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Saturday, March 23, 2024
Ramadan 13, 1445 AH

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WORLD AND ASIAN CUP QUALIFIERS

Qatar showed real quality in second half, says Lopez

Qatar beat Kuwait 3-0 on Thursday thanks to Afif's double strike



Qatar players pose before their Preliminary Joint Qualification - Round 2 for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup 2027 match against Kuwait at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha on Thursday. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Marquez Lopez was proud of Qatar's ability to increase their tempo in the 3-0 win over Kuwait in Group A of the Preliminary Joint Qualification - Round 2 for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup 2027 on Thursday. After a goalless first half at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha, Akram Afif wearing the captain's armband after Hassan al-Haydos announced his international retirement recently opened and closed the scoring for Lopez's side as Qatar moved on to nine points from three Group A matches.

"I am happy with this result. The match was not easy, especially in the first half," said Lopez, who led Qatar to their successful defence of the AFC Asian Cup in February.

"Kuwait played with a good defensive strategy but we showed our best in the second half and converted our chances. However, Tuesday's match will be difficult as Kuwait will try to make up for this loss," the Spaniard added.

Al Sadd forward Afif tapped in from close range two minutes into the second half to put Qatar in front and Ahmed al-Rawi doubled the



lead four minutes later when he pounced on a rebound after Sulaiman Abdulghafoor had spilled a long-range shot.

Afif also saw his shot kept out by Abdulghafoor in the 68th minute only to score at the second attempt and put the seal on Qatar's win. The win moves the Asian Cup holders five points clear at the top of the group standings, with India in second after a 0-0 draw with Afghanistan.

The first two finishers in each of the nine groups advance to the next stage of determining which nations will take Asia's eight guaranteed berths at the 48-team World Cup in Mexico, Canada and the United States.

Meanwhile, the defeat left Kuwait six points behind Qatar and one adrift of India at the halfway stage but head coach Rui Bento refused to believe that his team can't advance. "We still have a chance even though we lost today. I think we performed well in the first half and had some chances to score but we didn't capitalise on them. We played well but we were facing a strong team who controlled the match in the second half and scored three goals due to our lapses in concentration and mistakes. We still have three matches and we still have chances to qualify," said Costa.

India and Afghanistan played to a goalless draw in the group's other tie, meaning there will be everything to play for when they meet again on Tuesday.

"Disappointed with the result in the end because we created three or four really good chances. We could not score, which is the problem that has been following us for many years," said India head coach Igor Stimac.

"We should have won with the chances we created, we tried different combinations and players but it just did not work. At times we choose complicated options and we have to learn to decide better."

ATHLETICS

Tentoglou to make Doha Diamond League debut

Olympic, world and European long jump champion Miltiadis Tentoglou will star at the Doha Diamond League Meeting for the first time on May 10th, as he aims to continue his title-winning form in 2024.

The 26-year-old Greek athlete - who retained his world indoor title with victory in Glasgow on March 2 - boasts a personal best of 8.60m from 2021 and is so far unbeaten this year.

The 2022 Diamond League champion is hoping to regain his long jump title this season after Swiss rival Simon Ehammer claimed the Diamond Trophy in Eugene last year.

'Discovered' by his first coach while practising parkour as a hobby as a teenager, Tentoglou won his first global medal at the World Under-20 Championships in 2016.

In recent years he has gained a reputation for being an exceptional championship performer and in particular, for his final jump heroics. He first set hearts racing when he won Olympic gold on his last attempt at the Tokyo Games in 2021 (8.41m) and impressively repeated that feat at the 2023 World Athletics Championships in Budapest with a jump of 8.52m.

In the interim period, he was crowned 2022 world indoor champion in Belgrade and backed that up with a silver medal at the World Athletics Championships in Oregon later that summer. He has seven continental titles to his name dating back to 2017.

The 2022 Diamond League champion said: "I was in Doha for the World Championships in 2019, but I've never competed at the Diamond League meeting. The conditions in Doha are perfect and there is always a little wind, so I'm hoping to start strong in my 2024 outdoor season."

"The morning final in Glasgow (at the World Athletics Indoor Championships) was not who I am," he continued, referring to his disappointment in his own performance; "but the competition is getting tough. I have won everything there is to win, but I really want to defend my Olympic title."

Meanwhile, Olympic and world pole vault champion Katie Moon (USA) will take on fellow world champion Nina Kennedy (AUS) and newly-crowned world indoor champion Molly Caudery (GBR) at the Doha Meeting.

Moon - ranked fifth all-time with a best height of 4.95m - famously shared global gold with Commonwealth champion and Australian record holder Kennedy (4.91m) at the 2023 World Athletics Championships in Budapest after an enthralling contest failed to separate them. They were subsequently shortlisted for the 2023 International Fair Play Award as a result of their actions.

The Diamond League is the premier one-day meeting series in athletics. It comprises 15 of the most prestigious events in global track and field. Athletes compete for points at the 14 series meetings in a bid to qualify for the two-day Diamond League Final in Brussels on September 13 and 14.



Greece's Miltiadis Tentoglou - who retained his world indoor title with victory in Glasgow on March 2 - boasts a personal best of 8.60m from 2021 and is so far unbeaten this year.

FOCUS

Inaugural edition of Electronic Qatar Stars League kicks off

The inaugural edition of Electronic Qatar Stars League 2024 (E-QSL) started on Thursday evening at the Virtuocity Hall in Doha Festival City mall, with the participation of 2023-2024 season Expo Stars League's 12 teams.

The opening day's competitions featured Group A teams - Al Shamal, Al Duhail, Muaither, Al Gharafa, Qatar SC and Al Sadd.

A total of 15 matches were played and the results were as follows: Al Sadd bt Al Shamal 6-1; Al Gharafa lost to Muaither 2-3; Al Duhail bt Qatar SC 6-2; Al Gharafa bt Al Duhail 6-1; Qatar SC lost to Al Sadd 1-8; Muaither drew Al Shamal 3-3; Al Shamal lost to Qatar SC 0-4; Muaither bt Al Duhail 3-1; Al Sadd bt Al Gharafa 5-4; Muaither bt Al Sadd 3-2; Qatar SC lost to Al Gharafa 3-7; Al Duhail lost to Al Shamal 3-4; Qatar SC drew Muaither 5-5; Al Sadd bt Al Duhail 5-2; Al Shamal bt Al Gharafa 3-2.

The first four teams - Al Sadd (12 points),

Muaither (11), Al Shamal (seven) and Al Gharafa (six) - qualified for the quarter-finals. Qatar SC and Al Duhail ended up with four and three points respectively in fifth and sixth place and exited the tournament.

Group B matches (15) with another set of four teams making it to the quarter-finals. The knockout stage (quarter-finals, semi-finals, third-place play-off and final) is scheduled for today.

The winner will represent Qatar in the qualifiers for 2024 Electronic Sports World Cup for clubs. It may be noted that the E-QSL is a new initiative that aims to open new horizons for the QSL and club companies to enter the field of e-sports and keep pace with the tremendous development of this game, in addition to support the Qatari e-sports team, expand the base of participation in society, and refine and develop talent in this sport, which is of interest to a large section of fans, especially youngsters.



INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Chennai beat Bengaluru by six wickets



Chennai Super Kings batsman Ravindra Jadeja plays a shot during the Indian Premier League (IPL) match against Royal Challengers Bengaluru in Chennai yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Chennai, India

Bangladesh's Mustafizur Rahman returned figures of 4-29 to set up a six-wicket win for defending champions Chennai Super Kings (CSK) in the IPL opener against Royal Challengers Bengaluru yesterday.

Later during the run chase, CSK's IPL debutant Rachin Ravindra smashed 37 off just 15 balls.

Hosts Chennai kept Bengaluru down to 173-6, a total their batsmen overhauled in 18.4 overs at the MA Chidambaram Stadium.

Shivam Dube, who hit 34, and fellow left-hander Ravindra Jadeja, who made 25, put on an unbeaten stand of 66 to steer the team home.

The 17th edition of the lucrative league began with a glitzy ceremony, with performances by Bollywood stars including India's Oscar-winning composer AR Rahman.

Extravagant dances, popular music and fireworks gave way to the toss as Bengaluru skipper Faf du Plessis elected to bat. Old war-horse MS Dhoni had shocked his fans on the eve of the opener when he handed over the captaincy to Ruturaj Gaikwad, who said he got to know of the decision last week.

New CSK captain Gaikwad said yesterday: "Total control right from the start. Once the spinners came on, we were in control. 10-15 runs lesser would have been great but they came back well. (Turning point was) to get Maxwell and even Faf out, the quick wickets were the turning point."

He added: "I have always enjoyed it (the captaincy). Haven't felt the additional pressure, right from the state side. Not even a single time I felt pressurised by anything. Obviously had Mahi bhai with me. Everyone chipped in (the run chase)."

Gaikwad's leadership witnessed early challenges when his opposite number Du Plessis smashed regu-

lar boundaries but left-arm quick Mustafizur led Chennai's fightback with his IPL-best haul.

Mustafizur had Du Plessis caught out for 35 and Bengaluru slipped from 41-0 to 42-3 in the space of seven balls when Australia's Glenn Maxwell was out for a first-ball duck off Deepak Chahar.

Virat Kohli returned to competitive cricket after two months following a paternity break when he missed India's 4-1 Test victory over England and started cautiously.

He made 21 off 20 balls including a six off spinner Maheesh Theekshana before his departure in another inspired spell by Mustafizur, who again struck twice in an over. Kohli was caught in the deep after a relay catch between Ajinkya Rahane and Rachin Ravindra and soon Cameron Green departed with Bengaluru losing half their side inside 12 overs.

Anuj Rawat, a wicketkeeper-batsman who hit 48, and Dinesh Karthik, 38 not out, steadied the

ship and then took the attack to the opposition in their partnership of 95 in 50 balls.

In reply, Chennai's batsmen including IPL debutant Ravindra, who hit a 15-ball 37, got starts but lost regular wickets. Green struck with two key wickets including Rahane (27) and Daryl Mitchell (22) with his fast-medium bowling but Jadeja kept the chase going.

Dube, who came in as impact substitute in place of Mustafizur, and Jadeja ensured the team sailed through.

Organisers have released only the first two weeks of the IPL schedule so far because it clashes with India's six-week-long general election. Last season the 10-team IPL lasted eight weeks.

BRIEF SCORES
Chennai Super Kings 176 for 4 (Ravindra 37, Dube 34*, Green 2-27) beat **Royal Challengers Bengaluru 173 for 6** (Rawat 48, Karthik 38*, du Plessis 35, Mustafizur 4-29) **by six wickets**

FIRST TEST

De Silva, Mendis guide Sri Lanka with quality tons

Pacers Fernando and Rajitha put Bangladesh on the back foot

AFP
Sylhet, Bangladesh

Dhananjaya de Silva and Kamindu Mendis both hit knocks of 102 to help Sri Lanka post 280 in their first innings before their seamers rattled Bangladesh on the opening day of the first Test in Sylhet yesterday.

Bangladesh finished the day 32-3, trailing Sri Lanka by 248 runs, with Vishwa Fernando and Kasun Rajitha striking early in the innings for the visitors.

Fernando trapped opener Zakir Hasan (nine) and Najmul Hossain (five) lbw with identical in-swinging deliveries, while Rajitha got Mominul Haque caught for five.

Opener Mahmudul Hasan survived the day on nine alongside Taijul Islam, who was yet to open scoring.

De Silva and Mendis fought back with their 202-run stand for the fifth wicket, helping Sri Lanka recover from a precarious 57-5 after a pace demolition of their top order.

"I think they got too many when we had them five down," Bangladesh pace bowling coach Andre Adams told reporters.

"It's a good surface. There are no demons. There's a bit of bounce and carry. We have to be much better with the bat."

Khaled Ahmed and Nahid Rana took three wickets apiece for Bangladesh, who opted to bowl first on a green surface.

De Silva and Kamindu asserted their dominance after lunch to help Sri Lanka rebuild a respectable innings.

"It wasn't easy to bat on this track," Kamindu said afterwards.

"We were 57 for five. We discussed that we should bat long. We should settle down first and then keep going. That's what we did in the middle."

Kamindu reached his maiden Test century off 126 balls with a



Sri Lanka's Kamindu Mendis (left) celebrates next to teammate Dhananjaya de Silva after scoring a century during the first day of the first Test against Bangladesh at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium. (AFP)

four through the covers off Rana but fell on the next ball, edging a catch to Liton Das off Rana.

Skipper de Silva was soon to follow after trying and failing to hook Rana off a short ball, following a charging innings featuring 12 fours and a six.

Khaled gave Sri Lanka an early fright after seeing off the top order, forcing opener Nishan Madushka (2) to offer a catch to Mehidy Hasan at third slip at the end of the second over.

Dimuth Karunaratne and Kusal Mendis made 37 runs for the second wicket before Khaled struck again when Mendis knocked the pacer's delivery to Zakir Hasan at gully.

Mendis departed on 16, and Khaled bowled Karunaratne with an in-swing in the same over for 17.

Najmul ran out Angelo Mathews for just five with a direct-hit

to compound Sri Lanka's early woes. Shoriful Islam joined the party when he removed Dinesh Chandimal for nine, with Mehidy grabbing his second catch of the morning down low at leg slip.

The second and final match of the series will be played in Chittagong from March 30.

SCOREBOARD

Sri Lanka first innings

N. Madushka c Mehidy b Khaled 2
D. Karunaratne b Khaled 17
K. Mendis c Zakir b Khaled 16
A. Mathews run out 5
D. Chandimal c Mehidy b Shoriful 9
D. de Silva c Mehidy b Rana 102
K. Mendis c Liton b Rana 102
P. Jayasuriya c Liton b Rana 1
K. Rajitha not out 6
V. Fernando c Liton b Taijul 9
L. Kumara run out 0
Extras (b2, lb4, nb5) 11
Total (all out, 68 overs) 280
Fall of wickets: 1-3 (Madushka),

2-40 (Mendis), 3-41 (Karunaratne), 4-47 (Mathews), 5-57 (Chandimal), 6-259 (Kamindu), 7-264 (De Silva), 8-265 (Jayasuriya), 9-278 (Fernando), 10-280 (Kumara)
Bowling: Shoriful 14-0-59-1, Khaled 17-2-72-3 (nb2), Nahid 14-2-87-3 (nb3), Taijul 13-6-31-1, Mehidy 10-1-25-0
Bangladesh first innings

Mahmudul Hasan Joy not out 9
Zakir Hasan lbw b Fernando 9
Najmul Hossain lbw b Fernando 5
Mominul c Kamindu b Rajitha 5
Taijul Islam not out 0

Extras (lb 3, w1) 4

Total (3 wickets, 10 overs) 32

To bat: Shahadat Hossain, Liton Das, Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Khaled Ahmed, Shoriful Islam, Nahid Rana

Fall of wickets: 1-11 (Zakir), 2-17 (Najmul), 3-31 (Mominul)

Bowling: Fernando 5-1-9-2 (w1), Rajitha 5-1-20-1

Toss: Bangladesh

VAN DER POEL CRUSHES VAN AERT OVER E3 CLASSIC'S COBBLED HILLS

Harelbeke, Belgium: World champion Mathieu van der Poel shattered arch-rival Wout van Aert's bid for a third successive E3 Saxo title yesterday as he claimed the first of cycling's cobbled classics. Van der Poel yesterday first opened a gap while van Aert was on the floor after a fall, but his 40km solo run for the line was a powerful marker for the season ahead.

The 29-year-old Dutch rider crossed the line at Harelbeke stood up on his pedals and performing a military salute. He was 1min 31sec ahead of second placed Jasper Stuyven whose fellow Belgian Van Aert was third, a second behind. The 207km race over 17 hills is the first of a series of races known to cycling fans as 'Holy Week' leading up to Easter Sunday's Tour of Flanders, run over many of the same roads. "I even kept a bit back for Sunday," Van der Poel said of the upcoming Gent Wevelgem race in two days. "This is my first win here so I'm proud, but I haven't won Wevelgem either."

Van der Poel had attacked several times but was reeled in each time by a strained looking Van Aert before the key moment. Showers early in the race made the cobbles slick, and Van Aert fell at the foot of the Paterberg hill, slipping on an uphill cobble. Van der Poel was merciless, and

set off with blistering pace on his solo bid.

While Van Aert gamely went in hot pursuit, nursing a bloody elbow, Van der Poel raced on past fan-packed roadsides in a relentless and unflinching manner.

Winner last season of the world championship in Glasgow, Milan-San Remo and Paris-Roubaix, Van der Poel has established himself as the man to beat in the big one-day challenges.

Tim Wellens, fourth on the day, hailed Van der Poel's power. "That was a really hard race. By the time Van der Poel went the final time, we all knew he was the strongest, you could see it," he said.

Van Aert was far from the only rider to fall on the narrow Flanders lanes as Emil Herzog was sent flying head first into one of the ditches that line the lush fields of the region.

"I hit the cobbles hard, I can feel it now," a grim Van Aert said rubbing his hip.

"It was a stupid crash and I'll have to check there's no damage."

The E3 was first staged in 1958 and named after one of the major highways which runs through the Flanders region.

Van Aert won the race in 2022 with a long-range attack from 42km out alongside teammate Christophe Laporte and retained the title in 2023 after closing a gap on Tadej Pogacar and Van der Poel before beating them in the sprint.

FOCUS

France mounts security drill ahead of Olympics

AFP
Paris

French police tested their security plans for the Olympic torch relay yesterday, with a multi-layered ring of 100 officers set to be deployed to keep protesters at bay.

Authorities are nervous about the potential for disruption of the relay, which will begin once the flame arrives in southern Marseille on May 8 ahead of the start of the Games on July 26.

Environmental groups such as Extinction Rebellion, anarchist networks or pro-Palestinian demonstrators are seen as potential risks, while the security forces remain on high alert for terror attacks.

"For the party to be beautiful, it needs to be safe," said chief Games

organiser Tony Estanguet yesterday during the drill in the Aube area southeast of Paris that saw officers in plain-clothes jog alongside the torch bearer.

Anti-terror and riot police in vehicles as well as anti-drone specialists will be permanently but discreetly deployed as the torch moves around.

The Olympic flame is set to travel through 400 towns and dozens of tourist attractions during its 12,000-kilometre (7,500-mile) journey through mainland France and overseas French territories in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and Pacific. The flame will be lit in Olympia in Greece, then brought by boat to Marseille in a three-masted 19th-century French tall ship called the Belum.

More than half a million people are set to watch in person, including 326,000 with tickets.

SPOTLIGHT

International Centre for Sport Security and CBF sign landmark agreement

The Brazilian Football Confederation (Confederação Brasileira de Futebol, CBF) and the International Centre for Sport Security (ICSS) have signed a landmark Co-operation Agreement to protect Brazilian football from match-fixing and other threats to its integrity.

CBF President Ednaldo Rodrigues Gomes publicly disclosed last year his plans designed with FIFA and CONMEBOL to work with the ICSS and other stakeholders as

well as his determination to put an end to any threat to sport integrity in an open letter addressed to the President of Brazil Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, paving the path towards the implementation of a massive national plan to preserve and promote the integrity of football, asking Brazil to sign the Macolin Convention and establish a National Platform as the key national hub dedicated to the co-ordination of the fight against competition manipulation.

As a part of this plan and aligned with FIFA and CONMEBOL, CBF has requested the ICSS to work together on the development of CBF overarching strategy to combat match-fixing, and especially on a national educational and training programmes for the benefit of the Brazilian football athletes, officials, leagues, clubs at all levels and the Confederation itself.

The Cooperation Agreement also envisages activities at the grassroots level to instil the values of

football within youth and children, as well as the development of an awareness campaign involving influential Brazilian football players and football legends.

The signing ceremony was attended by CBF President Ednaldo Rodrigues Gomes and ICSS Chairman Mohamed Hanzab among other dignitaries. The signing of the agreement took place at Wembley Stadium in London, the day before a football match between the national teams of Brazil and England.



FORMULA 1

Ferrari buoyed by pace after practice at Australian GP

Leclerc was 0.381 seconds quicker than Red Bull's Verstappen

Reuters
Melbourne

Charles Leclerc topped the time-sheets for Ferrari in the second free practice at the Australian Grand Prix yesterday after Williams driver Alex Albon wrecked his car in the first session with a crash at a familiar turn at Albert Park.

Leclerc posted a flying lap of one minute, 17.277 seconds on soft tyres midway through the second session (FP2), 0.381 seconds quicker than Red Bull's reigning world champion Max Verstappen. Dutchman Verstappen, bidding for back-to-back wins in Australia and a third victory in succession this season, made a late start after damaging the floor of his car in the earlier session and was unable to do as many laps as planned.

Ferrari were nonetheless buoyed by their speed ahead of today's qualifying, having been well off Red Bull's pace in the opening races in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Leclerc's teammate Carlos Sainz was third quickest in FP2 on his return to racing two weeks after appendicitis surgery.

"We are fast so we are enjoying it but we need to wait and see," Leclerc, who was third behind the two Red Bull cars in Saudi Arabia, told reporters. "Red Bull weren't pushing yet (today). I think they are still ahead but we might have our best shot from the beginning of the season."

Verstappen's teammate Sergio Perez was eighth fastest in FP2 on a day when most cars struggled for grip on the street circuit. McLaren driver Lando Norris had set the pace (1:18.564) in FP1, which was halted in the last 20 minutes after Albon's crash triggered a red flag. The England-born Thai driver locked up and took a heavy shunt into the barrier at turn six then careened into the opposite barrier to damage both sides of his car, leaving debris on a long section of the track. It came a year after Albon crashed at the same turn on race-day, triggering one of three red flags.

Albon walked away from his car unharmed and apologised on the team radio. He missed FP2 as his team worked on his car, and Wil-



Ferrari's Charles Leclerc drives during the practice session for the Australian Grand Prix at the Melbourne Circuit yesterday. (Reuters)

liams, who do not have a spare chassis in Melbourne, may be down a driver for the rest of the race weekend if unable to repair it.

Williams had another fright in FP2 when Logan Sargeant, who recorded the 13th quickest lap, slid off track at the exit of turn 11. It was a sobering day for Mercedes, whose early season troubles appear to have followed them to Australia. Seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton posted only the 18th fastest lap in FP2 after being ninth quickest earlier.

Wolff later revealed that engineers had made

a major set-up change on Hamilton's car in a bid to unlock performance but said the move massively backfired. Russell was sixth in FP2 and third in FP1 but also struggled for control, joining Hamilton with a skid off track in the early session and complaining about vibration in his steering rack.

"It didn't feel good out there today," said Hamilton. "We made some big changes into FP2 and unfortunately, that made the car worse."

Aston Martin's Lance Stroll was fourth in FP2, ahead of teammate Fernando Alonso.

FOCUS

Williams down to one car after Albon crash

AFP
Melbourne

Williams driver Alex Albon will use teammate Logan Sargeant's car for the rest of the Australian Grand Prix weekend after he destroyed his chassis in a high-speed crash during practice yesterday.

Albon hit a wall then bounced onto another one via the kerbs towards the end of the first session at Melbourne's Albert Park. He was not hurt but was unable to compete in second practice, with the team confirming late Friday the chassis was badly damaged and that they did not have a spare.

Team principal James Vowles said Albon had a better chance to score their first points of the season during tomorrow's race, meaning Sargeant was sidelined. "While Logan should not have to suffer from a mistake that he did not make, every race counts when the midfield



Marshals remove Williams' driver Alexander Albon's crashed car from the circuit. (AFP)

is tighter than ever," he said. "So we have made the call based on our best potential to score points this weekend."

Sargeant said missing out was "the hardest moment I can remember in my career." "I am however completely here for the team and will continue to contribute in any way that I can this weekend to maximise what we can do," added the US driver.

Anglo-Thai driver Albon, who scored 27 of the team's 28 points last season, said he was gutted about the situation. "Logan has always been a consummate professional and a team player from day one, and this won't be an easy one for him to take," he said. "At this point though, I cannot dwell on the situation and my only job now is to maximise our potential this weekend."

MOTOGP

Marquez impresses despite crash in Portugal practice

AFP
Portimao, Portugal

Six-time MotoGP world champion Marc Marquez impressed yesterday in practice at Portugal's MotoGP as he continues to get to grips with his Ducati machine. The Spanish Gresini rider, who moved from Honda for the 2024 season set the third fastest time of the afternoon although later suffered his first crash of the season.

Ducati Lenovo rider Enea Bastianini was quickest with a lap time of 1min 38.057sec, 0.118sec ahead of Red Bull KTM Factory's Jack Miller and 0.153 in front of Marquez. Defending double world champion Francesco Bagnaia,

who eased to victory in the opening race of the season in Qatar, was eighth on his Ducati, only breaking into the top 10 on his final lap.

Heavy rainfall overnight left the Algarve track dusty, with the first Moto3 practice cancelled. Marquez was quickest in the first practice session although tricky conditions meant it was slow going and his time of 1.40.484 was eclipsed quickly in the second session.

The 31-year-old slid off his bike late in the second practice on the turn five hairpin, but was unharmed and smiling as he headed back to the garage, having secured his place into today's Qualifying 2. Marquez has not won a race since securing his 59th career win at the Emilia-Romagna Grand Prix in October 2021.



Gresini's Spanish rider Marc Marquez takes part in the practice session for the Portuguese Grand Prix at the Algarve International Circuit in Portimao, Portugal, yesterday. (AFP)

Malaysia rejects chance to host 2026 Commonwealth Games over costs

Kuala Lumpur: Malaysia said yesterday it had decided against hosting the 2026 Commonwealth Games because of the costs involved, raising fresh doubts over the future of the international multi-sport event.

The decision, made at a cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, follows the withdrawal of the Australian state of Victoria last year. "The Ministry of Youth and Sports today announced the government's decision not to accept an offer from the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) to host the 2026 Commonwealth Games," minister Hannah Yeoh said in a statement.

The CGF is scrambling to find a host after Victoria withdrew because of soaring costs. The CGF offered Malaysia and other potential hosts £100mn (\$125mn) to step in with just over two years to go until the Games are supposed to take place. But the Malaysian government said the offer was "not expected to be able to cover the entire cost of organising a large-scale sports event," Yeoh said. "The government wants to focus on the development of sports as well as the welfare and wellbeing of the people," she added.

A spokesman for the CGF said the search for a host of the event would continue. Victoria's sudden move, and the lack of an obvious alternative, raised questions over the future of the Games, which take place every four years and were last held in Birmingham, central England, in 2022.

The relevance of the event, with most of the competing teams drawn from former British colonies, has come under scrutiny amid persistent questions over the UK's colonial legacy. Birmingham stepped in as host at relatively short notice after Durban, in South Africa, was forced to pull out due to a number of issues including financial problems.

The CGF earlier this month hailed Malaysia's "fantastic track record", with the country having staged the Games in 1998. But the CGF also suggested that Malaysia was not the only country it had approached to host the Games. Singapore recently said it was "assessing the feasibility" of the CGF's proposal. The wealthy city-state also holds the annual Formula One night race and will be staging the World Aquatics Championships in 2025.

The prospect of Malaysia hosting the Commonwealth Games had sparked fierce debate. Mohamed Norza Zakaria, president of the Commonwealth Games Association of Malaysia, had called it a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" that could put the country back on the sporting map. But doubts emerged last week after current and former senior officials expressed reservations.

Khairy Jamaluddin, a former youth and sports minister, rubbished the idea and called it "reckless" because there was little time for planning. Any host would need at least four years to upgrade venues, plan sponsorship and set up infrastructure, he said.

TENNIS

Nishikori defeated in comeback game, Wozniacki out in Miami

AFP
Miami

Former world number four Kei Nishikori's return to the ATP Tour after a lengthy injury absence ended in a first round 6-3, 6-4 loss to Sebastian Ofner. Japan's Nishikori has barely played on the tour in the past two years with his last appearance on the ATP Tour coming at Atlanta July.

Given a wildcard by organisers, the 2016 Miami finalist was not surprisingly a little off the pace against 40th-ranked Austrian Ofner as he struggled to replicate his practice form.

"I thought I was practicing well, playing much better. I was feeling the rhythm and I was feeling the ball pretty good in the practice but during the match it's completely different," he told reporters.

"It was windy, he was hitting the ball very hard, very quick, the courts are quick. I was having a tough time making a lot of balls in the court and just the little things that I was not making, maybe I was supposed to hit the corner but the ball goes to the middle sometimes," he added.

At 34, Nishikori faces a real challenge to work his way back up the rankings but he believes that in time, he can get back to an

elite level. "I don't have the clear goal right now, you know I just want to play a lot of matches. I need some time to get used to (matches) and hopefully I can stay healthy, I think that's the only goal this year, I try to play as many matches as I can play," he said.

Gael Monfils, the 37-year-old Frenchman, turned on the style in his 7-6 (7/5) 6-4 win over Serbian Dusan Lajovic.

"It was a great match, he played well and I am still playing for these moments, these challenges. I feel like the fire is still there," he said. Britain's Dan Evans battled back for a 1-6, 6-3, 6-4 win over Italian Lorenzo Sonego.

In the WTA event, Caroline Wozniacki was a point away from winning in straight sets against Anhelina Kalinina but the Ukrainian ended up winning 5-7, 7-5, 6-4. Next up for Kalinina is world number two Aryna Sabalenka or Paula Badosa.

Wozniacki, who returned to the tour last year after a three-year absence, during which she gave birth to two children, reached the quarter-finals at Indian Wells last week.

Fourth-seed Elena Rybakina suffered a scare against Denmark's Clara Tauson before battling back for a 3-6, 7-5, 6-4 win. Rybakina, who had wins in Brisbane and Abu Dhabi as well as a runner-up finish in



Sebastian Ofner (left) shakes hands with Kei Nishikori after winning the first round match at the Miami Open on Thursday. (AFP)

Doha, had to miss Indian Wells due to illness and said she was still finding her way back to her best.

"I am happy with the win. It means a

lot, I hadn't really played for more than a week and it's going to take time for me to get back in my best form but happy to get another chance," said Rybakina.

Maria Sakkari of Greece, beaten finalist to Iga Swiatek in California, defeated Yuan Yue 6-2, 6-2 to reach the third round. Sakkari had lost her opening match in Miami in each of the last two years but she overcame the in-form Yuan, in one hour and 19 minutes.

The Chinese 25-year-old came into Miami after winning her first WTA singles title in Austin and then reaching her maiden WTA 1000 quarter-final at Indian Wells.

Ninth seed Jelena Ostapenko, the 2017 French Open champion had to work hard for a 7-6 (7/3), 6-4 over qualifier Laura Siegemund of Germany.

Victoria Azarenka, a three time Miami Open winner, had to deal with some strong resistance from American Peyton Stearns before emerging with a 7-5, 3-6, 6-4 win.

Belarusian Azarenka won in Miami in 2009, 2011 and 2016.

Brazilian 11th seed Beatriz Haddad Maia dropped the opening set to Diane Parry before rallying for a 3-6, 6-1 6-4 win to reach the Miami third round for the fourth time and the third straight year.

It was the first victory for Haddad Maia over the Frenchwoman, who had won their other two meetings both on clay.

Americans Madison Keys and qualifier Taylor Townsend both enjoyed smooth passage into the third round.

HORSE RACING

Delozier rides Mkaee'lat Al Shahania to Al Wakra Cup win

By Sports Reporter
Doha

HE Sheikha Yasmeen bint Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani's Mkaee'lat Al Shahania won the Al Wakra Cup in spectacular style at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Al Rayyan Racecourse.

In the 1600m contest for four-year-old Purebred Arabian fillies, the feature race of the day, jockey Lukas Delozier guided the Rudy Nerbonne-trained grey filly as it tracked the leaders until she produced the final furlong to speed past her rivals and record an impressive win by three quarters of a length at the turf track.

Eng. Dhafi Rashid HA al-Marri-owned and Yousef Ben Taher Mehaoued-trained Djedahess came second, while Wathnan Racing's Farida finished third.

Abdulaziz Jassim al-Boenain, Al Uqda Complex Manager, crowned the winners.

Eng. Osama Omer E al-Dafea-owned and trained Taxiwala won the Thoroughbred Conditions for three-year-old+ in the 1100m race. The seven year-old son of Holy Roman Emperor and the winner of Al Shaqab Racing Trophy 2021, was ridden by Jockey Soufiane Saadi to an easy win ahead of Mohamed Abdulhadi S al-Hajri's Selected.

Jockey Chloe Mignonneau rode the Jean de Mieulle's charge and

Al Shaqab Racing's Duhail to the victory in the 1600m race for the Thoroughbred Conditions for the three-year-old+.

Jockey Tomas Lukasek also registered a double on the card when he guided Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki-trained Jungle Mate, in the silks of Saeed Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, to victory in the 1600m race for Thoroughbred Handicap (70-90 for three-year-old).

The Pole was in the winner's enclosure earlier in the day when he jockeyed Mubarak Ali M al-Nuaimi's Bailey Gate to Thoroughbred Handicap (55-75) win. In the meet opener, Al Wasmayah Farm's Gas-sim Ghazali-trained Moharb won the Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate for three-six-year-olds.



Lukas Delozier guides Mkaee'lat Al Shahania to Al Wakra Cup victory at the Al Rayyan Racecourse.

FOOTBALL

Germany should feel no pressure, says Nagelsmann

Germans, who will host Euros later this year, face France in friendly

Reuters
Lyon, France

Germany are still far from tournament-ready less than three months before the start of Euro 2024 on home soil but coach Julian Nagelsmann said the team does not feel under pressure. The Germans face France in a friendly today before hosting the Dutch three days later.

Nagelsmann, who took over following the sacking of Hansi Flick in September, has had a mixed start with a win and a draw during a US trip in October followed by two straight losses in Austria and at home against Turkiye in November. "In the last two games we had maybe too many attack-minded players on the pitch," Nagelsmann told a press conference.

"This week we worked well in training and I am confident we will deliver a good performance tomorrow. On the issue of pressure, I have to repeat that these are things brought in from the outside. This pseudo pressure is not about life or death."

The four-times world champions, have had little success internationally since their 2014 World Cup victory, and have been eliminated early in their last three tournaments. They crashed out in the first round at the last two World Cups and were eliminated in the round of 16 at the European Championship three years ago.

Success-starved German fans have grown impatient ahead of the tournament starting in Germany on June 14 with the hosts facing Scotland. "The pressure we have is the pressure to be successful but all the rest is just issues brought in from outside. Sporting success is one part of life but I will not go crazy over something that has been fun for me since the age of three," Nagelsmann said. "We would be wise to enjoy the game. We have two important games, then a key two-month phase for the coaches and then it's off to the Euros."

The Germans will also play Ukraine in Nuremberg on June 3 before taking on Greece in Moenchengladbach four days later in their last friendly matches before the start of the Euros. "I don't like the pressure and the 'what-if we lose' Life is grand and football is a part of it and always fun. It's football, not politics, or a major decision affecting 30,000 workers," Nagelsmann said. "It's football and it should awaken emotions. We will try to win and if not



Germany's head coach Julian Nagelsmann (third right) and his players take part in a training session at the Groupama Stadium in Decines-Charpieu, near Lyon, yesterday. (AFP)

we will try again on Tuesday."

Nagelsmann insisted that Manuel Neuer remains the team's number one goalkeeper for Euro 2024 despite not having played an international match since their disastrous 2022 World Cup campaign. "The decision has been made," said Nagelsmann when asked if the injury-hit Bayern Munich goalkeeper had forced a rethink ahead of this summer's European championships which Germany will host.

Nagelsmann has already informed Neuer and deputy Marc-Andre ter Stegen of his decision. However, Barcelona goalkeeper Ter Stegen will start today's friendly against France in Lyon after 37-year-old Neuer suffered a leg injury in training.

"Neuer got injured, but it's just a small tear. He won't be away from the sport for eight months. It will be just 10 days and then he'll have the possibility of returning," added the coach. "We are lucky to have a second goalkeeper of exceptional quality who will be able to play two matches (on Saturday and against the Netherlands on Tuesday)."

Neuer, who has 117 caps and was part of the 2014 World Cup winning team, last played

for Germany at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar where the team was knocked out in the group stages. He then broke his leg shortly after and missed almost a year of football. Ter Stegen, 31, has 38 caps and recently celebrated his 400th appearance for Barcelona. He has been the starting keeper for Germany since the start of 2023.

BERLIN SAYS GERMAN FA LACKS 'PATRIOTISM' FOR DROPPING ADIDAS

The German national football team's decision to drop Adidas as its kit supplier sparked dismay in Berlin yesterday, with the economy minister blasting the switch to US sportswear giant Nike for its lack of "patriotism".

Economy Minister Robert Habeck described the pairing of the company's trademark stripes and the national flag colours as a "piece of German identity".

The DFB on Thursday said its partnership with Adidas – spanning more than 70 years and four World Cup triumphs – would stop at the end of 2026. From 2027, Germany's footballers will wear jerseys manufactured by the sportswear giant Nike.

Leicester take legal action against Premier League over financial charge

London: Championship club Leicester issued "urgent legal proceedings" against the Premier League and the English Football League after being charged with an alleged financial breach.

The Foxes, who sit second in the Championship, were charged by the Premier League on Thursday for an alleged breach of top-flight profitability and sustainability rules (PSR). Leicester, relegated from the Premier League last season, were also placed under a transfer embargo by the EFL yesterday in relation to its financial rules.

"Leicester have been compelled today to issue two urgent legal proceedings against the Premier League and the EFL," the club said in a statement. "Leicester will be seeking that each of these proceedings is determined by an appropriate and fully independent legal panel."

The Premier League said the charge related to an alleged breach in the PSR assessment period ending 2022-23. The EFL embargo is understood to be in relation to a March 1 submission forecasting the club's financial results for 2023-24.

Previous PSR charges against Everton and Nottingham Forest have resulted in points deductions being imposed on those Premier League clubs this season. Leicester's hopes of automatic promotion back to the top tier would take a major hit if they were given a points deduction.

Enzo Maresca's side are behind first-placed Leeds on goal difference but have a game in hand. Third-placed Ipswich are just one point adrift of Leicester, with the top two earning automatic promotion to the Premier League.

Leicester's Premier League charge will not be dealt with

under the league's standard directions process which is designed to ensure cases are dealt with in the same season as charges are laid. That is because the club had been relegated before the standard directions were adopted at the Premier League's annual general meeting last June.

NORTH KOREA VS JAPAN WORLD CUP QUALIFIER CALLED OFF

North Korea's World Cup qualifier against Japan that was scheduled to be held in Pyongyang next week has been called off, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) said. According to a report from Kyodo News, North Korea, which has no formal diplomatic relations with Tokyo, decided not to stage the match in Pyongyang over worries about infectious diseases in Japan.

"The decision, taken in consultation with FIFA and relevant stakeholders, comes after the AFC was informed on March 20 by the DPR Korea Football Association of the need to move the match to a neutral venue due to unavoidable circumstances," the AFC said in a statement. "The matter will now be referred to the relevant committees in FIFA with further updates to be communicated in due course."

DPRK is the abbreviation for the North's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Japan and North Korea are in Group B of 2026 World Cup qualifying, along with Syria and Myanmar. Japan beat North Korea 1-0 in another qualifying match in Tokyo on Thursday.

North Korea last hosted a men's football international in Pyongyang in 2019 during the qualifying competition for the 2022 World Cup.

Defending champs India in tricky group at Thomas Cup

Doha: Defending champions India found themselves in tricky Group C as the draw for the BWF Thomas & Uber Cup Finals 2024 was conducted yesterday in the host city of Chengdu, China.

India, who won the Thomas Cup for the first time in 2022, were drawn alongside 14-time champions Indonesia, Thailand and England in Group C. Hosts China, the second most successful team with 10 titles, will be challenged by South Korea, Canada and Australia in Group A. In the Uber Cup, China, record

holders with 15 titles, will be seek to avoid early surprises from continental champions India, with whom they have been grouped. Canada and Singapore are the other two teams in Group A. Uber Cup defending champions Korea, who are seeking their third title, are in Group D with Denmark, three-time former champions USA, and Mexico.

The 33rd edition of the Thomas Cup and 30th edition of the Uber Cup will be held from April 27 to May 5 in Chengdu, featuring a total of 32 teams.

AL-EMADI CLINCHES SMALL TOUR CLASS AT 10TH ROUND OF HATHAB



Abdullah Hassan al-Emadi won the Small Tour class during the 10th round of the Qatar Equestrian Tour - Hathab. Ghanem Nasser al-Qadi came in second, while Mohamed Salem al-Marri finished third at the outdoor arena of the Qatar Equestrian Federation. All bin Yousef al-Rumaili, Vice-Chairman of the Supreme Organising Committee of the championship presented the trophies to the winners.



In the Future Riders 60cm class, Nasser bin Hamad al-Thani emerged triumphant with his Sita. Fahd Talal al-Nuaimi came second on Pablo, while Mohamed Abdullah al-Marri was third with Whistler. Earlier, Mohamed al-Marri won the Future Riders 80cm class with his horse Animo. Khaled Jassim al-Suwaidi aboard Croat and Maryam Abdel Karim Abd on Wadi finished second and third respectively. Faisal al-Kahla, Deputy Director of the Hathab, and Abdullah al-Qashouti, Director of the Media and Live Broadcasting Committee of the tournament, crowned the winners.

