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CRICKET

Babar vows to make Pakistan world-beaters after regaining white-ball captaincy

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QATAR EQUESTRIAN TOUR - LONGINES HATHAB

Al-Baker claims Big Tour title, leads in overall rankings

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Mohamed Khalifa al-Baker garnered all the 30 points at stake in the 11th round of Qatar Equestrian Tour - Longines Hathab to continue to lead the Big Tour rankings with 240 points in the annual domestic equestrian series comprising 14 legs.

At the outdoor arena of Qatar Equestrian Federation (QEF) on Saturday, al-Baker galloped to the Big Tour title astride bay stud Liss-abon 56 in the Table A, One round against the clock (145-150cm) class with a fastest and faultless routine in 63.30secs.

The win saw al-Baker claim the top prize of QR25,000 besides the valuable points.

Saeed Nasser al-Qadi on bay mare Carrera Denfer was second clocking 64.84secs while Rashid Towaim al-Marri astride bay mare Navarone was third in 66.39secs.

Cyrine Cherif, who also has 240 ranking points in the Big Tour, finished eighth on I'A, Moerhoeve's Princess Z picking up four faults and clocking 65.59secs.

The Big Tour podium winners



Sheikh Ahmed bin Nooh al-Thani, Secretary-General of Qatar Equestrian Federation awarded the Big Tour podium winners at the QEF's outdoor arena on Saturday.



Maryam Ahmed al-Semaitt receives her award after winning Dressage Medium (Level 1) contest.

were honoured by Sheikh Ahmed bin Nooh al-Thani, Chairman of the Supreme Organising Committee of Longines Hathab Championship.

Earlier, the Open class Table A, Two phases (120-125cm) title was won by Jaber Rashid al-Amri who excelled on bay stud Apollon Du Banney with two faultless rounds

of 32.14 and 25.04secs, respectively. Farid Saad al-Qahtani riding dark bay mare Hidiene claimed the second podium spot with times of 35.25 and 25.18secs while Jaber Rashid al-Amri on grey stud Canavaro De Muze (E.T.) was third in 33.61 and 25.71secs.

Enas Mohamed, CEO of Zabardjad Jewelry Company, honoured the

winners with their prizes.

DRESSAGE TITLES FOR AL-SEMAITT, AL-JULANDANI
In the Dressage Medium (Level 1) Test 6 competition of the 11th Longines Hathab round, Maryam Ahmed al-Semaitt claimed the top honours as she excelled with bay stud San Francisco for a best

score of 65.968 points.

Saoud Ahmed al-Boinin performing with bay stud Saligaskar came second with a score of 60.645 points while Jassim Mohamed al-Fahd al-Kuwari with dark brown mare Leslie Ann 2 was third with a score of 60.323 points.

The Prelim (Level 2) competi-

tion was topped by Abdulla Khalid al-Julandani who garnered 70.385 points with H'Amour DCaramel VH Bloemenhof.

Jassim Mohamed al-Fahd al-Kuwari on Special Edition 19 was second with a score of 68.269 points while Hajeerah Khan with Lauries finished third with a score of 68.077 points.

EXPOSTARS LEAGUE

Abdurisag late strike helps Al Sadd beat Al Markhiya

ROGER GUEDES' DOUBLE POWERS AL RAYYAN PAST AL DUHAIL TO MAINTAIN FOURTH SPOT

Last-gasp goal by substitute Yusuf Abdurisag saw title contenders Al Sadd score a come-from-behind 2-1 win over a challenging Al Markhiya in their Expo Stars League match at Al Arabi Club's Grand Hamad Stadium yesterday.

Abdurisag scored after a goal-mouth melee following a corner kick in the 90+7th minute to rescue the leaders of the league championship.

Earlier Akram Afif had converted a penalty kick in the 67th minute to level the scores for The Wolves after Al Markhiya had gone up the lead with rivals' Own Goal (Paulo Otavio) in the 26th minute.

The dramatic win took Al Sadd's tally to 43 points from 18 matches at the top while Al Markhiya remained at the bottom with 8 points.

The huge contrast in the two teams' placings in the rankings was no reflection in the exciting contest as Al Markhiya battled hard and even pushed back the formidable rivals during many stages of the match.

While Al Sadd looked for a bright start they were held back by a staunch defence.

Al Markhiya hit back with a counter as Ali al-Mohannadi, who made the starting XI replacing an injured Yusupha Nije, latched on to the ball just outside the box to strike and Al Sadd's Otavio trying to defend deflected the ball into his own goal.

Having gained the lead, Al Markhiya came charging again in the 35th minute but failed to find a finish and after a scramble in front of the goal, Al Sadd goalkeeper Meshaal Barsham made a big save kicking the ball away.

In the 42nd minute, Al Sadd forward Afif got a lob from Paulo Silva to make a fine header but it hit the left goal post to bounce off. Al Sadd eventually found the



Al Sadd's Yusuf Abdurisag celebrates after scoring against Al Markhiya in their Expo Stars League match at the Grand Hamad Stadium yesterday.

equalizer in the second session when Gonzalo Plata dashed in from the right to weave his way through past defenders but was brought down inside the box by Mouhamadou Naby Sarr and the referee called for a penalty. Afif stepped up to take the spot kick and converted it coolly and drew parity.

The contest now heated up saw both sides making more attempts but failing to find a finish.

Al Sadd's big moment finally arrived in the dying moments when following a corner kick an unmarked Afif on the left, sent the ball toward the goal but it was first intercepted by a defender before the ball moved to Baghdad

Bounedjah who made a backflip which ricocheted off Al Markhiya goalkeeper Oumar Barry and an alert Abdurisag chested the ball back in much to the joy of his teammates and the team's fans.

Al Rayyan beat Al Duhail 2-0
Roger Guedes netted both goals as Al Rayyan defeated Al Duhail 2-0 in at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium yesterday.

Guedes got his brace in the 80th and 86th minutes to extend Al Rayyan's points in the standings to 35 as they maintained their fourth position, while Al Duhail remained on 22 points and remained sixth with four matches left to play before the league rounds off.



Al Rayyan's Roger Guedes (left) in action during their Expo Stars League match against Al Duhail at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium yesterday.

Al Duhail, who had been posting a string of inconsistency performances in several of their last fixtures, were on the front foot right from the blast of the opening whistle with their arrowhead in attack, Michael Olunga, posing significant threats to Al Rayyan's defensive lineup on several occasions.

After many attempts at goal, Olunga appeared to have given the Red Knights the lead in the 23rd minute after nodding home from Ismael Mohammed's assist, off a corner kick, but the goal was disallowed after a VAR review indicated that the Kenyan international was offside prior to the goal.

Undaunted by the cancellation of the goal, Al Duhail continued to pile pressure on Al Rayyan, whose defence stood rock-solid in curtailing the attack.

Olunga almost netted the opening goal in the 36th minute after connecting perfectly to a cross from Philippe Coutinho, but his powerful header was painfully denied by the crossbar.

Al Rayyan got a couple of chances to make the difference as well but were unable to find the net, like their opponents, as the first half ended with no goals on either side.

A much rejuvenated Al Rayyan came out of the dugout for the second half of the thrilling encounter, and they almost got the opener in the 46th minute with Achraf Bencharki's thunderous right-footed shot narrowly hitting the upright on its way out.

The goal attempt turned into a confident - boost for The Lions as they became more daring upfront, making several incursions into Al Duhail's half of the field.

With Al Rayyan's unending pressure, the deadlock was finally broken in the 80th minute, with Guedes netting the opener from a tight corner, from a Bencharki assist, after an impressive overlapping run.

Six minutes later, Gabriel Pereira assisted Guedes in getting his brace of the night to further compound last year's league winners, Al Duhail's woes.

The second goal seemed to take the wind of Al Duhail's sails as coach Christophe Galtier's men appeared to be bidding for the final whistle from thereon while Al Rayyan continued to be adventurous in their play.

Such was the situation until the final whistle, with The Lions having the "last roar" over their opponents as they bagged the crucial maximum points of the encounter.

SPOTLIGHT

Babar named Pakistan white-ball captain



New Pakistan skipper Babar Azam is seen breaking a sweat during gym training in Abbottabad, Pakistan, yesterday. (@babarazam258)

AFP
Karachi

Reappointed captain Babar Azam vowed to transform Pakistan into the best team in the world after replacing under-fire Shaheen Shah Afridi at the Twenty20 helm yesterday.

Babar only stepped down as skipper in all formats in November after Pakistan crashed out of the 50-over World Cup in the first round in India.

However, Shaheen's tenure as T20 captain was short-lived after overseeing a dispiriting 4-1 series loss to New Zealand in January.

"Our joint aim is to make this team the best in the world," said Babar, who will seek out fast bowler Shaheen's advice on the best way forward for the squad.

"As a captain, I have always valued his input and I will keep consulting him for important deci-

sions. We must take advantage of his strategic understanding of the game."

Shaheen said he stood firmly behind the experienced Babar.

"As a team player, it is my duty to back our captain, Babar Azam. I have played under his captaincy and have nothing but respect for him," he said.

"I will try to help him both on and off the field. We are all one. Our aim is the same, to help Pakistan become the best team in the world."

Following Babar's decision to relinquish the captaincy last year, he was replaced by Shan Masood as Test skipper and by Shaheen in T20Is.

Former head coach Mickey Arthur was also replaced after the World Cup disaster by team director Mohamed Hafeez, under whom Pakistan suffered a 3-0 Test white-wash in Australia and the T20I series loss in New Zealand. Pakistan will play five T20Is against New

Zealand at home, followed by three in Ireland and four in England, before the World Cup in the United States and the West Indies in June.

Mohsin Naqvi, the new Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman, announced changes to the board's selection process this month in an effort to improve team results before the tournament, making the captain and head coach part of the process.

Equal powers for all members of selection committee

"We have reorganised the selection committee with seven members but the different thing is that there will be no chairman," Naqvi told a news conference, with each member to have "equal powers".

Fast bowler Mohamed Amir has announced he will come out of retirement and all-rounder Imad Wasim has also reversed his decision to quit four months ago.

The squad is currently on a two-week training camp at an army

base in Kakul. Babar won 42 of his 71 T20Is as skipper from 2019, with 23 losses with six no-results, but was accused of favouring friends in team selection.

"We will have to see how this decision impacts Pakistan team's performance, but I think Babar should be given the long-term captaincy," former wicketkeeper-batsman Kamran Akmal told AFP yesterday.

"Babar is a serious captain, so I don't think there will be any rift in the team."

Former Pakistan skipper Shahid Afridi, whose daughter is married to Shaheen, was surprised at Babar's return.

"I believe that if change was necessary, then (Mohamed) Rizwan was the best choice," said Afridi on X.

"But since the decision has now been made, I offer my full support and best wishes to Team Pakistan and Babar Azam," Afridi added in his tweet.

FOCUS

Six batters hit half centuries as Sri Lanka reach 531

Kamindu Mendis misses century on day two of the second Test

AFP
Chittagong

Sri Lanka made a record 531 runs in their first innings of the second Test against Bangladesh yesterday but Kamindu Mendis narrowly missed scoring a third century in consecutive Test innings.

Sri Lanka's total on the second day in Chittagong was the highest scored in Tests without any batsman reaching a century - improving on India's 524-9 against New Zealand at Kanpur in 1976.

Bangladesh reached 55-1 at stumps, trailing Sri Lanka by 476 runs.

Opener Zakir Hasan was unbeaten on 28 alongside night-watchman Taijul Islam after Lahiru Kumara bowled Mahmudul Hasan Joy for 21.

Mendis was 92 not out when last man Asitha Fernando was run out for a duck, eight runs short of what would have made him only the fourth Sri Lankan to score three centuries in consecutive innings.

The right-hander, who scored 102 and 164 in the first Test, struck Taijul for two sixes in an over to come close to the feat.

However, Fernando fell short of his crease in a desperate attempt to change the strike.

Mendis had no regrets about missing out on his ton.

"I think it happens in cricket that someone can get a big hundred, someone can't," he said.

"We put a 500-plus total onto the board, I think we fulfilled our plan," he added.

Bangladesh batting coach David Hemp was hopeful his charges would put on a similar display.

"It looks like a pretty good pitch seeing the way we played or the boundaries we hit," Hemp said.

Apart from Mendis, who was



Sri Lanka's Kamindu Mendis plays a shot during the second day of the second Test against Bangladesh at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong yesterday. (AFP)

playing only his third Test, five other Sri Lanka batsmen passed the half-century mark: Dhananjaya de Silva (70), Dinesh Chandimal (59), Kusal Mendis (93), Dimuth Karunaratne (86) and Nishan Madhushka (57).

Shakib Al Hasan finished with 3-110 as Sri Lanka made Bangladesh toil for nearly two days after electing to bat first. Sri Lanka began the second day on 314-4.

De Silva, who scored 102 and 108 in the first Test, also raised the prospect of scoring three centuries on the trot before he was dismissed in the post-lunch session.

Chandimal was the only batsman to be dismissed in the first session, edging Shakib behind the stumps after making 59 runs.

Khaled Ahmed then trapped de Silva leg before in the first over after the lunch break.

The right-arm medium-pacer could have taken another wicket

in his next over if Prabath Jayasuriya was not comically dropped by three slip fielders on six.

Mendis was declared caught behind on 35 off Mehidy Hasan Miraz but the decision was reversed after review.

Shakib hit Jayasuriya plumb in front to end his 65-run seventh wicket stand with Mendis, who was dropped by Hasan Mahmud on 60 at deep square leg.

Sri Lanka, who have never lost a Test series to Bangladesh, won the first Test in Sylhet by 328 runs.

SCOREBOARD

Sri Lanka first innings

N. Madushka run out	57
D. Karunaratne b Hasan	86
K. Mendis c Mehidy b Shakib	93
A. Mathews c Mehidy b Hasan	23
D. Chandimal c Liton b Shakib	59
D. de Silva lbw b Khaled	70
Kamindu Mendis not out	92
P. Jayasuriya lbw b Shakib	28

V. Fernando run out	11
L. Kumara b Mehidy	6
A. Fernando run out	0

Extras (b4, lb2) 6

Total (all out; 159 overs) 531

Fall of wickets: 1-96 (Madushka), 2-210 (Karunaratne), 3-263 (Kusal), 4-289 (Mathews), 5-375 (Chandimal), 6-411 (de Silva), 7-476 (Jayasuriya), 8-497 (Vishwa), 9-518 (Kumara), 10-531 (Asitha)

Bowling: Khaled 20-2-71-1, Hasan 24-5-92-2, Shakib 37-5-110-3, Mehidy 46-7-146-1, Taijul 32-6-106-0

Bangladesh first innings

M. Joy b Kumara	21
Z. Hasan not out	28
T. Islam not out	0

Extras (b4, lb1, w1) 6

Total (one wicket; 15 overs) 55

Fall of wickets: 1-47 (Mahmudul)
Bowling: Vishwa 3-1-12-0, Asitha 4-0-21-0 (w1), Lahiru 4-3-4-1, Jayasuriya 4-1-13-0
Toss: Sri Lanka

REPORT

A standing ovation as Pant's 51 helps Delhi beat Chennai by 20 runs



Delhi Capitals captain Rishabh Pant (right) walks off the ground along with Chennai Super Kings' MS Dhoni after their IPL match in Visakhapatnam yesterday. (@DelhiCapitals)

AFP
Visakhapatnam, India

Rishabh Pant led from the front with his first IPL fifty since his comeback from a horror car crash as Delhi Capitals beat Chennai Super Kings by 20 runs yesterday.

Captain Pant hit 51 off 32 balls after fellow left-hander David Warner smashed 52 and helped Delhi to 191-5 in Visakhapatnam - the adopted homeground for the Capitals due to the upcoming general elections.

But the fans in the south Indian city largely represented Chennai as they chanted (MS Dhoni) "Dhoni, Dhoni" - the former skipper obliging with an unbeaten 37 off 16 balls, including four fours and three sixes.

Delhi restricted Chennai to 171-6 for their first win of the season and hand their opponents a loss after two opening victories.

Khaleel Ahmed returned bowling figures of 2-21 and Mukesh Kumar took three wickets.

Warner and Prithvi Shaw, who hit 43, put on an opening stand of 93 before Chennai's bowlers hit back with wickets including Matheesha Pathirana's two strikes in an over.

Pathirana also played a part in Warner's dismissal after he took a stunning one-handed catch behind the stumps off an attempted reverse scoop from the left-handed Australian.

Pant, who returned to the T20 tournament after 14 months away

from top level cricket, came in on the back of two innings of 18 and 28 and took time to settle in.

He started slowly but gained momentum at the backend as he smashed Pathirana for two fours and a six on successive balls, but the bowler had his revenge on the fourth.

Pathirana, known as "Baby Malinga" for his slinging action and trademark yorkers similar to the former Sri Lankan pace ace Lasith Malinga, returned figures of 3-31.

Pant walked off to a standing ovation after his first IPL fifty since 2021 and after he crashed his Mercedes north of New Delhi before dawn in December 2022.

Suffering multiple injuries when the car rammied into a crash barrier, flipped over and caught fire, Pant was rushed to hospital before being airlifted to Mumbai for further treatment and surgery.

Chennai, who witnessed a captaincy change at the start of the season when the 42-year-old Dhoni handed over the leadership to Ruturaj Gaikwad, lost two early wickets including Rachin Ravindra for two.

Ajinkya Rahane (45) and Daryl Mitchell (34) put on 68 runs in their attempt to revive the chase but the duo's departure saw wickets fall in clusters.

BRIEF SCORES

Delhi Capitals 191 for 5 (Warner 52, Pant 51, Shaw 43, Pathirana 3-31) **beat Chennai Super Kings 171 for 6** (Rahane 45, Dhoni 37, Mitchell 34, Mukesh 3-21, Khaleel 2-21) **by 20 runs**

BOTTOMLINE

Miller steers Gujarat to IPL win as Hyderabad fail to post defendable total



Gujarat Titans' Mohit Sharma celebrates after taking the wicket of Sunrisers Hyderabad's Washington Sundar (left) during the Indian Premier League Twenty20 match in Ahmedabad yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Ahmedabad, India

Mohit Sharma's bowling figures of 3-25 and an unbeaten 44 by David Miller powered Gujarat Titans to their second IPL win with a thrashing of Sunrisers Hyderabad yesterday.

Gujarat restricted Hyderabad to 162-8, a total they overhauled with seven wickets and five balls to spare at their home venue in Ahmedabad.

Hyderabad skipper Pat Cummins came to the venue with happy

memories after he led Australia to an ODI World Cup triumph at the 132,000-capacity stadium last year, but this time, the home team ruled.

"Winning two matches at home is great, two more to go and then we go on the road," Gujarat skipper Shubman Gill said.

Gill added, "Credit to the bowlers to restrict them. Everyone knows their roles in terms of batting or bowling... Miller's gotten in form too."

Gill made 36 to add to his team's attacking start after fellow opener Wriddhiman Saha smashed a 13-ball 25 and set up the chase.

Sai Sudarshan then came in as impact substitute in place of Mohit and put on a key 64-run third-wicket stand with fellow left-hander Miller, who struggled in the middle with his running and Gill said it was "just a cramp, I think".

Sudarshan fell for 45 off Cummins but Miller stood firm to steer the team home with Vijay Shankar at the other end in an unbeaten stand of 30.

Gujarat needed 49 from the last 30 balls before Miller and Sudarshan smashed Mayank Markande in a 24-run 16th over to ease into the chase. Mohit, 35, set up victory with his medium-pace bowling as

he struck three times including the key wicket of Abhishek Sharma, who made 29 off 20 balls.

Afghanistan spin wizard Rashid Khan made his presence felt when he bowled Heinrich Klaasen.

"Good match but we got 10-15 less," said Cummins. "They bowled well. Losing a couple of wickets meant we couldn't get a batter not making fifty plus."

BRIEF SCORES

Gujarat Titans 168 for 3 (Sai Sudharsan 45, Miller 44, Cummins 1-28) **beat Sunrisers Hyderabad 162 for 8** (Samad 29, Abhishek 29, Mohit 3-25, Noor 1-32) **by 7 wickets**

CYCLING

Van der Poel wins 'favourite classic' for the third time

'I FELL IN LOVE WITH IT THE FIRST TIME I TOOK PART'

AFP
Oudenaarde, Belgium

Mathieu van der Poel, at ease in the Belgian rain, powered into history yesterday as he joined the elite group who have won the Tour of Flanders three times.

"It's my favourite classic. I fell in love with it the first time I took part. And it's the one that suits me best too," Van der Poel told the post-race press conference.

The 29-year-old Dutch rider finished just over a minute ahead of the chasing group as he became the sixth rider in the 111-year history of the race to claim three victories.

"Honestly, I don't pay particular attention to records," he said. "My career has already succeeded beyond my expectations. Everything is a bonus from now on."

Italian Luca Mozzato grabbed second, one minute and two seconds back, outsprinting Australian Michael Matthews to the line. But Matthews was then penalised for dangerous riding and German Nils Politt was awarded third.

"Winning the Tour of Flanders with the world champion's rainbow jersey on your back is a dream come true," Van der Poel said at the finish.

"It was the hardest Tour of Flanders I've ever done, one of the hardest races of my career. At the end I was finished. I crawled all the way to the finish line. It was really hard."

Sunday's slog through the second and most sacred 'monument' took riders over 270.2 kilometres and up 18 nasty climbs, under grey Belgian skies and through persistent rain that made the



Alpecin-Deceuninck's Dutch rider Mathieu van der Poel celebrates by holding his bicycle in the air after winning the 'Ronde van Vlaanderen' (Tour des Flandres) one-day cycling race, 270.8km from Antwerp to Oudenaarde, yesterday. (AFP)

cobbled sections slippery. Van der Poel, of the Alpecin-Deceuninck team, spent most of the first 220 kilometres stalking breakaways.

Ivan Garcia had built a lead of 10 seconds, but slipped out of his pedals trying to find the power to climb the cobbled Kloppenberg. Rather than try to remount on the steep slope the Spaniard pushed his bike up the hill.

He was not the only one. "It was chaos. I felt really good but I still had to get off my bike on the Kloppenberg," said Latvian Toms Skujins, who finished 10th. "After that, Mathieu was alone in his world."

Van der Poel, a six time cyclo cross world champion at ease in miserable weather and on treacherous surfaces, surged up the hill and cut loose with 44km to go. "When it started raining, I

knew there was going to be chaos on the Kloppenberg," said Van der Poel.

"I accelerated in the steepest part to avoid any trouble. But it was really slippery.

"I had trouble keeping traction. The plan wasn't to start from so far out, but there was no way back."

With 30km left, he led by 1 minute and 25 seconds from a seven-rider chasing group that had begun to argue among themselves.

The Dutch rider nursed that advantage to the line to join a select club.

No one has won cycling's oldest 'monument' four times. The last man to complete a hat-trick was Swiss Fabian Cancellara in 2014. Van der Poel's previous triumphs were in 2020 and 2022.

Van der Poel's two most powerful one-day rivals were absent. Defending Flanders champion, Tadej Pogacar is skipping the spring classics as he targets a Giro d'Italia-Tour de France double.

Wout Van Aert broke a collarbone and a rib in Around Flanders four days earlier.

"I'm really sorry for all the guys who fell," said van der Poel. "I'm...not close with him...but I'm always quoted in the same sentence as Van Aert and I know what he did to be ready...It's very hard for him."

Next Sunday, Van der Poel will defend his title in the cobbled monument, the Paris-Roubaix.

"We'll have to see how I recover day by day," he said.

"I'm going to need several days to recover from today's race," Van der Poel said.

MOTORSPORT

Rovanpera, Halttunen seal 'special' Safari Rally in a Toyota 1-2



Toyota Gazoo Racing WRT's Finnish driver Kalle Rovanpera (right) and Finnish co-driver Jonne Halttunen hold their trophies at the podium after being the overall winners of the World Rally Championship (WRC) Safari Rally Kenya in Naivasha yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Nairobi

Double world champion Kalle Rovanpera avoided any late trouble to wrap up a comfortable win in the Safari Rally Kenya yesterday.

The 23-year-old Toyota driver had stamped his authority on the punishing third rally of the season from the start.

Cleaning up in all six stages around Lake Naivasha on Friday allowed Rovanpera to take his foot off the gas over the weekend and coast to a second success in the event. He led home a Toyota 1-2 with teammate Takamoto Katsuta second at 1min 38sec. Ford's Adrien Fourmaux completed the podium in Nairobi.

"It's always special to win here," Rovanpera, who failed to finish in Sweden last time out, said.

"Also, a legendary event for Toyota. We've always been so good here and that's continuing. Like they say in Africa: the car in front is always a Toyota!" he added.

Hyundai's Thierry Neuville had a taxing time with mechanical issues but sealed the closing power stage and its extra five points.

The Belgian maintained his lead in the world championship over Toyota's Elfyn Evans, fourth in Kenya. Rovanpera, who is only competing part-time this campaign to recharge his batteries

for a return full-time in 2025, is placed fifth. He is expected to sit out the fourth rally of the season in Croatia from April 18-21.

SAFARI RALLY KENYA RESULTS:

1. Kalle Rovanpera/Jonne Halttunen (FIN/Toyota) 3hr 36min 04.0sec, 2. Takamoto Katsuta/Aaron Johnston (JPN-IRL/Toyota) at 1min 37.8sec, 3. Adrien Fourmaux/Alexandre Coria (FRA/M-Sport Ford) 2:25.1, 4. Elfyn Evans/Scott Martin (GBR/Toyota) 4:20.2, 5. Thierry Neuville/Martijn Wydaeghe (BEL/Hyundai) 10:17.5

Special stage winners

Kalle Rovanpera (SS2, SS3, SS4, SS5, SS6, SS7, SS10), Thierry Neuville (SS1, SS9, SS14, SS17), Elfyn Evans (SS12, SS15, SS16), Takamoto Katsuta (SS8, SS11), Ott Tanak (SS13, SS18)

Power Stage

1. Thierry Neuville (5 points), 2. Ott Tanak (4), 3. Esapekka Lappi (3), 4. Kalle Rovanpera (2), 5. Elfyn Evans (1)

World championship standings Drivers

1. Thierry Neuville/Martijn Wydaeghe (BEL/Hyundai) 67 points, 2. Elfyn Evans/Scott Martin (GBR/Toyota) 61, 3. Adrien Fourmaux/Alexandre Coria (FRA/M-Sport Ford) 46, 4. Ott Tanak/Martijn Järveoja (EST/Hyundai) 33, 5. Kalle Rovanpera/Jonne Halttunen (FIN/Toyota) 31

Teams 1. Toyota 131 points, 2. Hyundai 127, 3. M-Sport/Ford 72

COLLINS REACHES HER GOAL AS SHE PREPARES FOR TENNIS EXIT

Miami: When American Danielle Collins decided this year was to be her final one on the WTA Tour, she set herself a simple goal but one which has eluded so many - to win one of the big prizes in the sport.

On Saturday, the 30-year-old from St. Petersburg, Florida, got her hands on that top trophy, winning her first WTA 1000 series title, with a straight sets win over world number four Elena Rybakina.

It was an emotional victory for Collins, in front of a home state crowd at her last appearance in Miami as she finally got the high-level success that had eluded her.

"I have always wanted to win every tournament that I have signed up for, but because it was my last year, I was like, I really want to try to win a Masters 1000 this year. That's really important to me. That's something that I talked a lot about with everybody close to me," she said.

"I really wanted to make a push to be able to bring out my best tennis. I'm so glad that I have been able to figure out some of the physical things I have needed to do to kind of peak at the right time and to feel like I'm ready to go.

"I certainly did that this tournament, but it

has been a goal, yeah. So I got to tick it off the list," she added with a grin.

Collins, who will rise from 53rd to 22nd in the world today, is leaving at what now appears to be her peak in a move that is in keeping with a career which began differently to most on the women's tour.

While the vast majority of talented young players opt for the path of home-school and entering the pro ranks in their teenage years, Collins decided to complete her studies, earning a masters degree in sports management, and play college tennis for the University of Florida and the University of Virginia.

She won two national collegiate titles but did not turn pro until she was 22 and perhaps not surprisingly, her success has come later in her career with titles in 2021 in Palermo and San Jose and a run to the final at the 2022 Australian Open.

But the decision to make 2024 her final season certainly appears to have brought a shift in approach which has worked to great effect.

"I really think part of the reason why I played so well and did a good job today was because I had that mentality of - I'm going to enjoy every minute of this," Collins said.

"This is my last year, this is my last season,

and these are some of my final events. I want to remember these moments."

"I'm just trying to get better at taking it in. Today I woke up and when we were in the car, I said 'Oh, this is going to be the first time I play a finals in my home state and have a lot of crowd support."

"We changed the playlist, got really pumped up."

"It was just so much fun. This day has been, like, the best," added Collins. The knowledge that there won't be many more moments left to savour also means Collins, who has had her dog Quincy with her in Miami this week and has been playing golf in her downtime, is determined to enjoy the win with those close to her.

"I've been going, going, going for the past few months playing back-to-back tournaments. Now I get to celebrate with friends."

"We're going to have a great weekend. We've got a pickleball tournament coming up tomorrow."

"I'm competitive, so we are always doing competitive activities," she laughed.

"And I've got a night out on the town. Haven't done that in a while. Hopefully I can stay up for it - and wear a non-tennis outfit."



Danielle Collins of the US yesterday poses with the trophy after winning the final at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida. Collins defeated Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan 7-5, 6-3 on Saturday. (AFP)

GOLF

Nakajima claims his first World Tour win in India

AFP
New Delhi

Japan's Keita Nakajima cruised to victory by four shots at the Hero Indian Open golf yesterday, despite a final-round stumble, for his first World Tour title.

Nakajima, 23, finished with a 17-under par total of 271 despite a one-over 73 in the last round, well clear of home favourite Veer Ahlawat, Sweden's Sebastian Soderberg and US golfer Johannes Veerman.

The former amateur world number one had led by four shots going into the final round and appeared to be untroubled until he came to the back nine at the DLF Golf and Country Club near New Delhi.

"It feels amazing," said Nakajima, the fifth Japanese winner of a World Tour event.

"I feel like this is the first win of a new professional career. This is my first year playing on the DP World Tour and I'm very proud to have won on the DP World Tour and very honoured to be playing here. I want to try and finish on the top ten on this tour and then go to the PGA Tour in 2025.

"The win definitely gives me a lot of con-



Japan's Keita Nakajima celebrates after winning the Hero Indian Open for his first World Tour title glory. (@DPWorldTour)

fidence in myself and I'm hoping now to take what I did this week and turn it into even more wins in the future.

"I was a little nervous and I had a tough back nine but I hit some great shots. Fortunately I had a few strokes in the bank which I can credit back to my strong play on the front nine and the earlier rounds this week, so overall very proud of my performance."

Nakajima quickly increased his overnight lead to six with birdies at the first and fourth holes, adding another on the sixth before dropping his first shot of the day on the next hole and then regaining it on the eighth.

That slight wobble became more serious with a double bogey on the par-4 14th.

He clawed one stroke back on the next hole by sinking a 20-footer but then missed three successive greens to finish his round with bogeys on the 16th, 17th and 18th holes.

However, none of his rivals was able to capitalise on Nakajima's stumble, with Soderberg also dropping a shot at the last to finish with a 67. Ahlawat gave the home crowd something to cheer about when he sank a tough putt for eagle on the 18th but his one-under final round on the Gary Player-designed course was also laced with four bogeys.

Bucks beat Hawks 122-113



Milwaukee Bucks guard Patrick Beverley (21) shoots past Atlanta Hawks guard Dejounte Murray (5) in the second half of their NBA game at State Farm Arena yesterdays. The Bucks won 122-113. (USA TODAY Sports)

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arsenal, Man City stalemate hands Liverpool lead

SALAH CAPS FIGHTBACK AS LIVERPOOL BEAT BRIGHTON 2-1

AFP

Manchester

Manchester City failed to break down a determined Arsenal defence as a highly-anticipated clash at the top of the Premier League failed to live up to the hype in a 0-0 draw at the Etihad yesterday.

Liverpool were the big winners of the day in the title race as they beat Brighton 2-1 to go top, two points ahead of Arsenal and three clear of City with nine games to play. Jurgen Klopp's side were rocked by Danny Welbeck's blistering strike after just 85 seconds at Anfield. Luis Diaz restored order with an equaliser later in the first half, before Salah netted after the interval to seal a vital victory.

Salah's third goal in his last three games was his 22nd in all competitions this term.

Later, a share of the spoils preserves City's unbeaten home run stretching back to November 2022 and ends Arsenal's eight-match winning run in the Premier League. But it is the Gunners who will be happier with a point as they prevented Pep Guardiola's men from scoring at the Etihad for the first time in two years.

"Defensively we were outstanding," said Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta. "The next step is with the ball to have more composure to attack better."

"They are the best team in the world by far, best manager by far, and we have to catch up. That's the challenge for us."

City had 72 percent possession but struggled to make anything of it against a defence that has conceded the fewest number of goals in the Premier League this season.

"We didn't create much but it was almost actions," said City manager Guardiola. "It's not easy



Liverpool striker Mohamed Salah (Centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring his team second goal during the Premier League match against Brighton and Hove Albion at Anfield in Liverpool yesterday. (AFP)

to break them (down) but I recognise the intention was there."

Guardiola said Liverpool were now "favourites" to win the title in Jurgen Klopp's final season.

City are still yet to win in six matches this season against other sides in the Premier League top five and must end that run when fourth-placed Aston Villa visit on Wednesday to keep their title challenge alive. "Always who is first is favourite, second favourite is Arsenal," added Guardiola. "It is not in our hands. All we can do is win against Aston Villa."

Arsenal had also been in free-scoring form, netting 33 times during their eight-match winning streak. However, the visitors had lost on their last eight trips to the Etihad, including a 4-1 thrashing as the title race swung decisively in City's favour last season, and opted

for a counter-attacking approach.

"Eleven months ago we were here and the story was very different, we have to keep making steps," added Arteta, who said his side still have to improve to match the standards City have set in winning five Premier League titles in six seasons. "We are improving, competing better, understanding how you have to play these games."

"We have to come here and win. Today we draw and we still have to improve to be able to do that."

Nathan Ake wasted the home side's best chance in the first half when he failed to connect properly with a dangerous Kevin De Bruyne corner. City were already missing the key defensive duo of Kyle Walker and John Stones after both were injured on international duty with England. And Guardiola was forced to cobble together an even

more makeshift backline when Ake hobbled off on 27 minutes. Arsenal, though, rarely tested the City defence. Gabriel could just not stretch far enough to meet Bukayo Saka's cross in the only sign of life from the England international. At the other end, Erling Haaland was extremely well-marshalled by Arsenal's solid centre-back pairing of Gabriel Magalhaes and William Saliba. And the Norwegian fluffed his lines when he did get a rare sight of goal seven minutes from time as he failed to connect with a corner at the back post. Arsenal's best chance to snatch all three points came late on when substitute Leandro Trossard fired straight at Stefan Ortega.

But a share of the spoils leaves the title race still tantalisingly poised with three points separating the top three.

FOCUS

QFA all set to stage Qatar-UAE Super Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Qatar Football Association (QFA)'s Organising Committee yesterday announced complete readiness to host the first-ever Qatar-UAE Super Cup, a landmark football event underscoring the collaborative spirit between Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

Addressing a press conference in Doha yesterday, the Organising Committee's Director of Communications Ali Hassan al-Salat expressed his confidence in making the inaugural event a huge success. Director of the Al Thumama Facility Ahmed al-Obaidi also spoke.

The tournament will commence in Doha on April 12, 2024, with the first event, the Qatar-UAE Super Cup, showcasing a match between Qatar's Amir Cup champions Al Arabi and UAE's President's Cup winners Sharjah at Al Thumama Stadium.

The excitement will continue with the UAE-Qatar Super Cup Shield scheduled for April 13, 2024, in Dubai, featuring a face-off between the 2022-2023 Adnoc Pro League champions Shabab Al Ahli and the 2022-2023 Qatar Stars League winners Al Duhail.

"We are completely ready to host the match between Al Arabi and Sharjah," al-Salat told reporters yesterday.



كأس السوبر
Super Cup
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"We are hopeful that it is going to be an exceptional event and we are very confident we will achieve the desired goal and come out in the best way."

Al-Salat revealed that tickets for the match were being offered via the Haya platform, stressing that Al Arabi fans do not need an invitation to attend the match in Doha, stressing that it is an opportunity for Al Arabi to achieve its first external achievement after it had previously won runner-up in Asia, the Arabs and the Gulf, and this time it can be present on the platform as a crowned champion.

The categories of tickets have been divided into three categories ranging between QR10 to QR100.

Meanwhile, al-Obaidi said Al Thumama Stadium is fully prepared, adding the gates will open at 4:30pm.

He added cooperation has been made with the security teams and all responsible authorities to organize the match in a befitting manner.

Everton announce £89.1mn losses for 2022-23 season

Premier League strugglers Everton revealed an £89.1mn (\$112mn) loss for the 2022-23 season in their latest financial accounts yesterday. Everton's losses were a significant increase from the 2021-22 season, when their accounts showed a £44.7mn deficit.

The Goodison Park club have blamed the indefinite suspension of sponsorship deals with key commercial partners as mitigation for the increased loss.

Everton's latest accounts, which also show heavy investment in the club's new stadium, comes at a time when their finances are under scrutiny. The Toffees are due to find out before April 8 the verdict of a second charge of breaching the Premier League's profitability and sustainability rules.

They could be hit with a further points deduction in addition to the six they have already lost for breaches related to the 2021-22 season. Under PSR regulations, clubs can lose a maximum of £105mn over a three-season period, or £35mn per campaign, before facing sanctions. Beaten 2-1 at Bournemouth on Saturday, Everton are currently 16th in the Premier League table. Sean Dyche's side sit just three points above the relegation zone with nine games left.

Under-fire majority shareholder Farhad Moshiri said earlier this week that he remains confident the protracted takeover of the club by 777 Partners will be completed soon.

BUNDESLIGA

Undav late strike snatches Stuttgart point against visiting Heidenheim

AFP

Stuttgart

Deniz Undav scored in the eighth minute of stoppage time to snatch a point for Stuttgart, pulling the home side level in a pulsating 3-3 draw with visiting Heidenheim yesterday. The match swung wildly late, Heidenheim's Tim Kleindienst scoring two goals in two minutes before Undav's last-gasp equaliser.

Goals from Serhou Guirassy, his 23rd in 21 league games, and Angelo Stiller, had third-placed Stuttgart in the driver's seat, but a 62nd-minute howler of an own goal from goalkeeper Alex Nuebel gave Heidenheim hope. Nuebel caught and then dropped a tame Kleindienst header, before allowing it to trickle between his legs and into the goal.

Kleindienst, who scored the crucial goal in the ninth minute of stoppage time which took Heidenheim up to the first division at the end of last season, scored in the 84th and 85th minutes to steal the lead. Kleindienst tapped in a

Jan-Niklas Beste cross to level the scores and then headed in while unmarked in the box. The visitors were reduced to 10 men after six added minutes, Nikola Dovedan seeing straight red for a rough tackle on Maximilian Mittelstaedt.

Undav, who celebrated a first-ever call-up to the Germany squad earlier in March, salvaged a point for the home side slamming a low drive into the bottom corner with the last kick of the game.

"If you're leading 2-0 at home, you can't give a game away like that," lamented Mittelstaedt on DAZN. Goalscorer Stiller, who is having a breakout season in the Stuttgart midfield, echoed the comments, saying "we can't be satisfied with the draw. We can't let that happen."

Stuttgart missed a chance to close the gap with second-placed Bayern to one point, but still sit seven points clear of fifth-placed RB Leipzig as they push for a return to the Champions League.

Stuttgart coach Sebastian Hoernes said his side got carried away. "After the 2-0, there was a party in the stadium. That's fine for the fans, but we need to stay seri-

ous. The result is bitter for us." Guirassy scored for the fourth straight game and is eight behind top scorer Harry Kane in the league this season. Heidenheim, who host Bayern next week, sit in 11th place and are all but certain to stay in the top division.

Earlier, Augsburg drew 1-1 at home with Cologne to regain seventh spot in the Bundesliga, and remain on course for a return to European football.

Arne Maier gave the home side the lead after 18 minutes but Davie Selke's 33rd-minute goal levelled the scores for the visitors.

Augsburg came into the game on a four-match winning streak and could qualify for Europe for the first time since 2015-16. Hovering dangerously close to the relegation places when the Danish coach Jess Thorup took over in October, Augsburg have improved rapidly. Depending on UEFA rankings and German Cup results, seventh spot may be enough for a Europa Conference League place. The point was cold comfort for Cologne, who are stranded in second-last place, six points from safety with seven games remaining.



Stuttgart's forward Deniz Undav (third from left) celebrates with teammates after scoring the equalising during the Bundesliga match against FC Heidenheim in Stuttgart yesterday. (AFP)

MOTORSPORT

Qatar Drift Championship: Al-Atiya claims fourth round honours

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's Saud al-Atiya claimed top honours in the fourth and penultimate round of the Qatar Drift Championship as engine noises roared at Qatar Racing Club (QRC) at the weekend.

The event is being sponsored by QRC Chairman HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani.

After the drivers' free test on Wednesday, the qualifying took place on Thursday in two sessions.

The first day, as usual, was dedicated to qualifying trials, held over two sessions, and in the end, Kuwait's Salem al-Sarraf managed to take the lead, leaving second place to the overall leader Ahmed al-Amri of Oman. Following them were Riyadh al-Mabsali and Mohamed Khourshid in third and fourth places, respectively.

As for the qualifying trials in the local category, racer Abdullah Jawad Abdullah managed to take the first place, narrowing the gap with the championship leader Ali al-Jabshah, who came in second, while the third place went to al-Atiya and the fourth to racer Aladdin Zareef. Overall, the trials resulted in the qualification of the top sixteen drivers for the knockout rounds, which began the next day.

The results of the first round of knockouts saw the qualification of Salem al-Sarraf, al-Atiya, Mohamed Khourshid, and Mubarak al-Dousari from the first half of the bracket, while al-Amri, Messier Abu Shiba, Khalid al-Shafei, and Ali Jabshah qualified from the other half.

The second round began with a heavyweight surprise as al-Atiya



defeated al-Sarraf, the leader in qualifying trials, who needed to progress in this round as he competed for the championship's overall lead but settled for this result.

Similarly, Khourshid managed to defeat Qatari racer al-Dousari in the second face-off of this round, reaching the semi-finals for the first time in this championship, while on the other side of the matchups, there were no surprises as al-Amri defeated Abu Shiba and Ali Jabshah secured his spot in the semi-finals by defeating his Qatari teammate al-Shafei, who faced issues preventing him from participating.

The fifth and final round will take place on April 4 and 5.

The first semi-final match brought together al-Atiya and Khourshid, with al-Atiya winning to reach the final for the first time in the championship to face al-Amri, who had to settle for second place after a mechanical issue prevented him from completing the match.

QRC Director Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani crowned the top three winners on the podium. Additionally, the winners of the top three positions in the local category were also honoured in front of large number of spectators.

The fifth and final round will take place on April 4 and 5.