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GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

Dhoni relinquishes captaincy as Chennai gear up for IPL defence

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WORLD CUP AND ASIAN CUP QUALIFIERS

Captain Afif strikes brace in Qatar's easy win over Kuwait

Qatar lead Group A with nine points, five clear of second-placed India, who drew with Afghanistan

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Akram Afif donned the captain's armband for the first time and the star striker celebrated his new role in style with a brace as Qatar swept past Kuwait 3-0 in the preliminary joint qualification - Round 2 match for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup 2027.

At the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium, the Asian champions broke the deadlock two minutes into second half after a simple tap-in from Afif. Four minutes later 19-year-old substitute Ahmed al-Rawi scored his first ever senior goal, before Afif added another in 68th minute.

The win took Qatar a step closer to qualifying for the next round as they aim to qualify for the World Cup for the first time. Qatar lead the Group A with nine points, five clear of second-placed India, who drew with Afghanistan 0-0 yesterday.

Qatar now travel to Kuwait for the reverse fixture, which will be held on March 26 at the Sabah al-Salem Stadium and a win in Kuwait City could well seal their place in the third round of the qualifiers.

The first sight on goal went Qatar's way, Jassem Garber's half-volley from outside the box took a deflection off a defender to go narrowly wide with Kuwait goalkeeper Sulaiman Abdulghafoor rooted.

There was a poignant moment at the 10th minute mark when the fans at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium paid homage to former Qatar captain Hassan al-Haydos - who recently announced his international retirement - by unfurling a banner with the image of the two-time AFC Asian Cup winner.

On the pitch, a mistake in the 15th minute almost gifted the opening goal to Kuwait, goalkeeper Meshaal Barsham missed an attempted punch and had teammate Lucas Mendes to thank for clearing Yousef al-Sulaiman's follow-up on the line. Qatar gradually grew stronger and a curling free-kick from Afif - appointed captain - only needed a touch but Almoez Ali and Yusuf Abdurisag got in each other's way, with the ball rolling harmlessly out of play for a goal kick.

Marquez Lopez's side came out firing on all cylinders in the second half after the Spanish coach - who was recently rewarded for Asian Cup triumph with a contract till 2026 - made changes. He brought in Ismail Mohamed and Ahmed al-Rawi for Abdullah al-Maaraqi and Mahdi Salem.



Akram Afif celebrates after scoring against Kuwait during the preliminary joint qualification - Round 2 match for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup 2027 at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha yesterday. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil



Ahmed al-Rawi (right) is congratulated by his teammates after the teenager scored his first ever senior goal yesterday.

And the hosts quickly built themselves a two-goal lead. Two minutes into the re-

start, Afif fired in from close range before substitute al-Rawi doubled the score in



Fans at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium paid homage to former Qatar captain Hassan al-Haydos - who recently announced his international retirement - by unfurling a banner with the image of the two-time AFC Asian Cup winner.



Qatar's Tarek Salman (left) and Kuwait's Faisal Zaid al-Harbi vie for the ball.

the 51st minute, controlling the ball perfectly to smash home a rebound after Abdulghafoor spilled a save.

Qatar's dominance saw them add a third through Afif in the 68th minute, the skipper scoring from the rebound after his ini-

tial effort had bounced off Abdulghafoor. With eight minutes left to play, Afif unselfishly set up al-Rawi for the shot, only for the attempt to hit a defender as Qatar eased off in the closing minutes to claim a comfortable win.

FOCUS

Japan beat North Korea, Son scores in draw against Thailand



North Korea's midfielder Kim Kuk Bom (left) clashes with Japan's Daizen Maeda during the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup 2027 qualification match at the National Stadium in Tokyo yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Hong Kong

Japan and Australia took big strides towards the next stage of Asian qualifying for the 2026 World Cup but South Korea dropped two points despite leading through Son Heung-min.

Germany-based midfielder Ao Tanaka scored the only goal after two minutes in Tokyo to give Japan a nervy 1-0 win over North Korea. Japan have three wins from three and are firmly on course to reach the third stage of qualifying for the World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

North Korea, who are still in the hunt despite the defeat, were cheered on by a vocal contingent of supporters from Japan's 300,000-strong ethnic Korean community. They waved flags and had their faces painted, but their side fell just short despite a spirited second-half display. "We wanted to bring good results for our compatriots but we couldn't, and for that, we're very sorry," said North Korea's coach Sin Yong Nam.

Japan and North Korea are scheduled to meet again on Tuesday in a game that was supposed to take place in the North Korean capital Pyongyang. It looks set to be

moved, however, after the North Koreans told their Japanese counterparts at half-time in Tokyo that they cannot host it after all, according to Japan's football chief. Hajime Moriyasu's Japan hardly sparkled but it was a welcome, if unconvincing, return to winning ways after a disappointing Asian Cup where they exited in the quarter-finals.

Another team trying to move on from the Asian Cup was South Korea as they hosted Thailand in Seoul. Skipper and Spurs ace Son scored in the first half but the Koreans were pegged back in a 1-1 draw in their first match since the sacking of Jürgen Klinsmann. It was also the first game since revelations about a bust-up between Son and Paris Saint-Germain's Lee Kang-in at the Asian Cup, where South Korea lost 2-0 to Jordan in the last four.

Son was left with a dislocated finger in the fracas at their team hotel in Qatar on the eve of the semi-final. Lee started on the bench yesterday but came on soon after Thailand grabbed a shock equaliser through Suphanat Mueanta.

The two sides meet again on Tuesday in Bangkok. South Korea are still on course to reach the next stage of qualifying and sit top of their group with seven points from three matches. Thailand are second on

goal difference from China, who squandered a two-goal lead to draw 2-2 at Singapore in Branko Ivankovic's first match as China coach.

In Sydney, Australia's Scottish connection helped them to a 2-0 victory over a determined Lebanon to move onto a perfect nine points. St Mirren midfielder Keanu Baccus struck early in the first half before Hearts defender Kye Rowles added a second on 54 minutes in front of a near-full house of 27,000.

Iran, seeking their fourth straight World Cup berth, hammered Turkmenistan 5-0 in Tehran, with Hossein Kanani scoring twice and Bayer Leverkusen's Sardar Azmoun, on loan to Roma, also getting on the scoresheet. Eldor Shomurodov gave Uzbekistan the lead in their 2-0 win over hosts Hong Kong in another Group E match.

Asian Cup finalists Jordan eased to a 3-0 victory over Pakistan, with Mousa Tamari scoring twice to take the visitors onto four points from three games with Group G leaders Saudi Arabia due to face Tajikistan.

Kyrgyzstan sealed a 2-0 win over Taiwan in Group D despite playing 66 minutes with 10 men due to Said Datsiev's sending off for a second yellow card while Indonesia defeated Vietnam 1-0 in Jakarta in Group F.

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Dhoni in focus as Chennai take on Bengaluru today

The 42-year-old hands over the CSK captaincy to Ruturaj Gaikwad ahead of today's opener

Reuters
Bengaluru

Chennai Super Kings will launch their Indian Premier League title defence against Royal Challengers Bengaluru in what could be Mahendra Singh Dhoni's final year in the lucrative Twenty20 competition after he stepped down as captain yesterday.

Dhoni played his last international in 2019 but remains one of the country's most popular players, and while the 42-year-old showed some signs of slowing down last season he still helped Chennai win a fifth title to match Mumbai Indians' haul.

Media reports have said 2024 could be the former India skipper's swan song and the wicketkeeper-batsman, who had knee surgery last year, handed over the captaincy to batsman Ruturaj Gaikwad ahead of today's opener.

Dhoni has captained Chennai since the inception of the league in 2008 and the team did not provide details about his future beyond this year's edition.

"Ruturaj has been an integral part of Chennai since 2019 and has played 52 matches in IPL during this period. The team looks forward to the upcoming season," Chennai added in a statement.

While Chennai may soon have to prepare for life without their talisman, Mumbai made one of the most talked-about pre-season moves by signing Hardik Pandya to take over the captaincy from India teammate Rohit Sharma.

Pandya showed his leadership qualities by guiding Gujarat to the 2022 title but may find Mumbai fans harder to win over after the team's decision to remove the league's joint-most successful captain



MS Dhoni poses in CSK outfit for the 2024 IPL season.

from his role. Having regained fitness after an ankle injury sustained at the 50-overs World Cup in October, Pandya will also look to hit form before the T20 World Cup which will be staged in West Indies and the United States from June.

Several top England players will be absent from the IPL, with Delhi Capitals batsman Harry Brook skipping the tournament after the death of his grandmother, while Mark Wood, Gus Atkinson and Jason Roy are managing their workloads.

Ben Stokes and Joe Root opted out of the player auction in December, depriving the IPL of more world class names, but Australia will be well represented, most notably by big-money signings Pat Cum-



Captains of the Indian Premier League sides pose with the trophy.

mins and Mitchell Starc. Starc became the most expensive player in the league's history, attracting an eye-watering \$2.98bn bid from Kolkata Knight Riders after national team skipper Cummins briefly held that honour as Sunrisers Hyderabad bid \$2.46mn for him.

Bengaluru's Virat Kohli will add to the

league's star power and is expected to return against Chennai after missing India's 4-1 Test series win over England for personal reasons.

India wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant will also be back for Delhi Capitals after his near-fatal car accident in December 2022 but pace bowler Mohamed Shami will miss

Gujarat's campaign after a heel operation.

Today's opening game will be followed by double-headers at the weekend, with 21 matches set to take place across 10 cities by April 7.

The Indian cricket board will release the remainder of the schedule after considering general election dates.

SPOTLIGHT

Starc and Cummins to Coetzee and Patel: Six IPL big-money buys

AFP
New Delhi

The 2024 Indian Premier League begins today, starting some of the world's best cricketers.

AFP Sport highlights six who went for eye-watering sums at the player auction for the 17th edition of the richest Twenty20 league in the world:

Mitchell Starc (KKR)

The Australian is the most expensive buy in IPL history after Kolkata shelled out \$2.98mn on the fast bowler and handy lower-order slugger.

Starc, a left-arm swing exponent with 358 Test wickets, returns to the IPL nine years after he played for Royal Challengers Bengaluru.

Videos of the 34-year-old bowling in training for Kolkata have generated huge interest on social media. Starc took 16 wickets in Australia's 50-over World Cup triumph, including three in the final against hosts India.

Pat Cummins (SRH)

Australia's World Cup-winning captain Pat Cummins will lead Sunrisers Hyderabad in his first stint as an IPL captain after they paid \$2.5mn for the 30-year-old fast bowler, an IPL auction record until Starc went under the hammer shortly after.

Former Australia pace bowling great Glenn McGrath said the hefty price tags would not impact Cummins or Starc "even one percent".

Cummins led Australia to win the World Test Championship triumph last year where they also beat India in the final.

Daryl Mitchell (CSK)

The batting all-rounder was bought by the 2023 IPL champions for \$1.6mn, a month after starring for New Zealand at the World Cup.

Mitchell, 32, rose to prominence by scoring two World Cup centuries against India - in the group stage and in the semi-final.

The Super Kings are leaning heavily on New Zealand talent as they go for a record sixth IPL title in 2024. They also have batsman Rachin Ravindra and spinner Mitchell Santner in their squad ahead of the opening match today against Royal Challengers Bengaluru.

Rovman Powell (RR)

The hard-hitting West Indian was the first player to be sold in the auction in Dubai as Rajasthan Royals bid \$890,000.



Mitchell Starc



Gerald Coetzee

Powell scores at a strike rate of more than 144 in the middle order but his previous IPL record is moderate, with only 257 runs in two seasons. He shone, however, in the Caribbean Premier League for Barbados Royals.

Gerald Coetzee (MI)

Gerald Coetzee's tearaway speed saw him finish as South Africa's

leading bowler at the World Cup in India with 20 wickets in eight matches.

The displays led five-time champions Mumbai Indians to pay \$602,000 for him to partner Jasprit Bumrah in a formidable pace attack.

The 23-year-old Coetzee, who said he was excited to "play under Hardik Pandya, and bowl with Bumrah", has taken 41 international wickets in all formats since his debut last year.

Harshal Patel (Punjab Kings)

An IPL regular since debuting for Royal Challengers Bengaluru in 2012, the medium-pace raised eyebrows when he was the subject of a bidding war at the auction, ending up as the most expensive purchase.

The 33-year-old took 32 of his 111 career IPL wickets in an outstanding 2021 campaign, performances that led to an India debut later that year.

But he failed to cement a regular place in the national side, taking 29 wickets in 25 Twenty20 matches.

His last cap came on January 3, 2023 and he was released by Bengaluru last year.

PREVIEW

Bangladesh have 'high expectations' for two-Test series against Sri Lanka

AFP
Sylhet, Bangladesh

Bangladesh host a "formidable" Sri Lanka in a two-match Test series starting today and ambitions are growing after years of struggle.

Bangladesh finished last in the 2021-2023 World Test Championship, winning just one of their 12 matches.

But in their previous Test series, against New Zealand in November-December, Bangladesh won the first match in Sylhet before losing the second in Dhaka after a close fight.

"We have high expectations," Bangladesh coach Chandika Hathurusingha told reporters in Sylhet ahead of the first Test, part of the 2023-25 World Test Championship cycle.

"If we can win most matches at home, then we give ourselves a good chance to be in contention in the World Test Championship.

"This Test series gives us a good challenge, but we are up for it," he added.

Hathurusingha warned however that he was expecting a tough challenge from his home nation Sri Lanka, calling them a "formidable, very experienced side".

Bangladesh will have to defy recent history.

They have won one of their 24 Tests against Sri Lanka, with their only victory coming seven years ago in Colombo.

Bangladesh will also be without veteran batsman Mushfiqur Rahim, who was ruled out of the series with a thumb injury.

Bangladesh's highest scorer in Tests with 5,676 runs in 88



Bangladesh skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto (right) and his Sri Lankan counterpart Dhananjaya de Silva pose with the trophy in Sylhet yesterday. (@BCBTigers)

matches was injured during Monday's four-wicket win, when he helped the hosts to a 2-1 victory in the ODI series.

Sri Lanka won the Twenty20 series 2-1.

The second Test begins in Chittagong on March 30.

Meanwhile Sri Lanka yesterday defended the inclusion of all-rounder Wanindu Hasaranga in the Test squad for the two-match series against Bangladesh despite his suspension by the ICC.

The move allows Hasaranga to serve out his ban during the Bangladesh Tests - and save himself for the ICC Twenty20 World Cup in June, Sri Lanka's next international fixture.

If he were not included in the squad for Bangladesh Tests, the Sri Lanka T20 captain would have to sit out the first four matches of the World Cup.

Hasaranga was on Monday criticised by umpires during the third one-day international against Bangladesh, when he snatched his cap from one and

ridiculed him. Later that day, the 26-year-old apparently ended his retirement from Test cricket and was included in Sri Lanka's 17-man Test squad.

On Tuesday, the International Cricket Council handed down the punishment after Hasaranga was found guilty of "showing dissent at an umpire's decision", earning him three demerit points.

This brought his total demerit points to eight in a 24-month period, which, according to ICC rules, was converted into four suspension points.

The four suspension points equate to a ban from two Tests or four ODIs or T20Is, whatever comes first.

But Sri Lanka's media manager, Mahinda Halangola, said yesterday that Hasaranga's inclusion in the Test squad was not meant to help him serve out his ban before the World Cup.

Hasaranga had announced his retirement from Test cricket in August to prolong his limited-overs career.

Van den Berg sprints to Tour of Catalonia stage four win

Barcelona: Marijn van den Berg emerged triumphant from a bunch sprint finale to snatch stage four of the Tour of Catalonia yesterday. Two-time Tour de France winner Tadej Pogacar remains the race leader and firm favourite after flexing his muscles with sensational stage two and three wins. EF Education-Easy Post rider Van den Berg prevailed in a blistering finish to the 169km run from Sort to Lleida to score his second World Tour victory. The 24-year-old Dutchman, who was concussed in a crash in February, edged out second-place Arne Marit and Emils Liepins, third. "It was a really fast day ... (the home stretch) was quite hectic with all the roundabouts," Van den

Berg told *Teledoor*. "I crashed quite hard in the Algarve, so I was out a little bit. "I came here to focus on getting in shape again and see how the outcome would be on stages like today, and now I'm back on track I would say." Stage five today takes riders 167.5km from Altafulla to Viladecans and does not feature any notably difficult climbs. Slovenian star Pogacar, two minutes and 27 seconds ahead of his closest challenger Mikel Landa, could effectively seal his victory tomorrow with a 6km climb to a mountain sanctuary at an average gradient of 7.2 percent. The UAE Team Emirates rider is aiming for an ambitious Giro-Tour double in 2024, with Marco Pantani the last to win both in 1998.

TENNIS

Murray beats Berrettini as Stephens, Osaka advance

Murray, who won the Miami Open in 2009 and 2013, will meet Tomas Martin Etcheverry in next round

AFP
Miami

Two-time Miami Open champion Andy Murray fought back for a 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 win over struggling Italian Matteo Berrettini in the first round at Hard Rock Stadium on Wednesday.

Berrettini needed medical attention near the end of the second set after appearing to almost faint on court but he battled on.

The Italian recently returned to the tour after an injury-plagued 2023, reaching the final of a Challenger event in Phoenix.

He broke Murray's serve in the first game of the match and was in firm control of the opening set.

But he faded badly in the second and called a medical time-out when 5-2 down after walking off the court looking dizzy.

The weather in Miami was not particularly hot or humid and more pleasantly mild than has often been the case at the tournament in past years.

The 27-year-old former world number six, put up a better fight in the third, but a solid-looking Murray saw the match out in two hours and 47 minutes.

Murray made just 20 unforced errors while Berrettini committed 44, as the Scot clinched his fourth consecutive first-round win.

"There is life in the old dog yet," wrote Murray on the television camera lens at the end of the game and he was pleased with the manner of his win.

"I started off a little bit slow, but I do think I played pretty well from the middle of the first set until the end of the match," he said.

"I created a lot of opportunities



Great Britain's Andy Murray reacts after missing a shot against Matteo Berrettini of Italy during the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. (USA TODAY Sports)

and he was struggling for a little bit at the end of the second and beginning of the third. I capitalised on that and got off to a quick start in the third. I served it out well in the end."

Murray, who won the Miami Open in 2009 and 2013, will meet 29th-seeded Argentine Tomas Martin Etcheverry in the next round.

In the WTA event, four-time grand slam-winner Naomi Osaka had little trouble in defeating Italy's Elisabetta Cocciaretto 6-3, 6-4 in one hour, 18 minutes to move into the second round.

Osaka is ranked 229th in the world after taking a break after having a child and spending over a year out of the game and is re-

turning to the scene of her run to the final in 2022 where lost to Iga Swiatek in the final.

Osaka said her performance was the best since she returned to the tour at Brisbane in January.

"Honestly, this is probably the most free that I was able hit my balls, the closest to the feeling that I want to capture going forward, so I would say that this is probably my best match in terms of shot-making....I was swinging the best that I have since I have been back," she said.

Osaka will face another mother in the second round when she takes on Elina Svitolina of Ukraine who in 12 months back on the circuit is already back inside the top 20 - a return which Osaka says has

inspired her. "I remember watching her play at Wimbledon whilst I was pregnant and thinking that I want to be there too one day. I think she's always just been a really great player so it's not surprising to me she's back in the top 20. It's where she belongs," said Osaka.

American Sloane Stephens beat Angelique Kerber 6-2, 6-3 in a meeting of two former Grand Slam champions.

Stephens, celebrating her 31st birthday, was on top throughout against the German who had shown good form in Indian Wells where she reached the fourth round. Stephens, the 2018 Miami champion, will play Romania's 19th-seeded Sorana Cirstea in the second round.

SABALENKA HEARTBROKEN OVER FORMER BOYFRIEND'S DEATH



Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus looks on during practice on day 5 of the Miami Open. (AFP)

Miami: World number two Aryna Sabalenka described the death of her former boyfriend as an "unthinkable tragedy" as she commented for the first time yesterday on the apparent suicide of Konstantin Koltsov. The Miami-Dade police department confirmed on Tuesday that they had responded to a call the day before at a Miami resort about reports of a man jumping off a balcony. The police said no foul play was suspected. The news of former professional ice hockey player Koltsov's death sent a shockwave through the Miami Open where Sabalenka is scheduled to play her opening match today against Paula Badosa.

"Konstantin's death is an unthinkable tragedy, and while we were no longer together, my heart is broken," Sabalenka said in a statement through her publicists.

"Please respect my privacy and his family's privacy during this difficult time."

The statement was the first mention since the tragedy that the couple had split.

Koltsov, 42, played for the Belarus national team at the 2002 and 2010 Olympics and spent parts of three seasons with the National Hockey League's Pittsburgh Penguins between 2003 and 2006.

Sabalenka and Koltsov were first linked in June 2021, according to *People* magazine, and the world number two frequently posted photos of them together on her Instagram account.

"I love you @koltsov2021," she wrote in one post that included heart and other emojis.

Koltsov also applauded Sabalenka after the Belarusian won her second consecutive Australian Open title in January.

FORMULA ONE

Verstappen to see out contract despite off-track turmoil

AFP
Melbourne

Three-time world champion Max Verstappen said yesterday he intends to see out his contract with Red Bull, insisting he was happy despite weeks of off-track turbulence.

The Dutchman is signed until 2028 but suggested at the last race in Saudi Arabia he would consider leaving if Red Bull parted company with long-time mentor Helmut Marko in a power struggle threatening to envelop the team. It followed his father Jos claiming earlier this month that Red Bull faced being "torn apart" if team boss Christian Horner remained in his position.

Horner was accused of inappropriate conduct involving a woman colleague but he was subsequently cleared of any wrongdoing ahead of the season-opener in Bahrain.

Asked at the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne if he would honour his contract, Verstappen replied: "Of course, that is why I signed the contract in the first place."

"For sure, with the deal in place, that is my intention, to be here until the end.



Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen speaks to the media at the Albert Park Circuit as Formula One teams prepare ahead of 2024 Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

"It would be a great story for me to see it out till the end because it would mean I've been part of one family and one team."

"I always felt comfortable (in Red Bull) because for me it is like a second family, it's good."

The 26-year-old's career has been overseen by Marko, 80, and Verstappen reiterated that it was important to

keep in place a team that has enjoyed so much success.

"I feel we all want the same, we all want to perform on the track, that's what we want to focus on as a team," he said.

"In general, when you have a successful team, when you have a good group of central people, it is important to keep them together and happy and

in the same roles." His veiled threat to leave Red Bull piqued the interest of Mercedes boss Toto Wolff, who needs a replacement next season when Lewis Hamilton departs for Ferrari.

"It's always nice to hear that," said Verstappen, who added that he did not know what would happen after 2028.

"I don't know after 2028 what happens, if I am going to continue, sign a new deal, I don't know."

Verstappen dominated the first two Grands Prix of the season in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia to put him on a nine-race win streak.

Should he cross the finish line first in Australia, he will equal his own record of winning 10 races in a row.

Sergio Perez, who finished runner-up to his

teammate in the opening two races, said he hoped Verstappen remained, with the team in "a very strong position."

"To achieve that it takes a lot of years," he said. "Everyone in the team is working well together now, the whole engineering team is united. You can see that on the track and how efficient we have been in the last years."

"So I don't see any reason to change it and it will obviously be a blow if Max were to leave."

Sainz feeling 'positive' about Ferrari return after surgery



Ferrari's Carlos Sainz Jr. with fans ahead of the Australian Grand Prix. (Reuters)

Melbourne: Formula One driver Carlos Sainz expressed confidence yesterday he was fit enough to drive his Ferrari in Melbourne but will decide whether to race after seeing how his body holds up in practice.

The Spaniard underwent surgery for appendicitis two weeks ago, forcing him to miss the last grand prix in Saudi Arabia, where teenage reserve driver Oliver Bearman came seventh. Sainz said he was improving by the day, having spent the last fortnight in recovery rather than training.

"Every day I'm feeling a lot better, the first week was tough. That was when you see things a bit darker," he said ahead of Sunday's Australian Grand Prix.

"But in the second week the recovery sped up a lot and I started to feel confident I can jump in the car tomorrow and do well."

"I'll see how I feel, I'm feeling positive about it." Sainz came third behind winner Max Verstappen and the Dutchman's Red Bull teammate Sergio Perez at the opening race of the season in Bahrain.

Red Bull repeated the one-two feat in Jeddah, where Sainz's teammate Charles Leclerc filled the podium.

While Sainz has been given the all-clear from doctors and is keen to race, it is not clear how his body will react to the demands of Formula One. "I'll let you know tomorrow when I get back in the car and the G-forces throw me around a bit," he said, referring to first practice in Melbourne today.

"But I feel ready, I've done as much as possible to recover and you cannot imagine the effort and logistics that I have done to be fit for this race. "I'm very happy with the progress I've made and now, as I said, it's time to jump in the car and see how I feel."

Sainz is leaving Ferrari at the end of the season to make way for Mercedes' seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton.

(AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Hamilton backs Susie Wolff's legal action against FIA

Reuters
Melbourne

Seven-times Formula One world champion Lewis Hamilton has applauded Susie Wolff for taking legal action against the governing FIA, saying he hopes it will improve transparency and accountability in the sport.

Wolff, one of the top women in motorsport and the wife of Mercedes Formula One boss Toto, said on Wednesday she had filed a criminal complaint in France against the FIA for a conflict of interest inquiry last year.

Wolff announced her move after FIA President Mohamed Ben Sulayem was cleared of alleged interference in two races last year by its ethics committee.

In the lead up to the Australian Grand Prix on Sunday, Mercedes driver Hamilton said he was incredibly proud of Wolff and described her as brave for standing



Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton signs his autograph in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters)

up in a world where "people are often silenced". "And I love that she's taking it out of this world - fight it

from outside because there is a real lack of accountability here, within this sport, the FIA, things that are happening behind closed doors," he told reporters in the paddock at Albert Park yesterday.

"There is no transparency, there is really no accountability. We need that. I think the fans need that. How can you trust the sport and what is happening here?" The FIA did not provide immediate comment to Reuters yesterday about Wolff's legal action or Hamilton's comments.

The FIA announced in December an inquiry into the Wolffs following a magazine report that a team boss had received confidential information from an employee of the commercial rights holder.

However, the inquiry was swiftly shelved after all nine other F1 teams issued statements in support of Susie Wolff. Wolff's legal action follows internal strife at F1 team Red Bull, whose boss Christian Horner was cleared of alleged misconduct after a complaint by a female employee.

HORSE RACING

Dubawi Spectre claims Al Jassasiya Cup



Connections of Dubawi Spectre celebrate after the four-year-old bay gelding won the Al Jassasiya Cup at the Al Rayyan Racecourse. **PICTURES:** *Juhaim*

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Mansoor Ebrahim S I al-Mahmoud-owned and Gassim Ghazali-trained Dubawi Spectre won the Al Jassasiya Cup at Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's (QREC) 36th Al Rayyan meeting.

Ridden by jockey Marco Casa-

mento, the four-year-old bay gelding settled in mid-position throughout and when asked to stretch away from the field in the early straight he performed nicely, holding on well from the charging rivals by half a length to win the feature race.

Wathnan Racing's Kovanof came second, while Hamad Ahmed Hassan al-Malki al-Jehani-owned Al Shaman finished third.

QREC Racing Manager Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi presented the trophies to the winners of the Al Jassasiya Cup.

In the penultimate race of the day, Jockey Faleh Bughanaim guided Al Wakra Racing's Superior Moment to victory in the 1100m contest for Thoroughbred Handicap (65-85).

Dr Fahad Salman FS al-Hajri charge AJS Hajaj, in the silks of Khalifa Hassan al-Jehani and rid-



Jockey Marco Casamento guides Dubawi Spectre to Al Jassasiya Cup victory.

den by Saleh Salem al-Marri, won the Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (65-85) for four-year-old+ race

In the meet opener, jockey Jefferson Smith guided Al Wasmiyah Farm-owned and Hamad al-Jehani-trained Mount Dukono to victory in the Thoroughbred Maiden Plate for three-year-old.

Ridden by Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi, Mohamed Ghazali-trained Al Zaem was fastest in the Purebred Arabian Handicap race.

RESULTS

36th Al Rayyan Meeting

Al Jassasiya Cup Day

WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

1 - Al Jassasiya Cup, Thoroughbred Handicap (80-100) Dubawi Spectre, Gassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento

2 - Thoroughbred Handicap (65-85)

Superior Moment, Owaida Salem

al-Hajri, Faleh Bughanaim

3 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap

AJS Hajaj, Dr Fahad Salman FS al-Hajri, Saleh Salem al-Marri
4 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap Neshan, Abdulrahman Mohamed Abdulwahed, Tejash Juglall
5 - Purebred Arabian Handicap Al Zaem, Mohamed Ghazali, Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi
6 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate Al Eraq, M al-Sulaiti, Abdelkadir Benlarbi
7 - Thoroughbred Maiden Plate Mount Dukono, Hamad al-Jehani, Jefferson Smith

OLYMPICS

France get kind draw as Mbappe uncertainty lingers

'WE WILL TRY TO MAKE IT HAPPEN, BUT IT'LL BE A LONG JOURNEY'



France's head coach Didier Deschamps (left) shares a laugh with Kylian Mbappe before a training session as part of the team's preparation for upcoming friendly in Clairefontaine-en-Yvelines yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Saint-Denis, France

Thierry Henry's France side are firm favourites to progress following a kind group draw for men's football at the 2024 Olympic Games on Wednesday, as the hosts wait to see if Kylian Mbappe will be made available.

"Nothing is easy," said Henry after the draw, but his side, already amongst the favourites for the gold medal on home turf, avoided potential pitfalls in not drawing Morocco and Egypt.

Les Bleus are in Group A of the 16-team tournament with New Zealand, USA and the winners of the AFC-CAF play-off, as they seek to win a second Olympic gold after success in 1984.

"It's never easy to win a home tournament, I think Brazil and Spain did it (in 2016 and 1992, respectively) but it doesn't happen often," said Henry. "We will try to make it happen, but it'll be a long journey."

It is understood that Paris Saint-Germain superstar Mbappe is also very keen to represent his country at the Olympics, but he would likely have little time to rest after Euro 2024.

Football's world governing body FIFA does not oblige clubs to release players for the Olympics, which could complicate Mbappe's situation even more.

The World Cup winner's chances of featuring in the hosts' squad as one of their three over-23 players seem all but extinct, however fellow 2018 world champion Antoine Griezmann may still feature despite his recent ankle injury. But, with under-23 talents like Eduardo Camavinga, Bradley Barcola and Warren Zaire-Emery also potentially at his disposal, Henry can well expect to top the group regardless.

Such an outcome could well be key in order to avoid Argentina, who were drawn in Group B alongside Morocco, Ukraine and the third qualifier from Asia. Argentina denied Brazil the chance of winning a third straight men's

Olympic football title after defeating them 1-0 last month to knock them out of qualifying for the Paris Games.

Coach Javier Mascherano has a trump card he may now play as Argentina seek a third gold for themselves after victories in 2004 and 2008. Global superstar Lionel Messi, 36, won gold in 2008 and, after winning the World Cup in 2022, he may feature for Argentina in a bid to win a last international tournament.

"Everyone knows my relationship with Leo... and the doors are open for him to join us... It's up to him," Mascherano, a long-time former international team-mate of Messi, said in February.

Spain, the silver medallists in Tokyo, will feature in Group C against Egypt, Dominican Republic and the second qualifier from the AFC.

Group D will include Paraguay, Israel, Mali and the first qualifier from the AFC.

Men's football at the 2024 Olympics is primarily restricted to players born after January 1, 2001,

but each side is allowed to select three players over the age of 23 for their squad.

The men's tournament will begin on July 24, two days before the Games opening ceremony, and conclude with the final in Paris on August 9. The top two teams in each group will qualify for the quarter-finals.

THE DRAW

Group A: France, New Zealand, USA, ICP AFC-CAF

Group B: Argentina, Morocco, AFC 3, Ukraine

Group C: AFC 2, Spain, Egypt, Dominican Republic

Group D: AFC 1, Paraguay, Mali, Israel

NOTE: The AFC U-23 Asian Cup will take place in Qatar from April 15 to May 3, the two finalists and the third-placed team will automatically qualify for the Olympics. The AFC-CAF play-off will decide the final participant at the Games. It will be contested between African side Guinea and the fourth-placed team from the AFC U-23 Asian Cup.

MOTOGP

Bagnaia seeks 20th win in Portugal

AFP
Portimao, Portugal

World champion Francesco Bagnaia targets his 20th MotoGP victory at this weekend's Portuguese Grand Prix, two weeks after his Ducati team dominated the season-opener in Qatar.

Bagnaia has already triumphed on the Algarve circuit in 2021 and 2023 and will be heavy favourite again for Sunday's race. "It's a circuit that I really like and where we have always been fast in the past," he said.

"Last season I won the sprint race and the Grand Prix and we have the potential to do well again this year. It won't be easy, I expect strong competition because many riders could fight for victory here."

In Qatar, Ducati placed six of their eight motorcycles in the top seven, with only South African Brad Binder on a KTM managing to break the stranglehold in second place. Last year's championship runner-up Jorge Martin, of the Ducati-Pramac team, was third in Qatar where he won the Saturday sprint and took pole position.

However, he has been cursed by misfortune on the Portimao track in the past, crashing out twice and only so far managing a best finish of seventh place.

"The pace was good in Qatar so we are confident," said the Spaniard. "I just hope to have better sensations on the bike but I am convinced that we will find a way to achieve it."

Compatriot and six-time MotoGP world champion Marc Marquez will race just his second weekend aboard a Ducati-Gresini after spending his entire premier class career with Honda.

Marquez was an impressive fourth in Qatar on his debut for his new team and is chasing a



first podium with the Italian manufacturer. "We'll see where we stand. I still have work to do because I need to understand how to use the full potential of the bike," said Marquez.

He will share the spotlight this weekend with rookie and fellow Spaniard Pedro Acosta, who impressed in Qatar on his MotoGP debut. Eighth on the grid, Acosta pulled off a series of daring overtakes and fought shoulder to shoulder with the sport's marquee names before slipping back to a ninth-place finish.

"Portimao is one of my favourite circuits so I'm sure it will be a good weekend but I have to continue to learn," the Spanish hopeful stressed on Thursday.

STANDINGS

1. Francesco Bagnaia (ITA) 31pts, 2. Brad Binder (RSA) 29, 3. Jorge Martin (ESP) 28, 4. Marc Marquez (ESP) 18, 5. Enea Bastianini (ITA) 15, 6. Aleix Espargaro (ESP) 15, 7. Alex Marquez (ESP) 13, 8. Fabio Di Giannantonio (ITA) 9, 9. Pedro Acosta (ESP) 9, 10. Maverick Vinales (ESP) 7, 11. Fabio Quartararo (FRA) 5, 12. Johann Zarco (FRA) 4, 13. Joan Mir (ESP) 3, 14. Marco Bezzecchi (ITA) 2, 15. Miguel Oliveira (POR) 1, 16. Alex Rins (ESP) 0, 17. Augusto Fernandez (ESP) 0, 18. Franco Morbidelli (ITA) 0, 19. Takaaki Nakagami (JPN) 0, 20. Luca Marini (ITA) 0, 21. Jack Miller (AUS) 0, 22. Raul Fernandez (ESP) 0.

Leicester charged by Premier League over alleged financial breach

Championship club Leicester have been referred to an independent commission by the Premier League for an alleged breach of profitability and sustainability rules during their last three seasons in the top-flight.

Currently second in the Championship as they chase an immediate return to the Premier League after last season's relegation, Leicester could be hit by a points deduction if they are found to have broken the financial regulations. "The Premier League has today referred Leicester City FC to an independent commission for an alleged breach of Profitability and Sustainability Rules (PSRs) and for failing to submit their audited financial accounts to the League," a statement said yesterday.

"The alleged breach relates to the assessment period ending season 2022/23, when the club was a member of the Premier League. Leicester City were relegated to the EFL Championship prior to the introduction of the Premier League's new Standard Directions, which prescribe a timeline within which PSR cases should be heard. Therefore, the proceedings will be conducted in accordance with a timetable to be set by the independent commission, and its final decision will be published on the Premier League's website."