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# GULF TIMES SPORT



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Mbappe, Dembele leave Paris Saint-Germain poised to celebrate Ligue 1 title

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**FOOTBALL**

# Al Sadd emerge champions of Expo Stars League



Al Sadd players celebrate with the winner's Shield after clinching the Expo Stars League title at the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor yesterday.

## THE WOLVES EASE PAST AL SHAMAL 4-0 FOR A THUMPING 15TH WIN OF THE 2023-24 SEASON

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**A**l Sadd emerged 17th time Qatar Stars League champions as they beat Al Shamal 4-0 in the penultimate match of Expo Stars League of the 2023-24 season at the Al Bayt Stadium yesterday.

The Wolves crowned themselves with glory registering a thumping 15th win of the season against Al Shamal with goals from captain Hassan al-Haydos (9th minute), Gonzalo Plata (26th minute), Akram Afif (83rd minute-penalty), Paulo Otavio (90+5' minute).

Al Sadd went up as clear leaders on the table with a whopping tally of 49 points having registered 15 wins, 4 draws and with only 2 reversals through the season.

They still have a game (Week 22) against Al Rayyan to play, the celebrations for the fans of Al Sadd have already begun.

Al Shamal remained in eighth place in the rankings with 22 points (coming from 5 wins, 7 draws and 9 defeats).

Al Shamal made matters worse for themselves, first in the 40th minute when Omid Ebrahimi was shown the red card for a rough tackle against Al Sadd's Boualem Khoukhi.

The referee changed his decision from



Al Sadd captain Hassan al-Haydos and forward Akram Afif receive QSL Shield from QFA president Jassim Rashid al-Buenain as QSL CEO Hani Taleb Ballan looks on yesterday. **PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil**

yellow to red following a VAR. And, later in the 73rd minute Al Shamal's Fahad Waad was given the marching for committing a foul against Plata and threatening to be physical. The referee also reprimanded Al Sadd's Plata with a red card.

While Al Shamal tried their best and even had a few close calls early in the game, they were clearly outclassed by the champions.

Al Shamal received the first big setback as their Colombian professional Jesion

Ceron in stopper-back position and left-top of the box fumbled a little and erred while trying to cross the ball as Haydos in the centre coolly grabbed the chance and beat the goalkeeper, firing in the opening goal.

Al Sadd then added to their lead with Ecuadorian professional Plata holding back the Al Shamal defence as he barged in to unleash a left foot strike which touched the fingers of the goalkeeper and hit the bottom left post before going in.

Al Sadd then gained a spot kick after Afif was brought down while going for a bicycle kick just on the edge of the box on the right by Ceron. VAR confirmed the decision and Afif went on to bag his 26th goal of the season to remain the highest goal-scorer of the season. Two minutes later, (85th minute) Baghdad Bounedjah came close to adding another goal for Al Sadd but his kick fell out after hitting the right post.

Paulo Otavio, however, provided the icing on the cake for Al Sadd in the added time as he made the most of Haydos pass to score after Bounedjah held back a slew of Al Shamal defenders.

The thrill of the goal and the victory added to Al Sadd fans delight as the players soon joined in the celebrations.

Al Markhiya battled from being a goal down to defeat Al Arabi 2-1 in their crucial clash at the Al Thumama Stadium yesterday. Star striker Yusupha Nije (41st minute) and Talal al-Shila (87th minute) scored for Al Markhiya after Omar Al Somah

(7th minute-penalty) had provided Al Arabi the lead.

Their fifth win of the season saw Al Markhiya elevate themselves to the relegation play-off spot in 11th place in the rankings (with 17 points to their credit) after being bottom-placed all through, while Al Arabi slid to 7th position after seventh loss of the season, remaining on 26 points.

Al Markhiya and the now bottom-placed Muaither, who lost to Qatar SC 3-5, have been in a battle of the relegation zone and the former will seek to rise further in the final week when Al Markhiya will meet Umm Salal, and Muaither will battle Al Arabi.

In other matches, Al Gharafa beat Al Wakrah 4-2 while Al Rayyan eased past Al Ahli 4-1. In the last match of the day, Umm Salal beat Al Duhail 2-0.



Al Sadd coach Wesam Rizik celebrates with the QSL Shield.

## AFC U-23 ASIAN CUP QATAR 2024

# Qatar coach coy about al-Rawi's availability for Japan tie

**Q**atar head coach Ilidio Vale has yet to decide whether forward Ahmed al-Rawi will feature in his side's AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 quarter-final against Japan at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium today as the Al Rayyan striker continues to struggle with his fitness.

Al-Rawi scored in the hosts' win over Indonesia in the tournament opener but played no part in the clashes with Jordan or Australia as Qatar won Group A and Vale remained coy about the 22-year-old's availability for the clash with Go OIWA's side.

"He's currently recovering from an injury so I'm only going to have him join the game if he is 100 percent ready for it," said the Portuguese coach. "However so far we have not yet decided regarding his participation."

The Qataris go into the game with an unbeaten record in the tournament so far but are facing a nation that has a remarkable track record

in both the AFC U-23 Asian Cup and in qualifying for the Olympic Games.

The Japanese won the title in 2016 and have appeared at every Olympic tournament since 1996 but Vale believes Qatar's recent successes, including the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 victory in January, will give his players a confidence boost. "The senior team won the last two Asian Cups and this gives the under 23 players a very positive morale boost," he said. "It doesn't put pressure on them because this is a different competition."

"The aim is different, which is qualifying for the Olympics. We are facing different teams than we faced at the Asian Cup. Our under 23 team is on the right track and I'm confident. This is a team that can win against any team, we do not fear other teams."

Japan come into the game off the back of a 1-0 loss at the hands of Korea Republic in their final Group B game on Monday and OIWA knows



Qatar players during a training session ahead of today's AFC U-23 Asian Cup quarter-final against Japan.

the Qataris will have the added incentive of performing in front of their own fans.

"We've watched their three games, we have done good analysis of them and we're quite confident,"

said the former Kashima Antlers coach, who will once again be without Ryuya Nishio as he serves the third of his three-match ban for his sending off against China. "We know the fans have a good impact

on the team but it's a one-off game and we're going to focus on that and we won't let that affect our team." "I told my players that the important thing is to focus on each game, the game in front of us and we have to keep winning, that's the ultimate goal. We know Qatar usually enters a game very enthusiastically but we also need to show our aggressiveness regarding our attacking skills."

### KOREA REPUBLIC V INDONESIA

Ahead of their last eight tie against Indonesia today, South Korea head coach Hwang Sun-hong declared that his side are fully focused on getting through to the semi-finals of the tournament.

The 2020 champions won all three of their Group B matches without conceding a single goal to progress to the knockout stage, which maintained their status as the only team in all six editions of the tournament to qualify from the group stage at every iteration.

Korea Republic have also reached

the final four on four previous occasions, the most of any team, and Hwang asserted that they are ready to start on a clean slate at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium.

"As we expected before the start of the tournament, it was obviously a difficult group for us and the matches we played were indeed very hard and tough," the 55-year-old said.

"But the boys were determined to win every match and they performed very well so I am pleased with that. "But that is already history and what is important is what is ahead of us, and we will do our best to prepare for tomorrow's match and win."

Similarly, his Indonesian counterpart Shin Tae-yong praised his charges for bouncing back from an opening-day defeat to record two consecutive wins in Group A and seal their quarter-final spot on their tournament debut, becoming the 18th different side to make it to the knockout stage. **(the-afc.com)**

FOOTBALL

# ECA Board meets in Madrid as membership breaks through 600 clubs



Headed by Nasser al-Khelaifi (second right), the 37-strong ECA Board met at the Civitas Metropolitan Stadium, Madrid, hosted by ECA Board and ExCo member Miguel Ángel Gil.

Chaired by Nasser al-Khelaifi, the 37-strong ECA Board met yesterday at the Civitas Metropolitan Stadium, Madrid, hosted by ECA Board and ExCo member Miguel Ángel Gil.

In attendance at the Board was La Liga President Javier Tebas, who spoke on the common ambition to protect football and jointly face the challenges that lie ahead, including the threat to football posed by the theft of audio-visual rights, quoting estimated revenue losses of 30-35%.

In his opening address, ECA Chairman Nasser al-Khelaifi commended the rapid growth in ECA membership as the Association

continues adding new members daily, including women's clubs and clubs from all first divisions across Europe.

Commenting on the meeting and growth of membership, ECA Chairman al-Khelaifi said: "ECA continues to go from strength to strength. As well as seeing our membership grow to 620 clubs, up from 266 members in July, we have advanced our key strategic joint ventures with UEFA and FIFA, while also building on our offering to clubs through delivering a number of new and exciting events and services."

"However, there is still much to be done, with many ongoing strategic initiatives that will enable us

collectively to build an ECA that is better placed than ever to serve and defend European clubs of all sizes."

ECA membership has reached the milestone of 620 clubs, up from 266 clubs since the start of the 2023/24 season, an amazing growth rate of over 130%, now spanning all 55 UEFA national associations including 100% membership in 15 countries.

The Board reviewed the ongoing internal governance reforms that will include evolving the current membership structure of the ECA Family to a more comprehensive and inclusive model under the banner 'Membership for All!'

This will allow all top division

clubs, irrespective of their size or country, to become ECA Members and participate in genuine decision-making.

Any eventual changes to the membership structure will require further amendments to the ECA Statutes to be submitted for approval at ECA's General Assembly later this year.

The preliminary findings from ECA's ongoing Strategic Review were presented to the Board concerning ECA's overall strategic direction and how the organisation needs to evolve operationally to better serve its growing membership base and to further evolve to keep clubs at the heart of football, now and in the future.

CRICKET

# Pant boosts World Cup hopes with IPL batting blitz

The dashing left-hander smashes 88 off just 43 deliveries

AFP  
New Delhi

Rishabh Pant smashed an unbeaten 88 as he led Delhi Capitals to a tense IPL win over Gujarat Titans yesterday, boosting his chances of playing for India at the T20 World Cup.

Delhi posted 224-4 courtesy of a 113-run stand between Pant and fellow left-hander Axar Patel, who hit 66, after they slipped to 44-3 inside six overs at their home Arun Jaitley Stadium.

The hosts kept Gujarat down to 220-8 to win by four runs after David Miller's 23-ball 55 and an unbeaten 21 off 11 deliveries by Rashid Khan.

Mukesh Kumar kept his nerve in the final over for Delhi's fourth win in nine matches as they kept their playoff hopes alive in the T20 tournament.

Pant, 26, struck his third half-century of this IPL season after being 14 months away from top level cricket following a frightening car accident when his Mercedes rammed into a barrier, flipped and caught fire in December 2022.

Pant, a wicketkeeper-batsman, suffered multiple injuries and was rushed to hospital before being airlifted to Mumbai for further treatment and surgery.

He has not only fired with the bat in the IPL but his sharp work behind the stumps prompted Delhi's director of cricket Sourav Ganguly and coach Ricky Ponting to back the India star for making the national team for the World Cup in June.



Delhi Capitals' captain Rishabh Pant plays a shot during the Indian Premier League match against Gujarat Titans in New Delhi yesterday. (AFP)

Up and coming Australian batsman Jake Fraser-McGurk gave Delhi a strong start with his 14-ball 23 but medium-pace bowler Sandeep Warrier took three wickets including two in one over.

**Promoted to number 3**

Patel, a bowling all-rounder promoted to number three in the batting, brought up his fifty with a boundary off Rashid before another Afghanistan spinner Noor Ahmad had him caught at long-on.

Pant reached his fifty in style

with a six off Mohit Sharma and then hammered the medium-pace bowler in a 31-run 20th over when he finished with a six, four and three hits over the fence to raise the roof.

South African Tristan Stubbs watched the blitz from the other end after he smashed Sai Kishore in the 19th over, which went for 22 runs, for his unbeaten seven-ball 26.

In reply, Gujarat lost skipper Shubman Gill for six off Anrich Nortje before impact substitute Sai Sudarshan smashed 65 off 39

balls. Gujarat lost regular wickets but the left-handed Miller smashed Nortje for three sixes and a four to give Delhi a scare before his departure in the 18th over.

Rashid kept up the fight till the end as Gujarat needed 19 off the final over and five on the last ball.

**BRIEF SCORES**

**Delhi Capitals 224 for 4** (Pant 88\*, Axar 66, Warrier 3-15) beat **Gujarat Titans 220 for 8** (Sai Sudarshan 65, Miller 55, Salam 3-44) **by 4 runs**

FOCUS

# QCA bags ICC Initiative of the Year Award 2023

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The Qatar Cricket Association (QCA) has been honoured with the prestigious ICC Initiative of the Year Award for 2023, it was announced yesterday.

This recognition celebrates the association's outstanding efforts and dedication to promoting and developing cricket in the region.

QCA's commitment to nurturing talent at all levels, from grassroots to elite, has been exemplary. Their innovative programmes and initiatives have significantly contributed to the growth of cricket in Qatar and have garnered widespread appreciation within the cricketing community.

Under the leadership of Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Saoud al-Thani, President of QCA, cricket in Qatar through strategic partnerships, community engagement and collaborations, has demonstrated excellence in driving the sport forward.

This award is a testament to the hard work, passion, and vision for the game.

William Glenwright, the ICC General Manager - Development, congratulated the regional winners and called the awards a longstanding initiative to reward outstanding efforts to grow and strengthen the game among the ICC Associate members.

"We are delighted to announce the regional winners in the ICC Development Awards 2023. I want



Qatar Cricket Association President, Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Saoud al-Thani

to thank all of our Members for the work that they commit to growing the game like it has never grown before and congratulate all of the successful member federations on their remarkable achievements in 2023," Glenwright said.

"The ICC Development Awards is a long-running initiative that recognises and rewards the outstanding efforts to grow and strengthen the game in the 94 ICC Associate Member nations. 2023 was an extraordinary year for emerging nations and their relentless passion for the sport is evident in the nominations we have received."

The ICC Initiative of the Year Award for 2023 is a well-deserved recognition of QCA's significant contributions to the sport and their relentless efforts to make cricket more accessible and popular in the region.



SPOTLIGHT

# Salt Lake City is poised to get 2034 Winter Olympics

Reuters  
Salt Lake City

Salt Lake City is all but guaranteed to be awarded the 2034 Winter Olympics later this year and officials said its robust infrastructure and enthusiastic public support have paved the way.

Utah's capital city hosted the Games back in 2002 and International Olympic Committee representatives recently toured the city and heard plans for its "no-build" Games.

No other cities are in the running for the 2034 Games. Salt Lake City 2034 and France 2030 were picked as preferred hosts for the Winter Olympics in November.

"They got the opportunity to see our venues and how they are still thriving," Catherine Raney-Norman, chair of the Salt Lake City - Utah Committee for the Games, told Reuters in an interview.

"They left excited with what they had seen. It was extremely positive."

While other cities have soured on the idea of hosting an Olympics for fears of cost overruns that is not the case in Salt Lake City, where the legacy of the 2002 Games endures.



"Our polling has shown that we have over 80% public support," said Raney-Norman, a four-time Olympic speed skater.

"That's amazing. And we've had that consistently for the past 20 years."

Ensuring the public remains on board is one of the challenges that comes with having a 10-year leadup to the opening ceremony.

"Our challenge is making sure we maintain that enthusiasm and also making sure we have intentional impact on our community," she said. "We don't have to build buildings so our headline in 2034 is going to be based on our impact in the community more so than standing up a new building."

The Winter Olympics have grown by about 40% since Salt Lake City hosted them last as more sports and disciplines have been added

but the city can handle the additional action, Raney-Norman said.

"We know that within our venues and within our technical side that we can execute on those events," she said.

"We're embracing it, we're excited about it." New events like big air could be held at a temporary downtown venue while the University of Utah will serve as the athlete village, she said.

Salt Lake City initially wanted to bid for the 2030 Games but dropped plans due to it being too close to the 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. The IOC is expected to formally name the city as host on July 24.

Hosting an Olympics within 10 years of LA28 is a "generational opportunity" for the United States and Raney-Norman said dialogue is already happening between the organising committees.

"As we look to a future award and Salt Lake hopefully officially being named the host for 2034, we see opportunities and synergies as we continue to collaborate," she said.

"This is an opportunity to elevate the Olympic and Paralympic movement in the United States and that requires collaboration between the two groups."

## Stoinis still keen to represent Australia despite loss of contract

New Delhi: Marcus Stoinis'

desire to keep playing international cricket beyond the T20 World Cup in June has not been diminished by Cricket Australia's decision to drop him from the central contracts list, the all-rounder said.

Stoinis looks certain to be named in Australia's squad for the World Cup in West Indies and the United States, and the Lucknow Super Giants batter provided a glimpse of his best form with a blistering hundred in the Indian Premier League on Tuesday.

The 34-year-old smashed an unbeaten 124 off 63 balls as Lucknow beat hosts Chennai Super Kings by six wickets to break into the top four in the points table. Named Player of the Match, Stoinis did not want to describe his performance as a statement knock and said he had a great relationship with Australia coach Andrew McDonald.

"Me not getting a contract, I knew that a while ago," Stoinis said after Lucknow's fifth win in eight matches. "I think it's great to give younger kids a crack and let them take my spot. I'm absolutely fine with that on the contract list. But on the playing front, I still obviously want to make sure that I'm there, and that's also why it's so lucky for us and for me particularly to have this competition (the IPL)... I started my career pretty much here and who knows I finish it



here." Stoinis was promoted to number three after Lucknow lost Quinton de Kock in the first over, allowing the Australian to pace his innings. "In this competition, there are plenty of better opening batters than me, so I'll let them do their job," he said.

"It is nice to get in early and build an innings but I have settled in the middle order." Stoinis smashed six sixes and 13 fours in his knock but it was not mindless slogging, he said. "There was ebb and flow in the whole innings. There were some bowlers we wanted to target, some that we played more cautiously against." Five-time champions Chennai slipped to fifth following their fourth loss in eight matches.

HORSE RACING

# Local Law storms to Al Jumayliyah Cup win

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**T**rainer Hamad al-Jehani and jockey Szczepan Mazur each completed a treble on the day with the Saif Rashid Saif al-Khayarin-owned Local Law taking victory in the day's feature the Al Jumayliyah Cup at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.

The six-year-old raced prominently by the rail, tracking the leaders throughout, and showed an impressive turn of foot in the final 200m to run down the long-time leaders, drawing two lengths clear at the line.

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

Earlier, al-Jehani and Mazur bagged their second wins when Texas Storm CS stormed to victory in the Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate, Division 2.

Trainer al-Jehani claimed his first win when Soufiane Saadi rode Pherenikos to win in the 1700m Thoroughbred Maiden Plate. Mazur opened his account yesterday guiding X Force to the Thoroughbred Conditions title.

Today's End of Season Cup Day – the 45th Al Rayyan meeting – will bring the curtain down to the racing season in Qatar which also included 22 meetings at Al Uqda Racecourse.



The connections of Local Law celebrate after the Saif Rashid Saif al-Khayarin-owned six-year-old horse won the Al Jumayliyah Cup at the QREC's al Rayyan racecourse yesterday. **Right:** Jockey Szczepan Mazur guides Local Law to the Al Jumayliyah Cup victory yesterday. **PICTURES:** Juhaim



TENNIS

# Nadal, 37, still not sure about playing at Roland Garros

'I'M GOING TO DO MY BEST TO TRY TO MAKE IT HAPPEN'

Reuters  
Madrid

**S**pain's Rafael Nadal said yesterday that he is not sure if he will be able to play at next month's French Open after pushing through the pain barrier in his comeback from injury.

The 37-year-old, a 22-time Grand Slam champion, said that he is far from being in top form and that he is only playing against American Darwin Blanch in the first round of the Madrid Open on Thursday as a personal sacrifice.

"If I was in Paris today, I wouldn't go out to play," Nadal told a press conference, in reference to Roland Garros.

"I don't think I'll be able to play at 100% but it's important to be able to play for the last time in Madrid, it means a lot to me to play on this court where I've had some great moments."

"This doesn't mean I'm giving up on anything in the next few weeks, I don't know what might happen..."

"I'm going to do the things I have to do to be able to play in Paris. And if I can, I can and if I can't, I can't. I'm going to Paris if I feel like I'm good enough...if I feel capable enough to compete."

Nadal, who has said he expects to retire after the 2024 season, returned to competition in Brisbane in January, after almost a year sidelined with a hip flexor injury.

However, after winning his first



Spain's Rafael Nadal answers to journalists during a press conference ahead of the 2024 Madrid Open in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)

two matches in the tournament, Nadal lost in three sets to Australian Jordan Thompson in the quarter-finals.

The gruelling contest appeared to take its toll on the Spaniard who, trailing 1-4 in the final set, took a medical timeout to get treatment on his upper-left leg.

He did not play an ATP event until making a winning return last week in Barcelona, with a first

round victory over Flavio Cobolli, only to fall a day later in a 7-5 6-1 second round defeat by Australian fourth seed Alex de Minaur.

"I am a competitive person and it is difficult to play without being able to give my best. If you ask me if I was happy in Barcelona, I say 'no, I wasn't happy'. What happens is that if I had tried to be happy in Barcelona today I probably wouldn't be here, that's the

reality," Nadal said. "That's why I want to try to go out and play in Paris feeling capable enough to compete well. I'm going to do my best to try to make it happen, and if it doesn't I'll have the personal satisfaction and the gratitude for having tried."

"We'll see what happens, but the world doesn't end if I don't play at Roland Garros. I also have the Olympic Games ahead of me."

## Medvedev hoping for more clay success with Simon in his corner

**Madrid:** Russia's **Daniil Medvedev** believes the addition of Gilles Simon to his coaching team can help him understand clay better as the world number four looks to build confidence on his least favourite surface ahead of the French Open starting next month.

Medvedev has won 19 of his 20 titles, including the 2021 US Open, on hardcourts, with a grasscourt crown that same year at the Mallorca Open. He won his lone claycourt trophy at the 2023 Rome Masters in the lead-up to Roland Garros.

Medvedev, who was runner-up at the Australian Open in January, did not have a great start to the claycourt season after losing early in Monte Carlo this month. However, he said he could see improvements in his game under Simon, who won five tour-level trophies on clay.

"He tries to bring something to my game, which maybe I thought of, but didn't understand how I should bring it on the court," Medvedev told reporters at the Madrid Open.

"He explains how I can do it and for me then it's important because during the match you don't have time to think too much. It's more of a reaction. So I have to be smart to not overthink what he says. Overthink it in practice, maybe, but not during the match. "I feel like in Monte Carlo, because we talked a lot about playing...I maybe thought too much about 'OK, next shot, what do I do?' Where I actually had to play more. "It's very interesting and for the moment it's working great. I'm looking forward to learning more things."

Medvedev begins his Madrid campaign against Christopher O'Connell or Matteo Arnaldi.

### Sinner doesn't want pressure with top ranking in sight

World number two Jannik Sinner can close in on Novak Djokovic at the top of the world rankings by lifting the Madrid Open title but the in-form Italian said he is not putting any extra pressure on himself after a superb start to the season. With Djokovic skipping the Masters tournament to stay in top



shape for the Grand Slams and the Olympic Games, Australian Open champion Sinner would pick up 1,000 points and move to within 330 of the Serb if he wins his fourth trophy of 2024.

"I don't want to put pressure on myself. I'm living a very positive moment, winning a lot of matches, I just try to keep going like this," Sinner, who has lost only two of his 27 matches this year, told reporters.

"In my mind, I know that I can and have to improve if I want to win more."

"I'm searching for new opportunities and I feel like that every tournament I play, there can be a good opportunity to show that my level has raised."

"Showing what I've improved... that's for sure something I'd like to do here. This is a new opportunity, new tournament and we'll see how it goes."

Defending Madrid champion Carlos Alcaraz said Sinner was the man to beat ahead of the May 26-June 9 French Open Grand Slam.

"He's dangerous. He's the best player in the world right now," world number three Alcaraz said. "I think (some people) think his tennis doesn't suit well to the clay, but he's had results on clay as well."

"He can win every tournament he goes to, and obviously I'm fighting with him and Novak to be number one."

"I'm trying to stay there, but honestly it's going to be difficult," he said.

BOTTOMLINE

# Former world No. 1 Osaka seals her first win on clay since 2022 in Madrid



Japan's Naomi Osaka in action during her match against Belgium's Greet Minnen at the WTA Madrid Open yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP  
Madrid

**N**aoimi Osaka says she is "embracing the clay a lot more now" as she captured her first victory on the surface since 2022 in the Madrid Open first round yesterday.

The Japanese former world number one grew up playing on hard courts in the United States and has mostly struggled on the red dirt over the years.

But back at the Caja Magica for the first time in two years, Osaka looked comfortable during her 6-4, 6-1 win over Belgian lucky loser Greet Minnen to book a second-round meeting with 15th seed Liudmila Samsonova.

It was just the fourth victory on clay for Osaka since the start of 2021 and the four-time Grand slam champion is hopeful it won't be her last in Madrid this fortnight.

"I've had several 'incidents' on clay but I'm embracing it a lot more now," the 26-year-old Osaka told reporters in the Spanish capital.

"I feel like there's definitely beauty to it. I'm taking a lot of inspiration from people that do very well here. I'm not expecting to be like, Iga (Swiatek), or something, but I just want

to do the best with what I have." On Arantxa Sanchez stadium yesterday, Osaka was breezing through her service games in the opening set but couldn't convert any of her first three break point opportunities before she finally got the break she needed in the 10th game to take a one-set lead.

The second set was a stroll compared to the first as Osaka built a 5-0 advantage and secured the win with a backhand winner on the 79-minute mark.

"I think I slid a couple of times to my forehand pretty well, so I was excited about that," explained Osaka. "She was hitting really good drop shots but I think I got to a couple quite well. "I think just movement-wise I'm feeling a lot more comfortable. I think shot-wise, I hit a couple of heavy balls. Hopefully I'm able to continue that."

Osaka has extra motivation to do well on clay this season due to the fact the Olympic Games will be played on the red dirt at Roland Garros this summer.

"The Olympics are a really big goal for me. I would really love to play them," she said.

### Raducanu struggles

Fellow former US Open champion Emma Raducanu was not as fortunate as the Briton fell

6-2, 6-2 to Argentinian qualifier Maria Lourdes Carle.

Raducanu has played just six matches this month - across three events - but blamed mental and physical fatigue for her performance and said she will take a few days off to rest after competing in the Billie Jean King Cup, Stuttgart and Madrid in the last two weeks.

"I think from the performance today it was very clear that mentally and emotionally I was exhausted," said Raducanu.

"I was trying to push through. I was pushing through Stuttgart and was just unable to push through today."

"It's a shame that I was feeling so good on the court and today happened but I guess this sport is just pretty brutal."

Fresh off a title run in Rouen last week, 2017 US Open champion Sloane Stephens picked up a sixth consecutive win on clay with a hard-fought 6-3, 5-7, 6-4 success against Italian Martina Trevisan.

Home favourite and former world number two Paula Badosa, who is struggling with long-term back pain since she sustained a stress fracture last year, yesterday failed to impress as she crashed out 2-6, 6-3, 6-3 to Spanish qualifier Jessica Bouzas Maneiro. Maneiro came from a set down to defeat Badosa.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Fan excitement builds as QSL announce Qatar Cup preparations

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The passion of football fans will be at fever pitch during Qatar Cup 2024, said Hassan Rabiah al-Kuwari, Executive Director of Sales, Marketing and Communication at QSL, as the Qatar Stars League (QSL) announced preparations for tournament at the Al Bidda Tower yesterday.

Ahmad Salman al-Adsani, Director of Competitions Department at QSL, also addressed the media.

Al-Kuwari, said that fans of QSL teams have been coming out in large numbers during the season and with the league's top four clubs battling for the Qatar Cup, "it will be another match happening in the stands."

Al-Kuwari stressed: "The QSL attaches great importance to this prestigious tournament through arrangements in co-operation with all parties concerned, partners and competing clubs, in order to organise it in a distinctive man-

ner at the technical and organisational levels."

He stated that the semi-finals would be held at the Khalifa International Stadium and Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium on May 1, and the final would be at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium of Al Duhail club on May 4. The semi-final teams and other details will be decided later, after the end of league championship.

He pointed out that all partners were working hand in hand despite the time constraints, and were ready for all scenarios. "We've organised six matches in one day and, thank God, we've a football family that works in great co-ordination in terms of human resources and staff at a high level."

"We've begun the promotion, marketing and publicity campaigns for the tournament in addition to the Trophy Tour stops at the headquarters of sponsoring companies as per specific schedule. The tour will include visits to the clubs competing in the tournament and a number of different locations."

Regarding match tickets, he



Hassan Rabiah al-Kuwari, Executive Director of Sales, Marketing and Communication at QSL (right) and Ahmad Salman al-Adsani, Director of Competitions Department at QSL, revealing Qatar Cup 2024 details during a press conference at the Al Bidda Tower yesterday.

confirmed that tickets for the semi-finals would be up for sale immediately after the end of final round of league championship and there would be complete co-ordination with the clubs in view of the expected large crowd turnout.

The match programme also includes organisation of a number

of different events and this is also a new opportunity for the fans to come to the stadiums and support their teams, in addition to win valuable prizes on the sidelines of the final match, the details of which will be announced later.

"I hope that we'll succeed in presenting a distinguished tour-

nament at all technical and organisational levels. I also extend my thanks and appreciation to the sponsors, partners, supporters, media outlets, host broadcaster Al Kass channels and all those who co-operated with us in the Qatar Cup 2024, The Glorious Cup," al-Kuwari concluded.

On his part, al-Adsani said: "We emphasise that our preparations are continuing at all levels in order for the tournament to emerge in a distinguished manner and there is co-ordination with the clubs and all parties concerned. I wish success to all competing teams to provide strong levels, just as any team that plays in Qatar Cup has the motivation to win the title, which enhances the strength of competition."

He pointed out that, as per the tournament rules, the first and fourth-placed teams and second and third-placed teams in the league would face off in the semifinals. The competitions will be held at three stadiums and inspection tour of the stadiums has been held.

He touched on the competition between teams in the league championship until the final stage.

"We're happy with the competition between teams, which is a very positive thing that's in the interest of tournaments and players, and reflects positively on Qatar football in general," al-Adsani said.

## FOOTBALL

## Mbappe, Dembele leave PSG poised to celebrate title

The result leaves PSG 14 points ahead of second-placed Monaco

AFP  
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain could be confirmed as French Ligue 1 champions once again later yesterday after Ousmane Dembele and Kylian Mbappe both scored twice in a 4-1 win at Lorient.

The result leaves PSG 14 points ahead of second-placed Monaco, who have five games remaining including home meeting with Lille.

If Monaco fail to win that, PSG will be able to celebrate a record-extending 12th French league championship triumph, and a 10th in the last 12 campaigns.

Luis Enrique's side have a potential treble in their sights, with an upcoming Champions League semi-final against Borussia Dortmund and the French Cup final against Lyon to look forward to next month. They made short work of relegation-threatened Lorient in Brittany after Dembele gave them the lead on 19 minutes, collecting a Senny Mayulu pass and coming in from the right flank before sending a shot low into the bottom-left corner.

Nuno Mendes then cut the ball back for Mbappe to double their lead midway through the first half.

PSG were looking to extend their unbeaten run in Ligue 1 to 25 games going back to September and their only loss of the cam-

paign so far, at home to Nice.

Lorient, in contrast, were aiming to avoid a fourth consecutive defeat and climb out of the automatic relegation places.

The visitors were without several rested regulars, including captain Marquinhos, Achraf Hakimi and Vitinha, but Mbappe and Dembele were both very much in the mood.

Mbappe produced a brilliant piece of skill to get away from Nathaniel Adjedi on the touchline to the left of the box before squaring low for Dembele to tap in the third goal on the hour mark.

That took Dembele's tally of goals for the season to five, after he also netted in both legs of the Champions League quarter-final win against Barcelona.

Lorient pulled one back on 73 minutes when Benjamin Mendy crossed for Ivorian striker Mohamed Bamba to head in.

However, Mbappe completed the scoring for PSG in the 90th minute with a trademark strike across the goalkeeper from the left-hand side of the box.

That took Mbappe to 43 goals for the campaign in all competitions in 43 appearances, with 26 of his goals coming in Ligue 1.

PSG forward Kylian Mbappe waves to the crowd at the end of the Ligue 1 match against Lorient in Lorient yesterday. (AFP)



## FOCUS

## 'The level of football in Asia is developing rapidly'

Ryuzo Morioka has represented Japanese football at all levels in an illustrious career that saw him lift the AFC Asian Cup in 2000 and captain the Samurai Blue during the 2002 FIFA World Cup. The prolific defender also played for his country at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney. Morioka is currently in Qatar as part of the Japanese press corps covering the AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024, a tournament that he sees holding tremendous significance for football in Japan and throughout the continent.

"Tournaments like the under-23 Asian Cup in Qatar offer a great opportunity to players to connect to the outside world," said Morioka. "It provides them with great motivation. It's great for teams to win and gain confidence, but it's equally valuable to lose matches that they expected to win. This provides them with a very valuable experience."

Morioka was part of a golden generation that saw Japan record its first ever win and qualify to the Round of 16 when they co-hosted the tournament alongside Korea Republic. Since then, the Japanese have established themselves as a side to be contented with in world football. Most recently, Japan topped their group at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, serving up famous victories against former champions Germany and Spain.

"Youth tournaments like the under-23 Asian Cup are important for the growth of young players. They allowed me to play against different countries, and be exposed to different cultures," said Morioka. "It's great for teams to win and gain confidence, but it's equally valuable to lose matches and gain much-needed experience."

Japan is set to meet hosts Qatar in a much-anticipated quarter-final match after finishing second in Group B behind Korea Republic. The Japanese regis-



tered wins against China PR and the United Arab Emirates before losing 1-0 to the Taeguk Warriors. Japan is looking to qualify to the Olympic Games men's football tournament for a seventh consecutive time.

"As someone that has been following the Japanese under-23 team closely, I am happy to see them develop to this high level. Seeing them in the knockout stage is wonderful, and I look forward to how the U-23 Asian Cup in Qatar will play a part in the growth and development of these future stars," added Morioka.

Qatar is hosting the AFC U-23 Asian Cup for a record second time, after previously organizing it in 2016, a tournament that Japan won. This is the first time that the competition is being played on FIFA World Cup stadiums, and comes only a few months after Qatar successfully hosted the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023.

"The level of football in Asia is developing rapidly, particularly here in the Middle East. This is something that we've seen with teams like Qatar and Saudi Arabia as well Indonesia in Southeast Asia," said Morioka.

"All across Asia, football is improving, and that's something I feel even more strongly about after watching this tournament here in Qatar. It makes me really happy to be a part of Asia."

## BOTTOMLINE

## Racegoers can enjoy revved up F1 hospitality packages at LIC

As excitement builds ahead of the Formula 1 Qatar Airways Qatar Grand Prix 2024 which is set to descend on Qatar from November 29 to December 1, Lusail International Circuit (LIC) is encouraging fans to elevate their race weekend by opting for one of four incredible hospitality packages:

**F1 Paddock Club** - the pinnacle of trackside hospitality, the Paddock Club occupies a raised position for unbeatable viewing of the race's first and final laps, not to mention all the action from the pit stops. With covered seating and access to several outdoor lounges, guests can enjoy specially curated menus, live chef stations and free-flowing refreshments right across the Grand Prix™ weekend. What's more, F1 Paddock Club hospitality guests can enjoy an F1® Aramco pit lane walk where they'll be able to see their favourite teams preparing for the big weekend, as well as take part in a guided track tour aboard an open-top truck where they can take in the twists and straights of

this world-class circuit.

Prices start from QR28,066 per person for the three-day race weekend.

• **F1 Experiences Champions Club** - this high-octane package offers access to the lower level of the Premiere Hospitality building located in a prime position at the end of the main straight, featuring climate controlled indoor seating and an outdoor terrace. It's the place to be for views of the starting grid as cars make their way through to Turn 1!

Ticket holders can also enjoy world-class cuisine, a grid walk and photo opportunities with the Formula 1 World Championship trophy, special insider appearances from F1 personalities, a trip inside the exclusive F1 Paddock and the chance to test drive the world-famous racing simulators. Prices start from QR16,765 per person for the three-day race weekend.

• **Premiere Hospitality** - promising all the action from the Premiere Hospitality building plus stunning cuisine, interactive chef



stations, free-flowing beverages and the best live entertainment including in-venue DJs on the decks, this package will ensure petrolheads have an unforgettable race weekend. Prices start from QR14,578 per person for the three-day race weekend.

• **Club 16** - enjoy three days of racing action from the all-new two-storey Club 16 aptly located

at Turn 16 on Lusail International Circuit. Offering climate controlled viewing along with expansive elevated outdoor viewing terraces, plus delicious food, free-flowing beverages and live entertainment, guests are sure to enjoy life in the fast lane. Prices start from QR8,381 per person for the three-day race weekend.

For the ultimate in race-week-

end luxury, all four packages have the option to add four night's accommodation staying at the five-star W Hotel in Doha (checking in on Thursday 28 November and out on Monday 2 December) with daily transfers to and from Lusail International Circuit.

For racegoers wanting to opt for standard day and weekend tickets, there are a variety of options available - but fans need to be quick as they are selling out fast!

Three-day Grandstand tickets start at QR1,000 with single-day and three-day General Admission tickets ranging from QR200 up to QR600.

Children aged two years and under can gain free entry for General Admission and Grandstands (but must be carried by parents and are not eligible for a seat). They require a full ticket for any hospitality package. The action begins on Friday, also known as 'Family Friday' which will feature a single free practice session followed by the standard qualifying session for the Grand Prix™.

On Saturday, the thrilling F1® Sprint race takes place which determines the grid for the afternoon's nail-biting Sprint. As one of just six Sprint locations, LIC lines up alongside Shanghai, Miami, Austin, Sao Paulo and Austria's Red Bull Ring. Racegoers of all ages can enjoy Family Friday - under 12s get free general admission alongside a ticketed adult. (A maximum of 4 child tickets can be booked while purchasing the ticket).

The additional race, which proved to be a high-octane addition to the 2023 season and saw McLaren's rookie driver Oscar Piastri clinch victory ahead of Red Bull rival, Max Verstappen, will take place on Saturday 30 November thrilling motorsports fans ahead of the nail-biting Grand Prix™ climax on December 1.

To take advantage of world-class hospitality, fans are encouraged to visit the official website to book their tickets at <https://hospitality.lcsc.qa> before they sell out. Standard day and weekend tickets can be booked at <https://tickets.lcsc.qa>