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CRICKET | Page 2

**Pant-inspired
Delhi hammer
Gujarat in IPL by
six wickets**



TENNIS | Page 3

**Nadal comeback
ends in second
round at
Barcelona Open**

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Page 4

AFC U-23 ASIAN CUP

Qatar will go all out for win against Jordan, says Vale

'Before starting this competition, we knew that it would be difficult to qualify from this group'

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar will aim to once again secure three points today when they face Jordan in their second Group A encounter at the AFC U-23 Asian Cup, according to head coach Ildio Vale.

Following their 2-0 win against Indonesia on Monday in the opening match, a second consecutive success at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium will see the hosts become the first side to seal their place in the knockout stage and their third appearance in the last eight.

While Vale cautioned against taking their opponents lightly, the Portuguese declared that his team heads into every match aiming for nothing less than victory. "Naturally, before starting this competition, we knew that it would be difficult to qualify from this group," the 66-year-old said. "We expect another difficult game for Qatar (but) there is a slogan for our team, which is to 'win and nothing but the win'."

Man of the match in their opening match, midfielder Jassem Gaber is aiming to turn in another commanding display and vowed that Qatar will improve as their campaign progresses.

"We are taking it step by step in this tournament and we have just finished the first step," said the 22-year-old, who has already been capped at senior level and scored at the Asian Cup. "But mainly, we will focus on our coach's instructions, and be even better in the next game."

Jordan, who were held to a goalless draw in their first match on Monday against Australia, will have their task made more difficult by the suspension of captain Dania Afaneh after the centre-back was sent off in that game.

Head coach Abdallah Abu Zema, however, played down any concerns over his captain's unavailability and called on his charges to reset their mentality for their first ever encounter against Qatar in tournament history.

"When we announced our squad of players (for this tournament), of course we already had in mind an alternative player for everyone... and thankfully, we also have someone to replace Danial," the 48-year-old said. "The game against Qatar has its own circumstances, tactics, decisions and different instructions to be taken. We have played Australia and we are



Victory today against Jordan will see Qatar become the first side to seal their place in the knockout stage of the AFC U-23 Asian Cup.



Qatar U-23 coach Ildio Vale.

going to forget that - it is done and we got the point we needed.

"We look forward to our game against Qatar in a very serious manner and hope it will take us one step closer to the knockout stage. However, let's not forget that the Qatari team is playing on their own turf, in their own country and amongst their own people and they are a very good team. This is something to be taken into consideration but we will be getting ready and hoping for the best."

AUSTRALIA EYE FIRST WIN

In the other Group A match today, Australia coach Tony Vidmar is relishing his side's meeting with Indonesia as the Olyroos look to back up their opening day draw against Jordan with their first three points of the campaign at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium.

Vidmar is attempting to steer Australia to a second successive Olympic Games qualification and only the country's third since joining the Asian Football Confederation in 2006, and victory over Shin Tae-yong's side would take his team a step



Australia players during a training session on the eve of their match against Indonesia.

closer to the knockout rounds.

"We were happy to start off with a point in this tournament," said Vidmar. "We look forward to playing Indonesia, which is going to be a really good game. Ten of their players were at the senior Asian Cup so that will be a real test. They were im-

pressive at the senior Asian Cup in January. That's what we're here for, to be tested against good opposition, different types of football. It's only going to make our players better for the experience."

The Australians currently sit two points behind early Group A leaders Qatar af-

ter sharing the points with the Jordanians and the Olyroos are expected to once again be at full strength after reporting no initial injuries in the aftermath of their first game. "It's one point in the right direction," captain Callum Talbot said after the draw, which was achieved despite Jordan playing out the closing stages with 10 men due to Danial Afaneh's red card. "It's a positive, a clean sheet and we move onto the next game."

Indonesia, meanwhile, will be looking to bounce back from a demoralising 2-0 loss to Qatar in their opener on Monday at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

Shin's hopes of taking the Indonesians into the next phase of the competition are further impacted by the unavailability of Ivar Jenner and Ramadhan Sananta, who were both sent off in the loss on Monday and will be serving suspensions as a result.

Jenner was dismissed moments into the second half for a second bookable offence following a challenge on Saif Eldeen Hassan while Sananta was given a straight red card for a foul on Mohamed Aiash deep into injury time at the end of the game.

SPOTLIGHT

Vi Hao at the double as Vietnam sink 10-man Kuwait

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Vietnam kicked off their AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 Group D campaign in style, defeating Kuwait 3-1 at the Al Janoub Stadium yesterday. The 2018 runners-up took full advantage of Kuwait going a man down in the 31st minute to claim the three points although they too ended the tie a player down. The match began on an equal footing with Kuwait having the early chances but Salman al-Awadhi and Hussain Ashkanani both sent their efforts wide in the opening minutes.

Vietnam suffered a setback in the 12th minute when Nguyen Dinh Bac was forced to leave the field due to an injury but the Southeast Asian side were not affected and should have taken the lead three minutes later. Nguyen Van Tung was positioned perfectly to deliver the final blow, but a mix-up with Khuat Van Kang saw them getting into each other's way as the chance slipped away. The match took another twist when Kuwait's Ebraheem Kameel was sent off after a VAR review for a violent challenge on Khuat.

With a one-man advantage, Vietnam



Vietnam's Bui Vi Hao celebrates after scoring against Kuwait during the AFC U-23 Asian Cup Group D match at the Al Janoub Stadium yesterday.

finally broke through when Van Tung masterfully beat the offside trap to latch onto Nguyen Van Truong's well-timed pass before calmly slotting the ball past goalkeeper Abdulrahman Marzouq in added time.

Just before the halftime whistle, Nguyen Ngoc Thang brought down Abdulrahman Karam, leading to another VAR review. The outcome was a red card for Ngoc Thang, and Salman al-Awadhi made no mistake

from the spot to level the scores.

Vietnam coach Hoang shook things up with three substitutions in the second half, a move that paid immediate dividends. Substitute Bui Vi Hao pressured goalkeeper Marzouq into a blunder, allowing the Becamex Binh Duong forward to easily tap in and regain the lead in the 47th minute.

Vietnam continued to apply pressure, leading to a scrappy exchange in the box, with Vo Hoang Minh Khoa slotting home in the 55th minute, but the goal was disallowed as Nguyen Thai Son was caught offside in the buildup. Bui continued to shine, notching another goal in the 76th minute off a precise through pass from Thai Son.

UZBEKISTAN EASE PAST MALAYSIA

Uzbekistan secured a positive start to life in Group D with a 2-0 win over Malaysia at Khalifa International Stadium. Malaysia kept the game tight for long periods but 2018 champions Uzbekistan's clinical finishing proved to be the difference in a tie of limited chances. Both sides had early chances with Luqman Hakim sending a volley just over the bar in the first minute before Jasurbek Jaloliddinov tested Malaysian goalkeeper Azim al-Amin with a grounder from outside the box.

Luqman was then presented with a tap-

in chance on seven minutes but Saidzamat Mirsaidov produced an outstanding last-ditch block to deny the Yokohama FC forward. That was to cost Malaysia four minutes later when Jaloliddinov confidently slotted home a spot-kick which was awarded after Syahir Bashah dallied inside his own box before eventually fouling Ruslanbek Jijyanov after the Navbahor forward had nicked the ball off him.

As the half progressed, Malaysia pulled their defensive line lower, allowing Uzbekistan more possession but were able to protect Azim better with only Jijyanov's long distance strike in the 32nd minute needing a save.

The second half was a more cagey affair even though the pattern of the game remained unchanged with Uzbekistan continuing to probe without success.

Malaysia had a half-chance in the 73rd minute after substitute Daryl Sham was released down the right wing, with his cross requiring Uzbekistan custodian Abdvakhid Nematov to drop back to collect the ball. Ulugbek Khoshimov settled the contest 10 minutes later after Khusain Norchaev pounced on a loose ball to set up the former for the finish, with Uzbekistan to face Kuwait next on Saturday while Malaysia will play Vietnam.

MOTORSPORT

F1 faces fresh challenge on return to China

Reuters
Shanghai

Formula One returns to China for the first time since 2019 with even world champion **Max Verstappen** facing a new challenge at a circuit that provided his Red Bull team's first grand prix victory 15 years ago.

The weekend will host the first sprint of the season, with only one hour of free practice tomorrow to fine tune the cars and do tyre assessments, and the teams have only simulator data to go on.

The last time they raced at the Shanghai International Circuit, the cars had 13-inch tyres and a flat floor instead of the current 18-inch Pirelli rubber and ground-effect aerodynamics.

The track has also seen little use since 2019 and could be bumpier than before.

"It's going to be quite hectic anyway with the Sprint weekend," said Verstappen after winning in Japan for his third victory in four races.

"So, yeah, only one practice session to really get into it again. So I think it will be quite interesting." The 26-year-old has been critical, with some others, of the decision to have a 100km Saturday sprint in China when there are so many unknowns.

"It would have been better to have a normal race weekend there. But on the other hand, it probably spices things up a bit more, and that's maybe what they would like to see," he said.

"We'll see what we get there. I mean, I always loved driving there. So yeah, hopefully we can hit the ground running as well as we can, and hopefully we don't need to fine-tune too many things on the car."

Verstappen has won three championships since he last raced in China and such is his domination that another victory on Sunday would mean the Dutch driver has won half of all the F1 races held since Shanghai's last appearance on the calendar.

It would also be his first win in China, which was Lewis Hamilton territory until the Covid-19 pan-



General view of the paddock at the Shanghai International Circuit ahead of the Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai yesterday. (AFP)

demical brought down the shutters. Mercedes' seven times world champion has won a record six times in Shanghai but arrives this time on the brink of 50 successive races without standing on the top step of the podium.

Ferrari are likely to be Red Bull's closest rivals again, with Carlos Sainz and Charles Leclerc third and fourth behind Verstappen and team mate Sergio Perez in Japan, and Mercedes beaten by McLaren and Aston Martin.

Verstappen is 13 points clear of Perez in the standings and 18 ahead of Leclerc with George Russell the highest placed Mercedes driver in seventh. Hamilton is ninth.

"The headline results didn't necessarily show it, but we made solid progress with our car in Japan,"

said Mercedes boss Toto Wolff. "We are looking forward to building on that this weekend."

Zhou Guanyu will give the Chinese crowd a first chance to cheer one of their own with China's first and only Formula One driver making his home debut with Sauber. The race is sold out, previously a rarity, and the excitement is mounting.

"F1 is definitely more popular than before. In the past, tickets may have been discounted towards race day, but this year, it was actually hard to get a ticket," said local chemistry teacher and F1 fan Li Qixiang.

"Everyone told me there were no tickets available, so it's definitely more popular than in the years prior to the pandemic. The main reason for this must have something to do with the fact that Zhou Guanyu is driving this year"

CRICKET

Pant keeps it neat as Delhi hammer Gujarat in IPL tie

'EACH AND EVERY MATCH I AM LOVING THE PROCESS'

AFP
Ahmedabad, India

Sharp glove work by skipper Rishabh Pant and some inspired bowling set up a crushing six-wicket win for Delhi Capitals after Gujarat Titans fell to their IPL lowest of 89 yesterday.

Medium-pace bowler Mukesh Kumar stood out with figures of 3-14 to help bundle out Gujarat in 17.3 overs and Delhi raced to their target in 8.5 overs in Ahmedabad.

Delhi, who were without injured David Warner, registered just their third win and second successive of this season to jump three places to sixth in the 10-team table.

Pant, who returned to this year's IPL after surviving a horror car crash, stood unbeaten on 16 after Australian batter Jake Fraser-McGurk made a brisk 20.

The 26-year-old Pant, a left-hand batsman, has scored 210 runs, including two half-centuries, in a boost to his chances of a return to the T20 World Cup in June.

"Lots of things to be pleased about," said man of the match Pant. "We spoke about champion mindset and our team spoke about it."

On his performance after his recovery, Pant added: "The only thought process before coming to the field is that I wanted to come in a better way, that's the only thought when I was going through my rehab."

"Each and every match I am lov-



Delhi Capitals' captain Rishabh Pant (left) celebrates with teammate Sumit Kumar (right) after their win at the end of Indian Premier League (IPL) Twenty20 match against Gujarat Titans in Ahmedabad yesterday. (AFP)

ing the process and being on the ground."

Pant suffered multiple injuries when his Mercedes rammed into

a barrier, flipped and caught fire in December 2022. He was hospitalised before being airlifted to Mumbai for further treatment and

surgery. India fast bowler Ishant Sharma dismissed captain Shubman Gill for eight in the second over of the match and Gujarat kept losing wickets to some disciplined bowling.

The fielding remained impressive after Sumit Kumar sent back Sai Sudarshan for 12 with a direct throw at the non-striker's end.

Pant was nimble behind the stumps and started with a diving catch to dismiss David Miller off Ishant.

The wicketkeeper affected two stumpings when his quick work sent back Abhinav Manohar, for eight, and Shahrukh Khan, for a duck in the space of three balls off South African spinner Tristan Stubbs.

Gujarat slipped to 66-7, but Rashid Khan resisted from one end with his gritty 31 off 24 balls before he fell caught behind with Pant taking a regulation catch behind the stumps.

"Our batting was very average, but it's important to move on and come back strong," said Gill. "The wicket was alright, if you see some of the dismissals, it had nothing to do with the pitch."

Gujarat's total is the lowest this season in a contrast to some big scores including two record highs of 277 and then 287 by Sunrisers Hyderabad.

BRIEF SCORES
Delhi Capitals 92 for 4 (Fraser-McGurk 20, Warner 2-40) **beat Gujarat Titans 89 all out** (Rashid 31, Mukesh 3-14) **by 6 wickets**

RATHOD SHINES AS QATAR BEAT MALAYSIA IN ACC T20 PREMIER CUP '24 CLASH

Qatar beat Malaysia by four wickets in their ACC T20 Premier Cup '24 match played at Al Ameerat Cricket Ground in Oman. Malaysia, after being put to bat first, scored 151/6 in 20 overs. Opener Fayed Ahmed was the top scorer with 38 runs for Malaysia. Qatar's all-rounder Himanshu Rathod returned figures of 2/22 in 4 overs.

In reply, Qatar chased down the score winning the match by 4 wickets with 2.4 overs to spare. Opener Kamran Khan (37 off 23 balls) and captain Mohamed Tanveer (33 off 24 balls) produced sparkling knocks. Rathod (left) was declared 'man of the match' for his brilliant bowling.



PAKISTAN VS NEW ZEALAND T20 SERIES STARTS TODAY



Pakistan captain Babar Azam (right) and his New Zealand's counterpart Michael Bracewell pose with the Twenty20 series trophy in Rawalpindi yesterday. Pakistan and New Zealand play the first game of the five-match series today in Rawalpindi. (AFP)

CYCLING

Williams, Katarzyna spring surprises at Fleche Wallonne

AFP
Huy, Belgium

Welsh rider Stephen Williams won the Fleche Wallonne Spring cycling classic run across the rain-drenched Ardennes hills and plains yesterday as the race delivered its usual nail-biting climax.

The Israel-Premier Tech rider burst from the remaining clutch of contenders on the steepest section of the imposing final Mur de Huy climb opening a 30 metres gap before running out of steam and just clinging on.

This revered race was won in 2023 by Tadej Pogacar but the 2024 event saw all the top contenders caught out in a peloton split engineered by the lashing rain. Weather often causes chaos in the spring classics and contenders in the Fleche need to be adept at racing in rain whilst also possessing the right physical build to tackle the final climb.

Williams rode against convention, attacking slightly early.

"I saw the 300m to go line and I thought if I could put five seconds into the group and get near the line, then I could hold on," said the exhausted 27-year-old at the finish.

There are no cobbles along the Fleche route but constant undulating hills, culminating in the 1.3km Mur de Huy with its 9.6 percent gradient, is prone to delivering a last-gasp winner like Williams.

But the 199km race from Charleroi to Huy was marked by regular bursts of heavy rain in the exposed open plains where Tom Pidcock, Mattias Skjelmose, Tiesj Benoot and the other fancied riders missed the key split.

At that point another rain specialist Danish rider Soren Krach Andersen opened up a 2min gap on the reduced peloton, but as the sun came out and riders began to throw their rain jackets into the roadside ditches he was caught and passed.

Fellow outsiders Kevin Vauquelin and Maxim Van Gils completed the podium, cheered on by huge crowds along the roadside barriers who had braved the nasty seasonal showers to witness a thrilling finale.

In the later women's race Poland's Katarzyna Niewiadoma beat Dutch giant Demi Vollerling and Italy's Elisa Longo Borghini at the same finish line.

"I knew it was going to be my day, it's my greatest win," she said.



Poland's Katarzyna Niewiadoma of Canyon/Sram Racing celebrates as she crosses the finish line to win the women's race of "La Fleche Wallonne" cycling race, in Huy, Belgium, yesterday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

After Tokyo 'test run', Duplantis set for different experience in Paris

Reuters
London

After making his Olympic bow in Tokyo when strict Covid-19 restrictions kept fans away and athletes in a bubble, pole vault world record holder **Armand Duplantis** hopes his second Games in Paris will be more like the way he always imagined them.

"It feels like it's going to be, in a way, my first Olympics," the Swede, who won gold in the Japanese capital, told Reuters. "It felt like a little test run, Tokyo, and it was also just a very stressful situation and very stressful time when we had the Olympics."

In 2021, with no fans there to cheer them on, athletes had to get used to competing in empty venues and were ordered to follow strict rules to prevent any spread of the virus within the Olympic "bubble".

Duplantis expects Paris to be a lot more fun. "The situation with Covid just brought a lot of stress, on everybody, and you weren't really able to be as free as you would like to," he said.

"Paris is going to be a completely

different experience and it's going to be great. I'm super excited. It's also nice to be able to have family members there that can actually watch you."

Duplantis has won everything there is to win as an athlete, including world indoor and outdoor titles as well as setting seven world records, but the 24-year-old is far from content with his achievements. "I feel like I have got a lot of fire in me, I'm very hungry," Duplantis said. "It definitely helps that it's an Olympic year, honestly, because I feel like there's a different level of intensity that comes into the training. Subconsciously, it just happens that way because it's such a big year."

"I feel like there's a lot left for me still to do on the track, a lot of higher heights to go, and I just want to keep pushing myself, keep improving, keep trying to see what I can get out of myself and just jump higher."

Despite his dominance, Duplantis said it was too soon for him to be included as one of the all-time greats.

"I like my chances against any pole vaulter now or in the history of the sport. I feel like I'm going to be the best guy on the track always. But other than that, I don't really think about it in that way," he added.

Keyhole
GULFTIMES
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British Olympic chief voices 'concerns' about Paris opening ceremony

British Olympic Association chief executive Andy Anson has expressed "concerns" over the opening ceremony for the 2024 Paris Games on the river Seine before gathering at the Trocadero for a ceremony. But with war currently raging in Ukraine and in Gaza, concerns have been raised that the ceremony could leave athletes potentially vulnerable to attack. "I'm clearly concerned," Anson said in an interview yesterday to mark 100 days to go until the opening ceremony. It's one of the most important things that we have to manage from a risk perspective."

The current plans would see as many as 10,000 athletes sailing along a six-kilometre stretch of the Seine in around 160 barges, before gathering at the Trocadero for a ceremony. But with war currently raging in Ukraine and in Gaza, concerns have been raised that the ceremony could leave athletes potentially vulnerable to attack. "I'm clearly concerned," Anson said in an interview yesterday to mark 100 days to go until the opening ceremony. It's one of the most important things that we have to manage from a risk perspective."

TENNIS

Nadal comeback ends in Barcelona Open 2nd round

'I had the chance to say goodbye on court and that means a lot for me'

AFP
Barcelona

Rafael Nadal suffered his first defeat on his return to tennis after injury as he fell 7-5, 6-1 against Alex de Minaur yesterday in the Barcelona Open second round.

The 22-time Grand Slam title winner, back on court this week after three months on the sidelines, battled well but eventually crumbled against the hard-working world number 11 from Australia. Nadal, 37, who missed virtually all of the 2023 season, is hoping to compete at the French Open in May where he is the record 14-time champion.

"On a personal level, for what is to come, the 6-1 in the second set is what had to happen today," said Nadal, who explained he did not want to push himself too far.

"That's the way I need to proceed today, to give me a chance to compete at Roland Garros," he added. "I'll try to take a step further in Madrid, then in Rome, and if, in any tournament it's worth going out there to give everything and die, it's in Paris."

The Spaniard, who has won the Barcelona clay-court title on 12 occasions, had eased past Flavio Cobolli on Tuesday in his first ATP Tour match since January, but said he was not favourite against De Minaur who has now won his last two clashes against the former world number one.

It proved a far tougher challenge and despite showing flashes of his supreme quality on the court named after him, Nadal came up short in what he said he believes is his final appearance at the tournament.

The Australian broke in the first game and tested Nadal with a series of brilliant drop shots which Nadal could not reach.

However Nadal hit back with a break of his own in the sixth game and consolidated with a fizzing backhand for a 4-3 lead.

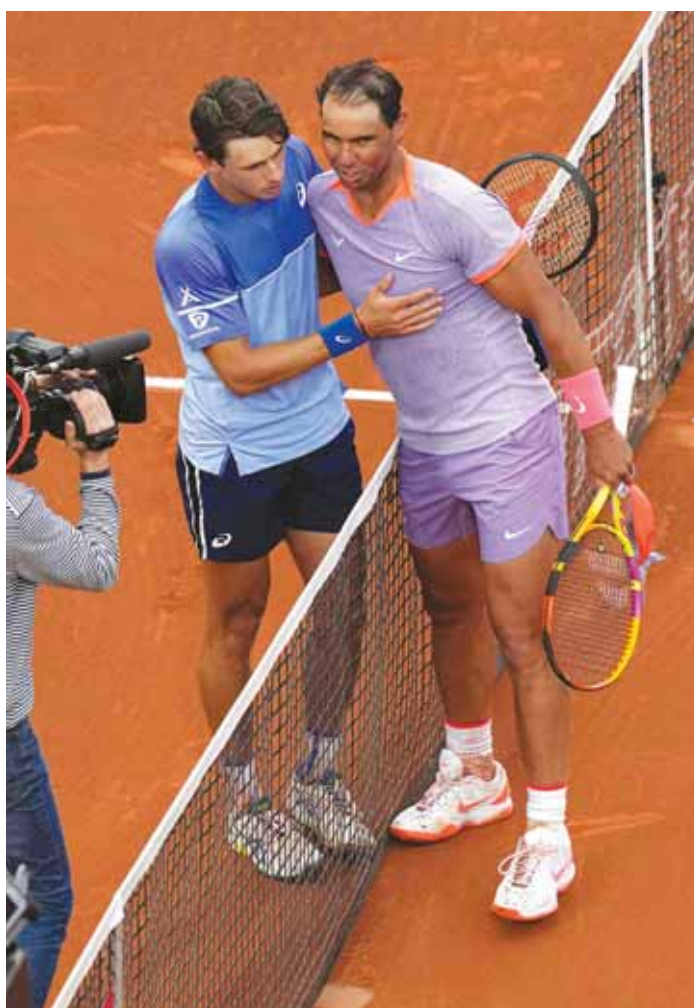
De Minaur broke to love to take a 6-5 lead as Nadal went wide and sealed the first set when the Spaniard pushed a shot into the net, winning the final 10 points as Nadal started to struggle.

The 25-year-old Australian broke for a 2-1 lead in the second set when Nadal could not return a powerful passing shot, and secured another break for 4-1.

De Minaur wrapped up his emphatic second set performance with a third break when Nadal went long. It marked what Nadal said was "realistically" his final appearance at a tournament he loves. "I had the chance to say goodbye here on court and that means a lot for me," he added.

"A week ago I felt I was not able to play any more at this event, that would be painful, but at least I played and now it's the moment to keep going."

Monte Carlo Masters champion Stefanos Tsitsipas faces Sebastian Ofner later in the second round.



Rafael Nadal (right) greets Alex de Minaur after their Barcelona Open match at the Real Club de Tennis in Barcelona yesterday. (AFP)

HORSE RACING

Al-Naimi's Afandem claims Al Mafiar Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Nasser Hamad al-Naimi's Afandem prevailed over Suka'ar in a thrilling contest to win the Al Mafiar Cup at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC)'s Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.

Arnaud De Lepine steered the Ahmed Kobeissi-trained bay horse to a narrow victory over the Sabheha Awad Ibrahim-owned and Ibrahim Khaled Elahmed-trained Suka'ar, who was ridden by Szczepan Mazur, in a Conditions for four-year-old+ Local Purebred Arabian. The seven-year-old horse won by a neck to win the feature race of the day.

Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi, QREC Racing Manager, presented the trophies to the winners.

In the penultimate race of the day, Triple Two Racing's Fifty Grand Slater won the Thorough-

bred Handicap Divison 2 race for three-year-old+. The three-year-old bay colt, ridden by Marco Casamento, defeated Al Azraq Stable-owned and Bader al-Balushi-trained Torgot in the 1,100m race.

Mohamed Ghazali-trained Keel Bay, in the silks of Jassim bin Ali MA al-Attiyah, won the Thoroughbred Handicap (70-90) race for the three-year-old+.

Bader al-Balushi trained and owned Keheilan Al Sakab emerged winners in the Purebred Arabian Handicap race for the four-year-old+.

Jockey Maikon De Souza guided the six-year-old Gelding to finish ahead of Al Raka-ben Stud's Mukabar and win the 1,200m race and completed a double on the card.

Earlier in the day, De Souza was in the winner's enclosure when he piloted Al Azraq Stable's Sardem to victory in the Thoroughbred Handicap race for the three-year-old+.



Connections of Afandem celebrate after the seven-year-old bay horse won the Al Mafiar Cup at Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim



Jockey Arnaud De Lepine guided Afandem to Al Mafiar Cup win at the Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.

Osaka says 'no excuses' after defeat on clay return

Naomi Osaka refused to blame a lengthy trip from Japan to France after losing in straight sets to Martina Trevisan in the first round of the WTA event Rouen yesterday. The former world number one was making her first appearance on clay since the 2022 French Open, when she was knocked out in the opening round and Trevisan reached the last four. Osaka, who returned to action in January after taking a 15-month break while on maternity leave, had

her chances in the first set against Trevisan, but the Japanese star could not capitalise on them and lost 6-4, 6-2. "It was really difficult for me...it was my second time hitting on this type of court. I think that overall I could have done better but I've tried my best," said Osaka, a four-time Grand Slam champion. The 26-year-old only arrived in France on Monday after playing for Japan in a Billie Jean King Cup qualifier last week against Kazakhstan in Tokyo.

Osaka has never reached a tour-level final on any surface other than hard courts, admitting the switch to clay was not an easy transition. "I have never been the type to make excuses for myself, I just have to really do better," she said, confirming her presence at next week's Madrid Open. "I think today, obviously, I didn't hit too many great shots and I could have done better. I'm kind of thinking I didn't do too bad but also I'm pretty hard on myself." (AFP)

FOCUS

Qatar Open Amateur Golf Championship begins today at DGC

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Around 100 golfers representing 30 nations are set to vie for honours at the 2024 WAGR Qatar Open Amateur Golf Championship, which tees off at the Doha Golf Club (DGC) today.

The event, which is in its 38th edition, is one of the oldest golf competitions having launched back in 1983.

It attracts the world's best amateur

golfers who showcase their skills at the picturesque venue. With the coveted berth for the prestigious Commercial Bank Qatar Masters on offer for the title winner, the Qatar Open has once again lured some of the leading golfers for this year's edition.

Qatar's charge will be led by Saleh Ali al-Kaabi while Ali Abdullah al-Shahrani and Abdul Rahman Abdullah al-Shahrani along with several national junior golfers will represent the host nation in the tournament.

The windy conditions are expected

to test the golfers during the three-day tournament. "All preparations have been made and the Qatar Golf Association (QGA) is ready to host another successful edition of the tournament," QGA's Media Coordinator Walid Saad said yesterday.

"We are looking forward to exciting contests among the golfers and we wish them all the best."

As many as 50 top golfers will make the cut for Saturday's final round following the first two rounds. Welshman Joe Jones, who won last year's title, is not taking part in the 2024 edition.



Qatar's Saleh Ali al-Kaabi.

ARTISTIC GYMNASTICS

Brown, Navas top qualifications at the Doha World Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Georgia-Rose Brown of New Zealand, who currently leads Olympic qualification ranking with 50 points despite not having scored in Baku, qualified for the women's uneven bars final at the 16th Artistic Gymnastics World Cup Doha at the Women's Sports Committee Hall yesterday.

As many as 95 male and 55 female gymnasts representing 55 countries are taking part in the event. The Doha stopover is the final qualifying round for the 2024 Paris Olympics.

Algeria's Kaylia Nemour has already qualified as an individual to compete at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games by finishing in 13th place in the all-around during the qualification round in the Olympic cycle of World Cup Series. But the Algerian (15,400 points) showed that she still wants to make it big after topping the qualification chart.

Nathalie Westlund of Sweden, who also qualified, also stands to make big gains if she does better than in Baku. The Swede finished fourth in the qualification ranking (13,400). Compatriot Jennifer Williams, who left Cottbus without Olympic qualification points and presently tied with Vanesa Masova (Czech Republic) with 48 points, crashed out of the qualifiers. She finished 17th.

Eleven gymnasts could mathematically qualify for the Uneven Bars places, making



New Zealand's Georgia-Rose Brown performs during the women's uneven bar qualification at the Artistic Gymnastics World Cup Doha at the Women's Sports Committee Hall in Doha yesterday.

it the most complex of the women's qualification races.

Meanwhile, Panama's Karla Navas showed grit and determination to top the qualification in a vault field that also featured seasoned Oksana Chusovitina. Total eight gymnasts event qualified for the final

including Chusovitina and India's Dipa Karmakar.

Karla, who won back-to-back bronze medals in Cottbus and Baku World Cups, accumulated 13,916 points ahead of Bulgaria's Valentina Georgieva (13,316) and North Korea's An Chang-Ok (13,166).



Panama's Karla Navas topped the vault qualification.

The performance at the qualifiers will boost her confidence to aim for a top finish, but it remains to be seen how the 2022 Pan American champion performs in the final today.

The 17-year-old Georgieva, who secured her berth in March for this summer's Olympic Games, was docked -0.10 points during her effort which saw her finish behind Karla in the qualification.

She accumulated enough points on vault by the third of four 2024 World Cup events to qualify for the Paris Games, but it is crystal clear that the teenager won't set-

tle for less than a gold in the Qatari capital.

North Korea's reigning Asian champion An Chang-ok looked super on the vault, but a sudden lapse of concentration saw her receive a penalty (-0.10).

The 20-year-old Pyongyang-born gymnast, who represented her country at the 2019 World Championships, will also be looking forward to a medal in the uneven bars, where she's a reigning champion. Aida Bauyrzhanova of Kazakhstan and Nazanin Teymurova of Azerbaijan also made it to the final along with Patricie Makovickova of the Czech Republic.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Kimmich heads Bayern into semis

German giants progress 3-2 on aggregate against Arsenal



Bayern Munich's German midfielder Joshua Kimmich (left) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Arsenal during the UEFA Champions League quarter-final second leg match in Munich yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Munich

A 63rd-minute Joshua Kimmich headed Bayern Munich a 1-0 win over Arsenal and a place in the Champions League semi-finals yesterday. The 3-2 aggregate quarter-final victory means Bayern return to the last-four for the first time since winning the title in 2020.

Bayern will face either Manchester City or Real Madrid for a place in the final. The result continues a poor week for Arsenal, who conceded top spot in the Premier League table on Sunday with their first league loss of 2024. Unlike last week's four-goal spectacle in London, Wednesday's match was a cagey affair, with few clear chances for either side in a testy opening half.

Midway through the second-half and with extra-time on the horizon, Kimmich burst through the Arsenal box and headed in a per-

fect Raphael Guerreiro chip. Guerreiro, pushed from wing-back to the forwards due to Bayern's injury woes, impressed as a creative presence when freed up from his usual defensive duties.

Six-time Champions League winners Bayern join fellow Bundesliga side Borussia Dortmund, who face Paris Saint-Germain, in the final four. Hit by injuries to several first-team attackers including former Arsenal winger Serge Gnabry - who scored along with Harry Kane in the first leg - and Kingsley Coman, Tuchel pushed Guerreiro into the forwards.

The move worked early, with the Portuguese finding space down the left flank and linking well with Musiala in the centre.

Arsenal coach Mikel Arteta opted for the defensive stability of Takehiro Tomiyasu in place of Jakub Kiwior at left-back to neutralise Leroy Sane but the Japanese, who was making his first start since December, notably lacked rhythm. Tomiyasu completely misjudged a Musiala pass early, allowing Sane to stroll through the Arsenal box and force a corner.

Gabriel Martinelli was the visitors' most dangerous in the opening half. He scuffed a curling ball just wide of the post after seven minutes and then shot directly at Neuer with the goal beckoning on the half-hour mark. Bayern were the better team after the break and went close immediately, Leon Goretzka heading a clever Kimmich cross onto the woodwork.

The pressure began to tell and Bayern broke through after 63 minutes when Kimmich, among the shortest players on the pitch, was allowed to slip through a crowded Arsenal box and head in a Guerreiro chip. The hosts almost doubled up moments after when Kane found an unmarked Sane in the box, but the German winger blasted his shot skywards.

Arsenal pushed for an equaliser and went close in stoppage time when Kai Havertz and Bukayo Saka lashed at a bouncing ball in the box but could not break through, ending the visitors' hopes of a return to the Champions League semis for the first time since 2009.

EXPO STARS LEAGUE

Rampant Sadd crush Ahli 9-1 to inch closer to title

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Leaders Al Sadd virtually assured themselves of the Expo Stars League title as they thrashed Al Ahli 9-1 at the Al Thumama Stadium yesterday. The Wolves are now on 46 points after 20 games with Al Gharafa and Al Rayyan being second and third respectively with 41 points each and would need to win their two remaining matches and hope for Sadd lose both their games for an improbability. Al Ahli are ninth with 20 points.

Baghdad Bounedjah scored a hat-trick for the winners striking in the 69th, 80th & 90+5 minute, while Akram Afif added a brace scoring in the 3rd & 56th minute besides providing three assists. The other Al Sadd goals came from Yousuf Abdurisag (32nd minute), Guilherme Torres (35th minute), Mohammad Abdulla Al Ishaq (Own Goal, 59th minute), and from Ilyes Housni (75th minute). Al Ahli's consolation goal was scored by Oumar Sekou in the 45th minute.

Adding to Al Ahli's woes was the sending off of Idrissia Doumbia in the 50th minute after he was shown the red card for injuring Al Sadd's Mohamed Waad in the eye after they fell down following a challenge for the ball. VAR check made the referee change the initial yellow card decision to red.

Till the incident happened, Al Sadd were leading 3-1.

Meanwhile, Al Duhail overwhelmed Muaither 5-2 at the Grand Hamad Stadium of Al Arabi

club yesterday. Kenyan Michael Olunga scored a brace in the eighth & 80th minutes, while Almoez Ali (40th minute), Philippe Coutinho (46th minute) and Rashid Al Abdulla (89th minute) got one each. Muaither's scorers were Hugo Gomes (23rd minute) and Ayman El Hassouni (42nd minute).

Muaither looked to challenge the reigning champions as they bounced back twice to draw parity and the teams went into the break at 2-2, but Al Duhail returned only to pump in three more goals and dash the hopes of the rivals. The win saw Al Duhail improve their tally to 28 points.

The result, however, left Muaither stuck on 14 points in 11th place and in battle with bottom-placed Al Markhiya (also on 14 points) to clinch the relegation play-off spot.

At the Thani Bin Jassim Stadium, Umm Salal came from a goal down to defeat Al Arabi 2-1. Kenji Gorre (63rd minute) and Oussama Tannane (84th minute) got the goals for Umm Salal after Mohammed Al Taaboni had given Al Arabi the lead in the 23rd minute.

With the result, Umm Salal now have 24 points, a relative safe distance away from the relegation zone, while Al Arabi remained on 26 points.

In another match, Al Rayyan eased past Qatar SC 3-0. Rayyan went ahead in the sixth minute after Qatar SC's Ibrahim Majid put the ball into his own net. Rayyan doubled the lead three minutes later through Rodrigo Moreno, before Achraf Bencharki put the game to bed with a 76th minute strike.



Al Sadd's Baghdad Bounedjah celebrates with teammates after scoring a hat-trick against Al Ahli at the Al Thumama Stadium yesterday.

Atalanta challenge different to Barcelona comeback: Liverpool boss Klopp

London: Liverpool manager Juergen Klopp knows all about heroic comebacks in European competition but even their barnstorming fightback against Barcelona in the 2019 Champions League will not prepare them for today's task in Atalanta. Klopp's side suffered a resounding 3-0 home loss in the first leg of their Europa League quarter-final and travel to Italy with a mountain to climb. While they also trailed Barcelona by a 3-0 scoreline in the Champions League semi-final five years ago, their 4-0 victory in the return fixture came with the noisy backing of a vociferous home crowd, while today's atmosphere will

be very different.

"The result is similar definitely. The performance not really," the German coach said. "We lost 3-0 in Barcelona and people didn't know how, now we lost 3-0 at home and are away, it's a massive difference. We are here and will try to win the game, that's all. That's what we should do. (Last week) we had really good moments but they completely deserved to win. Let's start with a much better performance and try to win the game and we will see how much time is left at the end."

The Liverpool boss does have experience of losing at home to Atalanta and winning by

a big margin away after the sides met in the 2020 Champions League group stage, when his team beat the Italians 5-0 in their own stadium before suffering a 2-0 home defeat weeks later.

"We played four years ago against Atalanta. Tomorrow the game is more difficult as they don't have to score at all. Not sure what they're going to do. It's not easy when you're 3-0 up. We won 5-0 here, we lost 2-0 in the home game. We will see who deals better with the situation. If Atalanta go through then they deserve it, if not then something special has happened."