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FOOTBALL

Qatar to host next three editions of FIFA Arab Cup

Qatar has also been confirmed as the hosts of five FIFA U-17 World Cups which will run from 2025-2029

Agencies
Bangkok

Qatar will host the next three editions of the FIFA Arab Cup in 2025, 2029 and 2033.

This was announced in the FIFA Council that met ahead of the 74th FIFA Congress in Bangkok where several key decisions were taken.

"At the request of the Qatar Football Association, Qatar will host the tournament in 2025, 2029 and 2033, which will follow the principle of an invitational competition not included in the international match calendar," said FIFA in its statement.

Qatar has also been confirmed as the hosts of the upcoming five FIFA U-17 World Cup which will run from 2025-2029. QFA had expressed interest in hosting the event under the umbrella of FIFA and the Arab Federation out of the Arab region's need for such tournaments, in addition to the

availability of success factors and integrated infrastructure to host tournaments in Qatar.

Qatar enjoys a prominent global position in organising sporting events and tournaments, the most prominent of which were the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 in which 32 teams participated, the Asian Cup Qatar 2023 in January and February 2024, and the U-23 AFC Asian Cup.

FIFA had announced that Qatar will host five editions of the FIFA U-17 World Cup from 2025 to 2029, with the participation of 48 team for the first time in its history.

Qatar has an integrated sport infrastructure with a modern transportation network to smoothly facilitate the arrival of fans and attendance of matches, enabling fans to attend more than one match per day.

The first edition of the Women's Club World Cup has been also proposed to start during January-February 2026 and the 16-team tournament will be held every four years.

FIFA President Gianni In-



FIFA President Gianni Infantino and other officials during the FIFA Council meeting in Bangkok yesterday.

fantino in May 2021 revealed their plans to introduce the Women's Club World Cup as part of a plan to "revolutionise" the female game.

The Women's Club World Cup would likely allow top European

teams from the UEFA Women's Champions League to face clubs from the United States' National Women's Soccer League, as well as sides from countries where the women's game is less developed.

FIFA also approved a new calendar with a focus on providing more

opportunities for rest and recovery for players and coaches.

"The women's international match calendar and the subsequent amendments to our regulations represent an important milestone in our pledge to take the women's game to the next level by enhancing competitiveness across the world," Infantino said.

In addition, the FIFA Council formally appoint-

ed Mattias Grafstrom as the FIFA Secretary-General, having been nominated on an interim basis in October last year.

"Football is my passion since I was born. I started playing it as a child and worked in football all my life at all different levels. There are therefore no words to express my feelings as I accept with pride and with a great sense of responsibility, the biggest challenge of my professional life," Grafstrom said.



MOTORSPORT

Jordan Rally fires into life at the Dead Sea today evening

Agencies
Amman, Jordan

The Jordan Rally, one of the most iconic rallies in the Eastern Hemisphere and a three-time former round of the FIA World Rally Championship (WRC), gets underway at the lowest point on earth today evening.

An entry that features 29 cars and competitors from nine nations will take the start at a purpose-built podium in the event's service park with the spectacular backdrop of the Dead Sea and the neighbouring West Bank from 19.15hrs. Crews will then tackle 15 demanding loose surface special stages in the Jordan Valley and Dead Sea areas of the Hashemite Kingdom for honours on the second round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC). The event is being held under the patronage of Prince Feisal al-Husseini, Chairman of Jordan Motorsport.

Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah is chasing an unprecedented 20th MERC title since 2003 and win number 16 in Jordan. Last year, he shared the Drivers' Championship with Abdullah al-Rawahi and had to watch as the Omani snatched his

first ever win at the Dead Sea.

Al-Attiyah's challenge for that 20th title has not started well either: a puncture and then suspension damage sidelined the Qatari from his home event in February and he will take the start tomorrow evening without a point to his name in this year's championship. He and co-driver Giovanni Bernacchini do have a new Škoda Fabia RS at their disposal this weekend, however, with the car being run by Autotek Motorsport.

While round one winner Pierre-Louis Loubet had never planned a full MERC programme this year, Qatar runner-up Mads Østberg confirmed last weekend in Portugal that he had planned to compete in Jordan with an SRT-run Škoda but logistical issues had prevented that from happening. The Norwegian finished 13th overall when the event was a round of the WRC for the last time in 2011.

SRT will now run a Fabia Rally2 Evo for Denis Krotov and his co-driver Yury Kulikov. Krotov is better known for his programme of cross-country rallies with Overdrive Racing and the X-Raid Mini JCW Team, with whom he finished eighth in last year's FIA W2RC Drivers' Championship.

Competition for the trio of Rally2 entrants comes from a pair



Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah chasing an unprecedented 20th MERC title since 2003.

of QMMF-supported Škodas for Abdulaziz al-Kuwari and Khalid al-Suwaidi. Al-Kuwari holds fourth in the Drivers' Championship after round one and teams up with British co-driver Marshall Clarke. Al-Suwaidi is a two-time winner of the Kuwait International Rally and teams up with Ross Whittock, who arrives in Jordan fresh from

achieving overall success at last weekend's Manx National Rally on the Isle of Man with James Williams.

Bader al-Fayez teams up with Lebanon's Joseph Matar to drive a Rally1 Škoda for the host nation and Qatari veteran Nasser Khalifa al-Atya and co-driver Ziad Chehab wheel out their Motor-

tune-run Ford Fiesta. Al-Atya will be hoping to improve on his current fifth place in the Drivers' Championship.

Local drivers dominate the MERC2 category after the opening round in Qatar: Shaker Jweihan takes a six-point championship lead into the weekend's action over Shadi Shaban with Husam Salim holding third place. Ten drivers will compete in MERC2 at the Dead Sea and they include Ameer Nassif, Ihab al-Shorafa Fadi Dahshan, Palestine's Hamada Odeh, Lebanon's Ahmad Khaled and Omani driver Zakariya al-Aamri. The route devised by Clerk of the Course Loai Marei, his deputy Khaled Zakariya and their team features a revised 195.20 competitive kilometres in a compact route of 575.48km.

The Mount Nebo area hosts the opening Panorama and Bahath stages on Friday morning before competitors return to the Dead Sea area to complete the loop with a pass through the aptly-named Baptism Site special. A lunchtime service precedes a repeat run through each of the three speed tests and a short blast through a 3.3km super special at the Dead Sea to round off the day's proceedings at 16.35hrs.

Saturday's action features 109.42 competitive kilometres

and is made up of two passes through each of the Shuna, Rawda, Turki and Suwayma stages: Shuna is the longest of the entire event at 20.93km. The podium and ceremonial finish (18.00hrs) and the post-event press conference (18.30hrs) round off proceedings.

FIA Middle East Rally Championship - positions after round 1:

1. Pierre-Louis Loubet (FRA) 33pts
2. Mads Ostberg (NOR) 29pts
3. Abdullah al-Rawahi (OMN) 25pts
4. Abdulaziz al-Kuwari (QAT) 21pts
5. Nasser Khalifa al-Atya (QAT) 17pts
6. Shaker Sjeihan (JOR) 15pts
7. Shadi Shaban (JOR) 13pts
8. Husam Salim (JOR) 11pts
9. Rashid al-Muhannadi (QAT) 9pts
10. Ihab al-Shorafa (JOR) 7pts
11. Fabid Ahmer (IND) 5pts
12. Shadi Shaban (JOR) 24pts
12. Khalid al-Suwaidi (QAT) 4pts

FIA MERC2 - positions after round 1:

1. Shaker Sjeihan (JOR) 30pts
2. Shadi Shaban (JOR) 24pts
3. Husam Salim (JOR) 21pts
4. Rashid al-Muhannadi (QAT) 19pts
5. Ihab al-Shorafa (JOR) 17pts
6. Fabid Ahmer (IND) 15pts.

FOCUS

ICC 'excited' as stadium launched in NY

AFP
New York

The newly-built Nassau County International Cricket Stadium, near New York, was launched yesterday with the sport's world body "excited" to conquer new territories through the T20 World Cup in June.

The 34,000-capacity stadium, with infrastructure from the Las Vegas Formula 1 circuit and drop-in pitches prepared in Florida, will host the hotly-anticipated India-Pakistan clash on June 9, among its eight scheduled World Cup games.

The showpiece 20-over event will be co-hosted by the West Indies and the United States starting June 1 with New York, Florida and Dallas as venues.

The International Cricket

Council (ICC) remains happy with the focus on the India-Pakistan clash and the Nassau project as part of bringing the game to the US.

"Yeah, absolutely! We can run that game anywhere and the interest in the fixture would be immense," Chris Tetley, the ICC's head of events, told reporters in a media roundtable.

"The news stories that we have seen and the media coverage in the US itself as well as amongst the cricket media around the world. I have not seen that before around an ICC event."

Tetley added: "We are really excited to bring the T20 World Cup cricket to the US and the opportunity that it presents to the sport and from what I can see there is an audience really waiting for us to come."

T20 Cricket will also feature as

one of five new sports at the Los Angeles Olympics in 2028.

Making a cricket stadium in Nassau remained a huge challenge for the ICC, who got in Adelaide Oval curator Damian Hough for the job. Hough created the first drop-in pitch in Adelaide in 2013 and the latest strips at the Nassau County ground promise good cricket and balance between bat and ball.

"People shouldn't be concerned about drop-in pitches," said Hough.

"They are proven around the world, definitely in Australia. Some of the best cricket is played on drop-in pitches and are really successful."

A bird's eye view of the newly minted Nassau County International Cricket Stadium in New York. (@/ICC)



CRICKET

Curran the hero as Punjab beat Rajasthan

All-round display from the Englishman as PBKS down RR by 5 wickets

AFP
Guwahati, India

Skipper Sam Curran starred with bat and ball as Punjab Kings beat Rajasthan Royals by five wickets for a consolation win in the Indian Premier League yesterday.

Chasing a tricky 145 on a sluggish pitch, Punjab depended on Curran's unbeaten 63 to achieve their target with seven balls to spare in Rajasthan's adopted home ground in Guwahati.

Left-handed Curran put on a key 63-run stand with Jitesh Sharma, who made 22, and despite losing his partner in the 16th over steered the team home to lift them from the bottom of the 10-team table.

Impact substitute Ashutosh Sharma smashed 17 and the winning run to hand Rajasthan their fourth successive defeat in this edition of the T20 tournament.

"To be very honest, we have to sit back and accept that we are going through some failures," Rajasthan skipper Sanju Samson said. "You have to find out what's not working well as a team. When you are getting to the business end, we need someone to raise their finger up and say I am going to win the game for the team. We have the players who can do that."

The loss for Rajasthan hurt their chances of a top-two finish in the league stage a day after they confirmed their play-off spot.

Rajasthan, who stay in second place with one game in hand, and table-toppers Kolkata Knight Riders are the only two teams to have booked their play-off berth.



Punjab Kings' captain Sam Curran plays a shot as his Rajasthan Royals' counterpart and wicketkeeper Sanju Samson (left) watches during the IPL match at the Assam Cricket Association Stadium in Guwahati yesterday. (AFP)

The top four teams make the play-offs, but the first and second-placed sides have the advantage of two chances to qualify for the final on May 26 in Chennai.

Punjab, who had already bowed out of the play-off race, kept the opposition down to 144-9 despite a 34-ball 48 by Riyan Parag.

Left-arm quick Curran bowled

Yashasvi Jaiswal, for four, in the first over and then Samson departed for 18 off Nathan Ellis after a slow start. Parag found Ravichandran Ashwin, who hit 28 off 19 balls, for company and the two attempted to push the scoring in their partnership of 50.

The rest of the batting faltered against a disciplined attack as

Curran, fellow quick Harshal Patel and spinner Rahul Chahal took two wickets each.

BRIEF SCORES
Punjab Kings 145 for 5 (Curran 63*, Avesh 2-28, Chahal 2-31)
beat Rajasthan Royals 144 for 9 (Parag 48, Ashwin 28, Curran 2-24, Chahal 2-26) by 5 wickets

CYCLING

Milan claims Giro stage double as Pogacar retains the overall lead



Lidl-Trek's Jonathan Milan crosses the finish line to win stage 11 of the Giro d'Italia yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Francavilla al Mare, Italy

Jonathan Milan claimed his second win at this year's Giro d'Italia after taking the honours at yesterday's 11th stage in a messy bunch sprint.

Having already won stage four, Italian Milan pipped a clutch of top sprinters to the line at Francavilla al Mare, on the shores of the Adriatic Sea, after 207 kilometres from Foiano di Val Fortore.

After an easy day heading north along the Adriatic coast, all of the sprint and general classification contenders were involved in the long straight final sprint into a headwind.

A nasty crash left several riders on the ground in the final kilometre but in the sprint to the line Lidl-Trek rider Milan broke off Tim Merlier's wheel, bursting through to notch his fifth win of the season.

"It's not just this 20-second sprint or the victory in the end that made me happy. It was all the work the guys did today to support me and bring me to the crucial position for the sprint," said track specialist Milan.

"This is what has made me happy. A real team, as we are. I think today it's just unbelievable what the guys did for me today."

Milan's win was a reversal of the third stage when Soudal Quick-Step's Belgian rider Merlier took the victory ahead of the current points jersey holder.

The 23-year-old Milan leads Alpecin's Australian rider Kaden Groves, was third across the line, by 63 points.

Merlier is some way off the pace for the cyclamen jersey and was replaced on the podium by Giovanni Leonardi for dangerous riding.

Slovenian Tadej Pogacar retains the leader's pink jersey with an unchanged lead of 2min 40sec over Colombian Daniel Martinez, while Welshman Geraint Thomas is a further 16sec back in third overall.

Today's 12th stage takes the peloton from Martinsicuro to Fano, a 190km run which takes in a series of punchy small climbs.



Pink jersey Team UAE's Slovenian rider Tadej Pogacar looks on prior to the 11th stage. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Tyson Fury: the 'Gypsy King' of the boxing ring riddled with contradictions

AFP
Riyadh

While the rest of the boxing world is drooling in anticipation of a genuine heavyweight world title fight that will unify the division for the first time in over 20 years, Tyson Fury insists Saturday's match-up with Oleksandr Usyk in Riyadh is all about the money.

"The truth is it's exciting to me and attractive because of the amount of money I'm getting paid," he said this week. "Not because of the belts that's on the line."

It is true that the self-styled 'Gypsy King' - Fury is the son of Irish Travellers - will earn north, perhaps far north, of \$100mn from the fight but there is a sense that he may just be covering up a little bit. For Gypsy King read 'Contradiction King'.

Fury, now 35, knows well enough what this fight means: a place among the very greats of boxing history.

Going all the way back to Jack Dempsey in the 1920s, only 23 fighters can claim that place in the pantheon: these are great names including Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, Mohamed Ali and Mike Tyson.

No one, however, has done it, since another British boxer Lennox Lewis defeated Evander Holyfield in 1999.

Usyk holds the WBA, WBO, IBF and IBO belts while Fury has held the WBC title since 2020.

So is it just about the Saudi gold, pleasant though that be?

"There are so many belts on the line and nothing competes with that," Fury said last month in direct contradiction of this week's soundbite.

"This is the fight of the ages, nothing can compare with this. Not a show fight, not a crossover fight, not YouTube boxing, nothing."

"This is two undefeated world heavyweight championships colliding for all the belts and it hasn't been done since whenever?"

Fury's boxing path began at birth in Manchester. Two months



Britain's Tyson Fury (left) and Ukraine's Oleksandr Usyk during a press conference in London on November 16, 2023. (AFP)

premature and weighing in at just 450 grammes (1 lb) - he will tip the scales at around 125 kilos (20 stone) for Saturday's fight - Fury had an early scrap to cling on to life itself.

Fury's dad, also a boxer, liked his fighting instinct and gave him the name Tyson. Yes, after Mike Tyson.

He shot up in height - he now

stands 2.06 metres (six foot nine inches) - quit school at 11 and focussed on the ring.

In 2008, at the age of 20, he made his professional debut stopping Hungarian fighter Bela Gyongyosi in the first round.

His record 16 years later reads an impressive 34 wins, 24 by knockout, and no defeats, the only sem-

blance of a blemish being the draw with Deontay Wilder back in January 2018.

It was the first of three fights between the two, with Fury sending the American sprawling to the canvas in the next two.

The early highpoint of his career was a unanimous points victory over the Ukrainian Wladimir Klitschko in 2015 although that was soon followed by the lowest as he tested positive for the banned substance nandrolone and then cocaine.

It prompted a spiral in his mental health and he relinquished all of his titles: at that point the Fury had become a Whimper.

But it is testament to his strength, and that of his wife Paris, that he came back from that to climb the mountain once more.

Fury has the build and the power, and the presence. He hurts people with his punches but if there is a mental weakness it may cost him.

His last outing in October, which was also in Riyadh, saw him take on UFC heavyweight champion Francis Ngannou who was taking his first boxing match.

An overweight, sluggish Fury struggled. He was knocked down in the third round before going on to win via a controversial split decision.

That performance has not swayed Lennox Lewis who believes that Fury has the armoury to follow him as undisputed heavyweight champion.

"I've been watching him for a long time and he's a good boxer," Lewis told *The Guardian*.

"Tyson Fury's got lots of different weapons in his arsenal. He has shown in the fights with Deontay Wilder he is aggressive and moves forward well."

"Those fights really showed his skill, his talent, his ring generalship."

"I would put money on Fury - as long as it is the 100 percent focussed Fury."

The 'Gypsy King' himself is in no doubt that this is the moment when he joins those other boxing legends.

"If Tyson Fury can't beat Usyk, Tyson's no good, end of," he said.

"This is my time, my destiny, my era and my generation. Fact."

SPOTLIGHT

'Best ever' tennis takes Tabilo to Rome Open semis

Women's second seed Sabalenka needed just an hour and 13 minutes to see off Jelena Ostapenko

AFP
Rome

Alejandro Tabilo hailed the best tennis of his career yesterday after his fairytale run at the Rome Open continued to the semi-finals with a straight-sets win over China's Zhang Zhizhen.

Chile's Tabilo will play his first-ever last four match at a Masters 1000 event at the age of 26, after unfussily seeing off unseeded Zhang 6-3, 6-4 in one hour and 26 minutes on centre court at the Foro Italico.

Tabilo knocked out six-time Rome champion Novak Djokovic on Sunday and in the last four of the 29th seed will face either world number five Alexander Zverev or Taylor Fritz who play the day's final match.

"It's just unbelievable, I just can't believe it right now, still trying to soak this in... Definitely an unforgettable two weeks for me," said a delighted Tabilo.

"It's definitely the best tennis of my life right now, but I mean, trying to keep a poker face there because inside I'm just so nervous, every time trying to close out the match gets a little bit tighter."

Tabilo, in fact, had far less trouble yesterday than he did in his battle with Karen Khachanov in



Chile's Alejandro Tabilo celebrates after winning against China's Zhang Zhizhen during the Rome Open match yesterday. **Right:** Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka shakes hands with Latvia's Jelena Ostapenko after winning her match at the Rome Open yesterday. (AFP)

the previous round, not facing a single break point on his way to the biggest match of his career at the last major tournament before the French Open.

Zverev, who won the Rome title in 2017, is the highest ranked man left in the event after Daniil Medvedev's elimination on Tuesday.

As well as Djokovic's exit, Italian world number two Jannik Sinner and third-ranked Carlos Alcaraz both dropped out injured before

the tournament. Holger Rune, who lost last year's final to Medvedev, Madrid champion Andrey Rublev - ranked sixth in the world - and beaten finalist Felix Auger-Aliassime have also been eliminated.

Aryna Sabalenka strolls

Women's second seed Sabalenka needed just an hour and 13 minutes to see off Jelena Ostapenko in straight sets, 6-2, 6-4 on her way to the semis, improving her record against her Latvian opponent to

three wins and no defeats. Crowd favourite Sabalenka will take on next the winner of two-time Australian Open champion Victoria Azarenka and Danielle Collins, this year's Miami Open winner, who face off later on centre court.

"With this amazing atmosphere and with this amazing support... that's why I'm super motivated here and that's why I always say that this is the dream tournament for me to win," said Sabalenka yesterday.

"I really enjoy playing here so I don't have to think about being focused..."

"I'm just here enjoying it and doing everything I can to win every point I play no matter what the score. I guess that's the key."

Possible rematch in the offing

The 26-year-old could get a rematch of the Madrid final which she lost in dramatic fashion to world number one Iga Swiatek earlier this month.

Sabalenka, who has won the two most recent Australian Opens, was in a different class to Ostapenko, a former French Open winner, who could do nothing in the face of some punishing hitting.

Rome is the first time since the 2013 French Open tournament that the top three women players have reached the last four of a WTA event of 250 points level or higher, with Swiatek and world number three Coco Gauff in the other semi-final.



GOLF

McIlroy silent on divorce but 'ready to play' PGA

AFP
Louisville, United States

Rory McIlroy was silent about his divorce plans but confident in his golf game yesterday at the PGA Championship, where he seeks his first major triumph in a decade.

A day after news broke of his Monday divorce filing from Erica, his wife for the past seven years, McIlroy made his first public comments, saying only when asked about his energy and personal state, "I'm ready to play this week."

World number two McIlroy's shock break-up brought into question his status among the favourites at Valhalla, the course where the 35-year-old from Northern Ireland won his most recent of his four major titles 10 years ago.

"Today was the first time I was on the golf course since 10 years ago, so it was good to refamiliarise myself with the place," McIlroy said.

"A little longer, a couple little minor changes but for the most part pretty much the same that I can remember from 10 years ago."

McIlroy tees off today morning hoping to maintain the momentum off a victory on Sunday at the Wells Fargo Championship, his fourth career triumph at Quail Hollow, and a PGA Tour pairs victory last month in New Orleans alongside Irish pal Shane Lowry.

"Just trying to keep the momentum going," McIlroy said. "I think it's all about confidence and momentum and I have a lot of confidence and quite a bit of mo-



Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland speaks to the media prior to the 2024 PGA Championship at Valhalla Golf Club in Louisville, Kentucky. (AFP)

mentum coming into this week."

McIlroy also carries more than his usual share of turmoil given his personal split.

Erica Stoll was working for the PGA of America when she met McIlroy in 2012 at the Ryder Cup and they began dating in 2015, becoming engaged in December 2015 while on holiday in Paris and marrying in April 2017 at an Irish castle.

Their three-year-old daughter, Poppy, was born in 2020.

McIlroy had previously dated Danish tennis star Caroline Wozniacki from 2011 to 2014. They became engaged on December 31, 2013, but McIlroy announced in May 2014 that he had ended the engagement.

Lest anyone think McIlroy cannot cope with personal emotions and top golf rivals, he won

four days after the breakup with Wozniacki at Wentworth on the European Tour. In the following three months, McIlroy went on to win the 2014 British Open, the WGC Bridgestone Championship at Firestone and the PGA Championship at Valhalla.

McIlroy said his game is in a strong place based on technical form and shotmaking.

"Some of the shots that I hit last week, some of the three-quarter shots, some of the wedge shots, some of the iron shots, combined with how good I feel with the driver at the minute, and those wedge shots going and starting on the right line, that gives me a lot of confidence," he said.

McIlroy spoke about the PGA Tour merger talks with Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), the backers of LIV Golf,

and Monday's resignation of Jimmy Dunne from the Tour Policy Board. Dunne complained about lacking a role in the negotiations shortly after the formation of a transaction subcommittee for direct talks that included McIlroy but not Dunne.

"I think it's a huge loss for the PGA Tour, if they are trying to get this deal done with the PIF and trying to unify the game," McIlroy said. "Jimmy was basically 'the' relationship, the sort of conduit between the PGA Tour and PIF."

"It's really unfortunate he hasn't been involved for the last few months and part of the reason that everything is stalling at the minute is because of that."

McIlroy said his confidence level for a deal getting done was "as low as it had been" before and now "it's concerning."

FOCUS

Defending champion Koepka in 'good shape'

Reuters
Louisville, Kentucky

Brooks Koepka was considered one of the heavy favourites heading into the Masters last month.

But the five-time major champion never threatened, shooting nine-over par and finishing tied for 45th at Augusta. His poor play led to him recently saying he was "embarrassed" by his play.

"Everybody put in a lot of hard work," Koepka said of his team heading into the Masters. "Dedicated a lot of time and effort and then for me to go out and play like that is not what I expect of myself, I don't think what they expect of me."

"So yeah, just we had a good talk and just kind of put our nose down and kept grinding. You know, had some difficult punishment workouts. It was long hours on the range. Just worked with everybody and really tried to go back to the fundamentals, and I think that was the important thing."

Koepka responded by claiming the individual title at the LIV Golf Singapore event and this week he's one of the favourites for the PGA Championship at Valhalla Golf Club.

The 34-year-old Koepka has won the PGA three times, including last year at Oak Hill Country Club in Pittsford, New York.

"I feel like my game is in good shape right now," he said. "It will be interesting to see how the course plays. It's a little bit wet right now. I don't know if we are going to get any rain this afternoon. Looks like it. Yeah, it's in great shape; it's just as I remember."

"Obviously changed the grass in the fairways. I think it's made it a little easier to chip off of, but yeah, it's a good track, big-boy golf course. But I feel good."



The best round at the Masters for Koepka was a 73 on each of the first two days, followed by a 76 and a 75. He said his swing was a little off and blamed the weather at his home course in Jupiter, Florida.

"It's kind of funny, it's been windy," he said. "It feels like it's blowing 20 miles an hour every time we hit balls from pretty much February on, and every time we seemed to play it was blowing 25 or 30. My ball position just got back. Back with everything."

Koepka took the week after the Masters off, noting it was always the plan to help him recharge his energy. After the break, Koepka returned to play and finished T9 at LIV Golf Adelaide before winning in Singapore.

"I think no matter how I play in the majors, I feel like I'm not physically exhausted, just mentally, just the grind of what I put myself through or what goes on for the previous weeks of the prep," he said. "It's just a lot more intense. I enjoy taking the week off after. It's kind of enjoyable. (But) the majors are different than everything else," he added. "The majors are - they just have a different feel than any other golf tournament. I've always enjoyed it and they are always tougher golf courses. That's something I get up for. It's always the peak of our sport for the four times a year we play in majors."

ALBON SIGNS NEW MULTI-YEAR F1 CONTRACT WITH WILLIAMS

London: Alex Albon has committed his long-term future to Williams after it was announced yesterday he had signed a "multi-year" contract extension with the British Formula One team. The Thai driver had been linked with Mercedes following Lewis Hamilton's move to Ferrari for 2025 and also a return to Red Bull. But instead he has decided to stay with Williams, after winning 27 of their 28 points in the 2023 drivers' championship as the team finished seventh place in the Constructors' Championship - their best placing since 2017. Albon, however, has yet to win a point from this season's opening six races.

"I'm incredibly happy to be remaining with Williams Racing and to continue working with such a talented and dedicated team of people," said Albon in a Williams statement. "It has been a difficult start to the year, but since joining Williams we have made significant progress together and I have seen the huge changes happening behind the scenes to take us back to the front of the grid. "This is a long-term project that I really believe in and want to play a key role in which is why I have signed a multi-year contract. "The journey will take time but I am confident we are building the right team

to move forward and achieve great things in the years to come." Williams did not specify the length of Albon's new deal but said the renewed agreement with the 28-year-old, who was born in London, would take "the partnership into the new era of Formula One regulations and demonstrates a shared belief in the upward trajectory of the team". Williams' statement added: "Since joining Williams Racing, Alex Albon has showcased exceptional determination and dedication both on and off the track. "His performance since he joined ahead of the 2022 FIA Formula 1 World Championship has been integral to the team's progress and success, and his efforts sig-

nificantly contributed to the team's best championship finishing position since 2017 of seventh last year."

Watches belonging to F1 great Schumacher fetch millions at auction

Eight watches belonging to Formula One legend Michael Schumacher were sold at auction in Geneva yesterday for a total of four million Swiss francs (\$4.4mn/£4.1mn). The German seven-time F1 world champion was a passionate watch collector until the skiing accident he suffered in December 2013, since which he has not been seen in public. Two of the timepieces sold at the Christie's auction were personalised gifts

Schumacher received from then Ferrari team principal Jean Todt to celebrate his achievements on the racing track with the Italian manufacturer. An F.P. Journe Vagabondage with a dial honouring the seven F1 world championships Schumacher won was sold for \$1,646,700. But the piece that went for the most - \$2,711,500 - was a vintage pink gold Patek Philippe. "Our sincere thanks go to our consignors as well as the Schumacher family who entrusted us with the outstanding property of Michael Schumacher. We saw strong global participation, with an emphasis on America" said the auction house's watch specialist Remi Guillemin.

FOOTBALL

Haaland tells Man City to 'relax' ahead of title race finale

'It will be the same against West Ham. We will feel the pressure'

AFP
London

Erling Haaland has urged his Manchester City teammates to "relax" after they closed in on making English football history with a 2-0 win away to Tottenham Hotspur.

Tuesday's triumph in north London saw City, courtesy of two goals from Haaland, win their game in hand as they returned to the top of the table as they moved two points clear of Arsenal.

Victory at home to West Ham on Sunday's final day of the season will now assure City of a fourth successive Premier League title – an unprecedented feat in the top tier of English football.

"Yeah, fantastic mentality," Haaland told City+.

"Focus on game by game and now relax. We came here to try to win and we won."

Haaland opened the scoring six minutes into the second half when he tapped in from Kevin De Bruyne's pass before doubling City's lead from the penalty spot after Jeremy Doku was brought down by Pedro Porro.

Spurs, however, had a chance to equalise but City reserve goalkeeper Stefan Ortega, who came on after Ederson was injured in a challenge with Cristian Romero, stood up well to deny Son Heung-min when one-on-one with the South Korean.

"They're a fantastic team," Haaland said of Spurs. "You know everyone knows that they want to play all the time and all praise to them."

"It was really difficult, but yeah, we came here to try and win and we won. That's my only thing and I'm happy. I think we were a bit nervous. I think that's normal, there's a lot of emotions for everyone."



Manchester City's Erling Haaland shoots a penalty kick and scores his team second goal during the Premier League match against Tottenham Hotspur at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in London. (AFP)

ryone. "Everyone knows the situation, but it's about not thinking too much. Try to focus on your things to do and try to win."

He added: "Ortega man of the match... What can I say? He's incredible and such a good guy as well, so I'm happy for him."

City do feel the tension of title race, says Guardiola

Manchester City will be affected by the nerves of going for a fourth consecutive Premier League title on Sunday, said Pep Guardiola despite his side's experience.

It is the first time Guardiola's men have won at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in the Premier

League, but it was a far from vintage performance. City have won eight straight Premier League games and are unbeaten from open play in any competition since December 6. But they host West Ham on the final day knowing anything less than win will allow Arsenal to take the title should they beat Everton.

"They were playing for the consequences of the result. When you play football thinking about the consequences, you are going to lose the Premier League, you cannot perform at your best level," said Guardiola of his side's display. "But they are human beings so I can understand the pressure is there. It will be the same against

West Ham. We will feel the pressure."

In the same circumstances two years ago City needed a late rally from 2-0 down to beat Aston Villa 3-2 and deny Liverpool the title.

"They feel it there and they know it. They are not celebrating, there is relief but there is still a job to do," added Guardiola.

"The tennis players say 'the serve to win Wimbledon is the most difficult one! (We need to) prepare well, completely focus and try to win there.'" Rodri said City are ready to rewrite the record books once more by becoming the first side to ever win four consecutive English top-flight titles.

FOCUS

Postecoglou 'misread' fans desperation to deny Arsenal title

AFP
London

Tottenham boss Ange Postecoglou said the foundations he has built at the club are "fragile" after many fans took glee in their 2-0 defeat to Manchester City, which could deny north London rivals Arsenal the Premier League title.

Spurs' chances of Champions League football were ended by Erling Haaland's second-half double that took City back to the top of the table, two points ahead of Arsenal going into Sunday's final fixtures.

Postecoglou had dismissed suggestions on the eve of the game that Tottenham supporters would want their own side to lose if it meant denying the Gunners a first title in 20 years.

But after a subdued atmosphere on Tuesday night, with chants mocking Arsenal in the final stages, the Australian admitted he had "misread" the situation.

"I think the last 48 hours have revealed to me the foundations are pretty fragile. That's things I've got to go back to the drawing board on," said Postecoglou.

The former Celtic boss was further pressed on whether his frustration was aimed at the fans or those inside the club.

"(I) Don't care. Outside, inside, everywhere. It's been an interesting exercise," he added.

"I probably misread the situation in what it takes to make a winning team."

Tottenham have made a habit of scoring late goals this season, including in a thrilling 3-3 draw against City at the Etihad earlier in the season. Spurs had their chances to snatch at least a point, most notably when Son



Heung-min missed a one-on-one against Stefan Ortega late on.

But there was no sign of encouragement from the crowd willing their side to put the defending champions to the sword.

"Of course it does (have an impact). It is what it is," said Postecoglou on the atmosphere.

"I can't dictate what people do. Yeah, when we've got late winners in games, it is because the crowd has helped us."

"What other people's priorities are doesn't interest me. I know what we need to build a winning team and that's what I'm concentrating on."

Tottenham still have work to do to guarantee fifth place and Europa League football next season, but only need a point when they travel to relegated Sheffield United on Sunday to do so.

Liverpool assistant Lijnders to become new Salzburg boss

Liverpool assistant manager Pep Lijnders is to become the new head coach at Austrian club Red Bull Salzburg after his departure from Anfield at the end of the season. The Dutchman, who had initially worked at Liverpool under Brendan Rodgers, will leave the Merseysiders along with current manager Jurgen Klopp come the conclusion of the Premier League campaign.

Paris Olympics ticket app and resale platform goes live

The official 2024 Paris Olympics app went live yesterday, enabling ticket holders to obtain their places and resell seats for any unwanted sessions, the organising committee announced.

The application "paris2024tickets" is the "only official and authorised resale channel: the resale is completely transparent for both the seller and the purchaser," the organising committee said in a statement. Most events for the July 26-August 11 Games have quickly sold out during multiple ticket releases since last year, with around 8.27 million places purchased in total. There remain tickets for the Olympic football, however, while most sports are still available for the Paralympics which take place from August 28-September 8. The app will be "the essential tool for accessing your tickets for the Olympic Games Paris 2024. On competi-

tion day, only a ticket presented on the Paris 2024 tickets app will allow access to the venues," the organising committee said. It enables buyers to transfer tickets to their fellow travellers and will be used to obtain the QR codes that must be shown to security at venues. The QR codes "are not visible for the moment to prevent counterfeiting," Michael Aloisio, director general of the Paris organising committee, told reporters. (AFP)



PREMIER LEAGUE CLUBS TO VOTE ON SCRAPPING VAR

Premier League clubs will be given the chance to scrap VAR from next season when they vote on the controversial review system at their annual general meeting next month. Wolves have submitted a resolution to abolish VAR to the Premier League, triggering a vote of the top flight's 20 teams on June 6. The Molineux club said VAR is "undermining the value of the Premier League brand" after another season marred by a host of debatable decisions. In order for VAR to be axed by the

Premier League, 14 of the 20 clubs will have to vote against it. Wolves are expected to canvas other clubs in order to gain support before the meeting. VAR was introduced in the Premier League in 2019 with the aim of helping referees avoid clear and obvious errors that had marred matches in the past. But there have been numerous controversies surrounding the technology this season as Premier League managers and fans grow increasingly vocal in their disdain

for the system. "The introduction of VAR in 2019/20 was a decision made in good faith and with the best interests of football and the Premier League at its heart," a Wolves statement said. "However, it has led to numerous unintended negative consequences that are damaging the relationship between fans and football, and undermining the value of the Premier League brand. "The decision to table the resolution has come after careful consideration and with the utmost

respect for the Premier League, PGMOL and our fellow competitors. "Our position is that the price we are paying for a small increase in accuracy is at odds with the spirit of our game, and as a result we should remove it from the 2024/25 season onwards." Wolves boss Gary O'Neil revealed he has regularly received apologetic phone calls from Professional Game Match Officials Limited (PGMOL) chief Howard Webb after VAR decisions that went against his team. (AFP)

LA LIGA

Bellingham, Vinicius shine as champions Madrid smash Alaves

AFP
Madrid

Jude Bellingham and Vinicius Junior inspired runaway Spanish champions Real Madrid to a 5-0 rout of Alaves on Tuesday.

Carlo Ancelotti's side continued warming up for the Champions League final with a comprehensive demolition of their Basque visitors at the Santiago Bernabeu.

Bellingham scored the opener and played a part in Madrid's next three goals, two scored by Vinicius, finding his best form at the business end of the season.

Turkish teenager Arda Guler added a late fifth to put the cherry on Madrid's cake and moving them 17 points clear of second-place Barcelona.

"We've had just one defeat in the league and I think that a big part of the success is because of (the defence)," Ancelotti told reporters after his side's 30th consecutive league game unbeaten.

Madrid celebrated their title with an open-top bus parade on Sunday but with the Wembley final a little over a fortnight away, nobody is letting their concentration slip. Least of all Belgian goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois,

who made a fine double save from Samu Omorodion in the opening minutes. After missing most of the season with a severe knee injury, Courtois is hoping for a Champions League final start and boasts three clean sheets in three matches since his return.

"I knew I'd come back strongly – I'm the same Courtois, or even better," said the goalkeeper.

Ancelotti selected the vast majority of his first choice line-up after resting them at the weekend, and Madrid's usual suspect opened the scoring. It was Bellingham, with his 19th league goal and perhaps his luckiest.

The England international directed Toni Kroos' cross towards the far post where Dani Carvajal was running in, but the ball sank directly into the net. Bellingham trails La Liga's top scorer, Girona's Artem Dovbyk, by one goal.

Madrid doubled their lead after Bellingham threaded a pass through for Eduardo Camavinga. The French midfielder burst forward in the box and unselfishly squared for Vinicius to tap home when other players might have taken the chance to shoot.

Alaves midfielder Ianis Hagi, son of legendary Romanian playmaker Gheorghe Hagi, stung the palms of Courtois with a fierce



Real Madrid's Jude Bellingham controls the ball during the La Liga match against Deportivo Alaves at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium in Madrid. (AFP)

drive at the other end. The visitors have enjoyed a strong season and are safely ensconced in mid-table, avoiding the stress of a relegation battle.

However, Madrid dismantled them with consummate ease and

Fede Valverde rattled home the third in first-half stoppage time after Bellingham played him in.

The Uruguayan midfielder hammered a strike into the top corner at the near post for his second league goal of the season, far

fewer than his tally of seven last year due to his deeper role.

Courtois denied Omorodion and Hagi again in the second half as he continued stating his case to Ancelotti, and he ended up making nine saves altogether.

Vinicius extended Madrid's lead after Bellingham played him in, lashing home his second of the night with a fine finish.

"I'm at my best," said Vinicius. "Now we've got time to train and that lets us stay calm, do good work and arrive better than ever at Wembley."

Rodrygo should have added the fifth but goalkeeper Jesus Owono denied him from close range after Vinicius teed him up, and so it was Guler instead after a deflected effort fell his way in the box. "Every time a small team comes here, it's a torment," lamented Alaves coach Luis Garcia Plaza.

Eder Militao and Carvajal ended the game with apparent physical issues, but they turned out to be nothing serious. "What happened with the knee is nothing," Militao said after the game, while Ancelotti confirmed the Spanish defender was also fine.

Elsewhere high-flying Girona, third, fell to a 1-0 home defeat against Villarreal - Barcelona can move four points clear if they win at Almeria on Thursday.

Mallorca, 15th, rescued a 1-1 draw at Osasuna to add one more point in their battle for survival. The Copa del Rey runners-up are seven points clear of the relegation zone.