 until 2024 but last summer declined to activate a clause allowing him to stay another year at PSG.

Mbappe has been widely tipped to move to Real Madrid and, according to a source close to the matter, has already entered negotiations with the Spanish giants.

"The terms of the departure have yet to be fully agreed," the source said, adding that the club and Mbappe will make an official statement "when everything is finalised in the next few months".

PSG declined to comment when contacted by AFP.

Mbappe will leave PSG on a free transfer but the blow to the club will be softened by an agreement they reached last summer which will see the player waive bonuses amounting to around 60 to 70mn euros ($65.6mn to $76.6mn).

After seven seasons at PSG, Mbappe, the club's all-time top scorer, looks set to seal a move to Real Madrid, the club that the player has dreamt of since he was a child.

Real have made no secret of their desire to bring him to the Santiago Bernabeu. In 2019, 2021 and 2022, club president Florentino Perez considered signing him, only to be rebuffed each time. For PSG, the departure of their main star, a year after the exits of Neymar and Lionel Messi, marks the beginning of a new era of uncertainty.

FOOTBALL

Mbappe scores as PSG take control of Real Sociedad tie

AFP
Paris

Kylian Mbappe scored the opener as Paris Saint-Germain took a big step towards reaching the Champions League quarter-finals with a 2-0 win over Real Sociedad in the first leg of their last-16 tie on Wednesday.

The mediocrity of PSG's first-half performance at the Parc des Princes may have had their supporters fearing another in a long line of disappointing results down the years in the Champions League knockout stages.

But Mbappe, who is expected to leave the club at the end of the season when his contract expires, broke the deadlock from close range just before the hour mark. Bradley Barcola's well-taken goal in the 70th minute then made it 2-0 to give the French champions a comfortable cushion to take to Spain for the return early next month.

There was big pressure on PSG coming into this tie after they had gone out in the last 16 of the Champions League in five of the last seven seasons.

Another early exit this season would be a monumental setback for the Qatar-owned club, especially as Real Sociedad were appearing in their first Champions League knockout tie in two decades. They also made the trip to Paris having failed to score a goal while failing to win any of their last four games in all competitions. In addition to that, they were missing captain and top scorer Mikel Oyarzabal as he recovers from injury. PSG, who gave a Champions League bow at left-back to 20-year-old Brazilian January signing Lucas Beraldo, were aiming to extend a run of 16 games unbeaten in all competitions stretching back to early November.

However, an early shot by Mbappe that was beaten away by visiting goalkeeper Alex Remiro was really the only time they threatened in a poor first-half showing. Instead it was the away side, winners of their group ahead of Inter Milan, who looked more comfortable and who came closest to scoring prior to the break. In the final minute of the half, captain Mikel Merino controlled the ball before crashing a piledriver from 25 metres off the top of the bar and over. PSG eventually broke the deadlock on 58 minutes as Ousmane Dembele's corner from the right was helped on by Marquinhos towards the back post where Mbappe turned it in.

It was a 31st goal of the campaign in all competitions, and a fourth in the Champions League, for the France captain who is widely tipped to move to Real Madrid after this season.

That relaxed the hosts and Mbappe almost scored again in the 63rd minute as he won the ball back high up the pitch and hit a powerful shot from outside the box which was tipped onto the bar and over by Remiro.

Luis Enrique's side did find the net again 20 minutes from the end when Barcola collected a ball on the left, skipped away from Hamari Traore on his way into box and then slotted the ball past Remiro for his first ever Champions League goal. La Real could not find a way back into the game as their run without a goal stretched to five matches.

They now have something of a mountain to climb when they entertain PSG in San Sebastian on March 5, although supporters of the French side will remain wary given the way they have collapsed at this stage of the competition in recent years against Barcelona and Madrid, among others.

IMMOBILE HANDS LAZIO OVER TROUBLED BAYERN

Ciro Immobile fired Lazio towards a first Champions League quarter-final in nearly a quarter of a century in Wednesday's 1-0 win over Bayern Munich which plunged their troubled opponents even deeper into crisis.

Italy forward Immobile slotted home the last 16, first leg's decisive goal from the penalty spot in the 69th minute in Rome to pile pressure on Bundesliga champions Bayern, who risk having a disastrous season by their own exalted standards.

The spot-kick was won by Gustav Isaksen who was clattered by Dayot Upamecano with a rash tackle which earned the France defender a red card and left Bayern a man down for the final 20 minutes.



Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Kylian Mbappe celebrates scoring his team's first goal during the UEFA Champions League round of 16 first leg match against Real Sociedad at the Parc des Princes Stadium in Paris yesterday. *(AFP)*

FOOTBALL

Qatar surge to 37th rank following Asian Cup triumph

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar moved up 21 spots in the latest FIFA world ranking and are placed 37th following their successful defence of their AFC Asian Cup title. Qatar remained undefeated in the Asian Cup at home, winning six and drawing once to take their unbeaten run in the continental showpiece to 14 matches stretching back to 2019.

In the points stakes, Qatar chalked up the biggest tally (92.04 points) after capitalising on home comforts to successfully defend their continental crown.

Jordan, who emerged runners-up in the continental showpiece, improved 17 spots. Jordan, meanwhile, upstaged the likes of higher ranked sides Iraq and South Korea to reach the Asian Cup final for the first time.

Japan, who were eliminated in the quarter-finals in Qatar, remain Asia's highest ranked side but down one spot at 18. Iran are second at 20th while South Korea, also eliminated at the last four stage, are third at 22nd. Rounding up Asia's top 10 sides are Australia (23), Saudi Arabia (53), Iraq (59), Uzbekistan (66) and United Arab Emirates (69).

Qatar's rise sees them enter uncharted territory, with two other teams also recording best-ever rankings. Senegal (17th, up 3), who suffered shoot-out heartbreak at the hands of the eventual winners Ivory Coast in the Africa Cup of Nations round of 16, break new ground, while Tajikistan (99th, up 7) mark their maiden Asian Cup campaign by making a first-ever appearance in the top 100.

Ivory Coast are 39th, up 10 placed as they reap the rewards of their continental triumph on home soil, secured following an eventful tournament campaign. Beaten finalists Nigeria (28th, up 14) make significant strides but are no match for the Angola side they ousted in the last eight (93rd, up 24), who are the biggest climbers in the latest instalment of the global ranking.



Qatar moved up 21 spots following their successful defence of their AFC Asian Cup title on Saturday.

HH THE AMIR SWORD INTERNATIONAL EQUESTRIAN FESTIVAL

Lambre and Gaudiano shine in five star classes

In the CSI5* 140cm class, Saudi Arabia's Saad al-Ajmi emerges triumphant

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Santiago Lambre and Emanuele Gaudiano won the five star classes during the day one of the HH The Amir Sword International Equestrian Festival at Al Shaqab yesterday.

In the CSI5* against the clock 150cm class, Brazilian Lambre emerged triumphant with stallion Zeusz 67.91 seconds. The second place went to Thailand's Janakabhorn Karunayadhaj, who came home in 68.01 seconds with 12-year-old mare Maxwin Kinmar Agalux, while Saudi Arabia's Khaled al-Mombty finished third in 70.48 seconds with Jaguar King WD.

Earlier, Lambre had finished second to Gaudiano in the CSI5* Two Phases 145cm class. Italy's Gaudiano finished on top with his stallion Vasco 118 in a time of 24.22 seconds. Lambre this time had to settled for runner-up spot with veteran gelding Cetano Van Aspergem Z in 24.81 seconds, while Austrian Gerfried Puck was third with Equitron Ornaat V in 26.63 seconds.

In the CSI5* 140cm class, Saudi's Saad al-Ajmi came in first place in 41.74 seconds. Frenchwoman Cyrine Cherif was second, followed by her compatriot Louise Sidran.

More than 150 riders from 28 countries are participating in the showjumping and dressage competitions, which carries a total prize pool of more than 650,000 euros.

Yesterday, the championship began with three-star category at a height of 120cm, which witnessed intense competition. Qatar's Hamad Nasser al-Qadi came in first place with a time of 23.48 seconds, while Saudi's Abdullah al-Sheikh finished in 23.55 seconds, followed by home rider Salman Mohamed al-Emadi in 23.97 seconds.

In the 130cm class, Kuwait's Ali al-Kharafi came first with a time of 26.93 seconds, ahead of the Qatar's Bassem Mohamed, who came second with a time of 26.98 seconds, and Qatar's Hamad Towaim al-Marri, who came in third place with a time of 27.15 seconds.


Brazil's Santiago Lambre receives the winners's trophy from FEI judge Nasser al-Hajri after his victory in the CSI5* against the clock 150cm class during the HH The Amir Sword International Equestrian Festival at Al Shaqab yesterday. Thailand's Janakabhorn Karunayadhaj and Saudi Arabia's Khaled al-Mombty finished second and third respectively.



Dr Eiman al-Ansari, Head of Governmental Relations and Public Affairs at Al Abdulghani Motors, awarded the trophies to podium finishers of CSI5* Two Phases 145cm class.


Saudi Arabia's Saad al-Ajmi won the CSI*5 1.40m class yesterday.

In the three-star 145cm against the clock, Sweden's Evelina Tovek finished first, followed by home favourites Mohamed Saeed Haidan and Salman Mohamed al-Emadi.

In the competitions for the young riders category at a height of 130cm, which was held in the Longines indoor arena in Al Shaqab, Qatari rider Khalifa Abdullah al-Khalidi was crowned first place, followed by his compatriot Fares al-Qahtani in second place, while Saudi's Othman Bakerman came in third place.

As for the junior category at a height of 120cm, the Qatari riders displayed their brilliance. Sultan Salem al-Nuaimi came first, Mohamed bin Jassim al-Thani was second while Abdullah Khaled al-Jalandani was third.

Palace manager Hodgson 'stable' in hospital after illness

London: Roy Hodgson was in a "stable" condition in hospital, said Crystal Palace in a statement, after he was taken ill at a training session yesterday. The club cancelled their under-pressure manager's pre-match press conference.

The 76-year-old former England boss was due to speak at to preview Monday's Premier League game away to Everton. Palace confirmed the briefing would not go ahead with a short statement that said: "Unfortunately, today's press conference will no longer take place as scheduled as Roy Hodgson was taken ill during this morning's training session."

A later Palace statement: "Following news that Roy Hodgson was taken ill during today's training session, we can confirm that he is now stable and is currently undergoing tests in hospital. Everybody at the club sends their best wishes to Roy for a speedy recovery."

British media reports have suggested Hodgson is about to be sacked by Palace, who are 15th in the Premier League, five points above the relegation zone. Ex-Eintracht Frankfurt manager Oliver Glasner has been tipped to take over at the south London club.

Hodgson took charge of his 200th match as Palace manager earlier this week but his side lost 3-1 at Selhurst Park by London rivals Chelsea. Palace have won just three league games since beating Manchester United at Old Trafford in September and have lost 10 of their past 16 top-flight matches.

Hodgson, a boyhood Palace fan, is in his second spell in charge after returning for the final 10 games of last season when he signed a short-term deal to take over from Patrick Vieira. He guided the Eagles to an impressive 11th-place finish before agreeing to continue as manager for the 2023/24 season.

TENNIS

Swiatek downs Azarenka to stay on course for third Qatar title

AFP
Doha

World number one Iga Swiatek moved closer to a third successive Qatar TotalEnergies Open WTA 1000 title when she brushed aside Victoria Azarenka in straight sets in the quarter-finals yesterday. Swiatek claimed a 6-4, 6-0 win in 74 minutes and will face either fellow four-time Grand Slam title winner Naomi Osaka or Karolina Pliskova for a place in tomorrow's final.

Polish 22-year-old Swiatek is now 12-1 at the tournament with her only defeat coming in the 2020 second round to Svetlana Kuznetsova. Former world number one Azarenka, the 2012 and 2013 champion in Doha, double-faulted in the ninth game to hand Swiatek the first break. The top seed served it out before racing through the second set without facing a break point. Swiatek ended the encounter with 17 winners to just five from Azarenka.

Swiatek is bidding to become the first player to win a WTA Tour event three consecutive times since Serena Williams prevailed at the Miami Open in 2013, 2014 and 2015. Like Swiatek, Azarenka won her Doha titles back-to-back, over a decade ago in 2012 and 2013. Azarenka brought her Doha championship experience to the first set and was a point away from breaking Swiatek for a 5-3 lead. But the top seed got out of that jam, then earned a break point of her own at 4-4 behind a barrage of blistering backhands. Azarenka double faulted to cede that game and put Swiatek up a break, and the Pole routinely served out the set from there.

The second set was much more straightforward, as Swiatek romped through it without facing a break point. Swiatek went 5-for-6 on break points on the day, and she ended the match with 17 winners to just five from Azarenka.

Earlier, Elena Rybakina and Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova set-up a semi-final clash. Third seed and former Wimbledon champion Rybakina came from 4-2 down in the first set to defeat 2021 US Open finalist Leylah Fernandez 6-4, 6-2. Pavlyuchenkova secured her first 1000-level hardcourt semi-final in 14 years with a 7-5, 6-4 win over Danielle Collins of the United States.

"I hope it will be a good match, we know each other well, both on and off the court," said Rybakina, last weekend's champion in Abu Dhabi, of her clash with Pavlyuchenkova.

Pavlyuchenkova, ranked 32 in the world, needed one hour and 34 minutes to see off Collins, a former world number seven who had to qualify this week. The Russian's only stutter came in the first set when she coughed up a 5-2 lead but she regrouped to take it 7-5 and went on to claim victory on her first match point.

"I was injured for a long time, so I'm happy to be back and able to fight on all points, and victories give me confidence," said Pavlyuchenkova in the post-match on-court interview. "I've been working a lot on the mental aspect and I feel like it's paying off," added the 32-year-old, a finalist at the French Open in 2021.


Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina hits a backhand during her match against Canada's Leylah Fernandez at the Qatar TotalEnergies Open in Doha yesterday. *(AFP)*


Iga Swiatek serves against Victoria Azarenka.


Former Brazilian footballer Ronaldinho at the Qatar TotalEnergies Open yesterday.