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FOOTBALL

Every year I get offers from European clubs, says Qatar star Afif

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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Sadd and Rayyan gear up for Qatar Clasico clash

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Sadd and Al Rayyan face off in the highly anticipated Qatar Clasico in the Qatar Stars League. The match will kick off at 7:30pm at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium, promising an intense battle between two of the league's fiercest rivals.

Sadd are currently second in the standings with 15 points, four behind leaders Al Duhail. The defending champions will aim to maintain their momentum after a 3-0 win over Al Wakrah in the previous round.

Coach Felix Sanchez stressed the importance of this fixture as it is the last league match before the international break. "Playing against Rayyan is always different, but as usual we have to focus on getting the three points. It is important that we try to get a good result," Sanchez said.

The Wolves will, however, be without Pedro Miguel and Paulo Otavio, both sidelined with injuries.

Despite these setbacks, Sanchez remains optimistic about his team's form. "I think the players are now at a good level, and we are getting good results. This gives us the motivation to continue."

Al Sadd midfielder Mohammed Waad also expressed confidence ahead of the match. "It will be difficult for both teams, but our goal is to collect the three points and continue the victories. Al Sadd fans are our biggest strength, and we are waiting for them at the Qatar Clasico match," he said.

On the other hand, Al Rayyan, who sit eighth in the table with 10 points, will be looking to bounce back after a 2-2 draw against Al Ahli. Coach Younes Ali acknowledged the challenge of facing Al



Al Sadd's midfielder Boualem Khoukhi at a training session yesterday.



Al Rayyan's Rodrigo Tabata trains under the watchful eyes of coach Younes Ali (right).

Sadd but remained confident in his squad's ability to compete. "Al Rayyan vs Al Sadd matches are always difficult, exciting, strong, and popular. The team that is more focused and exploits opportunities is more likely to win," he said.

Ali emphasised the importance of staying composed and capitalising on key moments. "Regardless of both teams' rank-

ings, these matches are always difficult and offer great incentive to the winning side. We hope to avoid injuries during this challenging period, as we're playing every three days," the coach added.

The Lions will rely heavily on Roger

Guedes, their top scorer with six goals this season, alongside Mahmoud Trezeguet, Achraf Bencharki and Abdulaziz Hatem to anchor the midfield. Rodrigo Tabata, a veteran presence for Al Rayyan, noted the significance of this match for their season.

"It is a very difficult match, and right now, Al Sadd have the advantage because they are better in the standings. But I think this is the right moment for us to get back on the right track and regain our winning touch," Tabata said. "We have to implement the coach's instructions, and in Clasico matches, small details make the difference. We need to focus on those to secure the three points."

With the rivalry steeped in tradition, a packed stadium and electrifying atmosphere are expected for the Qatar Clasico, adding to the intensity of what promises to be a captivating football match.

Meanwhile, Al Gharafa will host Al Arabi at Thani Bin Jassim Stadium today. Al Gharafa managed to secure a crucial point against Al Duhail last after a 1-1 draw, which served as a recovery from their earlier defeat in the third round against Al Wasl of the UAE in the prestigious AFC Champions League Elite.

Currently, The Cheetahs occupy the fourth position in the standings, having accumulated 12 points. In contrast, Al Arabi have returned to winning form, achieving a 4-1 victory over Qatar SC in their most recent match, which elevated their total to 10 points, placing them ninth, with a goal difference that separates them from Al Shamal and Al Rayyan, who are positioned seventh and eighth respectively.

In the other match of the day, Al Khor face Qatar SC at the Al Khor Stadium. Al Khor currently sit at the bottom of the table in 12th place with only four points, having yet to record a win.

In contrast, Qatar SC occupy the 11th position with seven points and the three-point gap between the two teams is expected to intensify the competition, adding an element of challenge and excitement to the encounter.

SPOTLIGHT

Katara to host start of Qatar International Baja today

Action gets underway with a 10.01km Prologue; Alvarez, Ferreira to duel for FIA World Baja Cup title

By Sports Reporter
Lusail

The Qatar International Baja will be officially flagged away from the iconic amphitheatre in Katara Cultural Village from 7.20pm tonight. Drivers and riders from 33 countries will tackle two days of gruelling competitive action in the Qatar deserts over the weekend with a Prologue stage of 10.01km today afternoon being used to determine the starting order for the first stage on Friday morning.

While local media attention turns to the presence of Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and a host of Qatari drivers, the event is also the sixth round of the FIA World Baja Cup and the two leading title protagonists, Fernando Alvarez and Joao Ferreira, both realise the importance of achieving a top result in the Lusail-based event.

Argentina-based Alvarez currently leads his Portuguese rival by 19 points in the overall Drivers' Championship and is well clear of his other competitors in the SSV category at the wheel of his South Racing Can-Am Maverick XRS RR. His co-driver Xavier Panseri has a similar lead in his category.

Ferreira looks to have an unassailable lead in the Ultimate class and has replaced his usual X-Raid Mini JCW Rally for a Can-Am Maverick XRS Turbo RR in Qatar. With third-placed Miguel Toril absent from the event, Edouard Pons, Khalid al-Jafra, Amerigo Ventura and Diego Martinez will be aiming to close the gap and rekindle their title bids. Pons also holds a 19-point lead over al-Jafra in the Challenger category.

Ferreira's co-driver Filipe Palmeiro is second behind Panseri in the Co-drivers' Championship. The Portuguese said: "I have been here twice before. The first time was with Yazeed al-Rajhi in 2012 and in 2014 with Martin Kaczmarek. I have good and bad memories of the race. We rolled



QMMF Executive Director Amro al-Hamad was joined by FIA competitors Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah, Fernando Alvarez, Joao Ferreira, Ahmed al-Kuwari, Diego Martinez and Dania Akeel at the pre-event press conference at Lusail Circuit yesterday. Motorcycle riders Mohammed al-Balooshi, David Megre, Joanna Modrzewska and James Hillier were also present alongside quad front-runner Haitham al-Tuwajri.

and crashed with Yazeed. The navigation is always challenging but I like this kind of race. There are very fast tracks with lots of rocks and punctures."

While Ferreira concentrates on the overall title at the expense of the Ultimate category on this occasion, the top-seeded X-Raid driver Denis Krotov (Mini), Overdrive Racing's Akira Miura (Toyota) and Czech veteran Miroslav Zapletal (Ford F150) will be aiming to challenge for outright victory.

Miura is making his first appearance in Qatar. The Japanese said: "The futuristic cityscape (Doha) really makes an impression. I'm thrilled to have another opportunity to race in a Baja with the Overdrive Team. This time, I'll be racing in a new model with a wider track and the tyres

have been improved based on our experience in Greece."

Fourteen drivers are registered for FIA Middle East Baja Cup points for a competition where Qatar is the second round of four. Ahmed al-Kuwari holds a seven-point lead over Saudi rivals Saleh al-Saif and Majed al-Thunayyan in the overall standings. Al-Saif is not in Qatar but al-Thunayyan leads the Stock category for series production cross-country machines in his Nissan Patrol.

Overdrive Racing's Dania Akeel is chasing Middle East Baja Cup honours in her Toyota Hilux, while the Saudi Can-Am duo of Hamad al-Harbi and Maha al-Hameli are concentrating on the Challenger category. Abdulaziz al-Yaesh and Nasser al-

Ajmi are also registered for the Ultimate section in their Nissan Patrols.

Akeel said: "I have some points in the Middle East Cup but I am not sure I will go to the remaining rounds. The plan is to get more seat time in the Ultimate car and that's why I jumped on this opportunity. I finished second in the race in Saudi last week in this car, where it was very sandy with dunes. This event is known for its hard rocky surface and some dunes."

"I am looking forward to adding to my experience with every kilometre. If that lands us on the podium, I would be very happy for that."

A large field of motorcycles and quads will tackle the stages in advance of the FIA entrants. Emirati Mohammed al-Balooshi

tops the field from closest FIM Bajas World Cup rivals David Megre and Pedro Bianchi Prata. Qatar-based Martin Chalmers suffered a set-back when he lost a wheel and took a tumble during a brief shakedown of his Gas Gas 450 RFR motorcycle today morning.

The amphitheatre being used for the start location in Katara Cultural Village was completed in 2008 and is a crafted balance between classical Greek theatre design and Islamic features. It was officially opened in December 2011 and has a seating capacity of 5,000.

On-stage action in the Qatar International Baja gets underway with a timed Prologue stage of 10.01km from 1.45pm onwards today.

PREVIEW

'Adapting' to the pitch key to NZ hopes of 3-0 win

'The red clay is very different, so we're going to have to adapt quickly'

Reuters
Mumbai

New Zealand's chances of delivering a famous series whitewash in India will depend on how well they adapt to the Mumbai pitch, coach Gary Stead said.

The tourists thrashed India by eight wickets in the series opener in Bengaluru before winning the second match in Pune by 113 runs on Saturday, ending their opponents' home streak of 18 successive series triumphs stretching back to 2012.

The last time India were blanked in a home series was in 2000 when they lost 2-0 to South Africa.

"A series win in itself is incredible, but what we want to do is keep trying to get better every game, and we're going to different circumstances now," Stead told New Zealand media.

Another victory would improve the Black Caps' chances of reaching the World Test Championship (WTC) final next year he added.

However, Stead highlighted the challenge of getting accustomed to the Wankhede Stadium's red clay pitch after playing on black soil surfaces in the two opening victories.

India beat New Zealand by 70 runs at the venue in the semi-finals of last year's Cricket World Cup and thrashed them by 372 runs when they met there in the longest format in 2021.

"The red clay is very different, so we're going to have to adapt quickly," he added.

"Our next two trainings are going to be important but for the WTC itself, there's no doubt one more win would certainly help us."



India's captain Rohit Sharma throws a ball as Kuldeep Yadav (left), Ravindra Jadeja (second right) and KL Rahul watch during a practice session ahead of their third Test against New Zealand at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday. (AFP)



Gary Stead

New Zealand, who won the WTC title in 2021, are fourth in the standings and must beat India and overcome England in three tests at home next month to boost

their hopes of finishing in the top two.

"The first time we were in the situation of qualifying for the first WTC final, we had to win four Tests on the bounce and we managed to," Stead added.

"Hopefully that's something we can lean on and say, 'we've done it before, here's an opportunity to perhaps do something very special again'."

Meanwhile India's batting coach Abhishek Nayar yesterday said his team remained in 'great spirit'.

"The atmosphere is great. Still a lot of jokes (are being cracked) and cricketers are bubbly. As you watch, you'll see our sessions filled with fun and nothing's

changed. We all understand it's a sport," Nayar said.

"We're going to win most times, lose some times and the losing will be emphasised, but we know it's part of the deal.

"So we just go out smiling and give our best all the time."

"When India lost the World Cup that was a low point for everyone. But a couple of months later, we were world champions. A low point in a cricketer's career happens, but what a cricketer goes through and then comes back is always a great journey. That's how stories are made. That's how legacies are created," he said.

The third Test begins in Mumbai tomorrow.

SPOTLIGHT

New Zealand's Ajaz 'emotional' on Mumbai return after perfect 10



New Zealand's spinner Ajaz Patel poses in front of the honours board at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday. @BLACKCAPS

AFP
Mumbai

New Zealand spinner Ajaz Patel said yesterday that returning to his birthplace Mumbai after his 10-wicket haul there three years ago made for an "emotional" homecoming ahead of the third Test against India.

The Black Caps sealed a first-ever Test series victory on Indian soil last week in Pune and are now chasing a 3-0 sweep in the final match starting tomorrow at Wankhede Stadium.

In December 2021 at the same venue, Ajaz became only the third bowler in Test history to take all 10 wickets in an innings.

New Zealand lost the match but Ajaz joined elite company alongside England off-spinner Jim Laker (1956 at Old Trafford) and Indian spin ace Anil Kumble (1999 in Delhi).

"Certainly emotional," Ajaz, 36, told reporters.

"I guess being back in Mumbai is always quite special and it's a place I call home as well. Having the opportunity to play out here again is quite special."

He added: "To be honest, after my 10-wicket haul I wasn't sure whether I'd get another opportunity to play out here again."

New Zealand beat India at their own game of spin for a 113-run

victory in the second Test on a turning Pune pitch.

Ajaz's fellow left-arm spinner Mitchell Santner excelled with a match haul of 13 wickets as top Indian batters including skipper Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli flopped.

But Ajaz, who made his Test debut in 2018 after moving to Auckland from Mumbai with his parents, said India still remain the favourites.

"I think India still have the wood on us when it comes to playing on turning wickets and traditionally the Indian batters have I guess done well on turning surfaces," said Ajaz.

"Obviously they haven't had maybe as much success as they would have liked in this series so far, but they're certainly an opposition that are very, very skilled and not the easiest to come up against."

India assistant coach Abhishek Nayar said the home team's knowledge of the surface will help them counter New Zealand at Wankhede.

"We have to give a lot of credit to New Zealand, the way they have played and the way they have countered spin," he told reporters yesterday.

"A lot of the guys have played a lot of local cricket here and the understanding of what these conditions are and how the pitch is going to pan out."

FOCUS

Stokes' house burgled by masked robbers while family inside

AFP
London

England Test cricket captain Ben Stokes said yesterday a masked gang had burgled his home when his family were inside while he was away in Pakistan for the recent tour.

The 33-year-old said his family did not come to "any physical harm" but a number of "sentimental" items were taken.

Stokes' wife Claire and children Layton and Libby were in the house when the robbery took place during the second Test, with the all-rounder leading England in a match they eventually lost by 152 runs en route to a 2-1 series loss.

"On the evening of Thursday 17th October a number of masked people burgled my home in the Castle Eden area in the North East," said Stokes in a social media post. "They escaped with jewellery, other valuables and a good deal of personal items. Many of those items have real sentimental value for me and my family. They are irreplaceable."

"This is an appeal for any help in finding these people who carried out this act." He added: "By far the worst thing about this crime is that it was carried out whilst my wife and 2 young children were in the house. Thankfully, none of my family came to any physical harm."

"Understandably, however, the experience has had an impact on their emotional and mental state. All we can think about is how much worse this situation could have been."

"I am releasing photographs of some of the stolen items - which I hope may be easily identified - in the hope that we can find the people who are responsible for this. Although we have lost cherished possessions, to be clear, my sole motivation in sharing these photographs is not the recovery of material items. It is to catch the people who did this."

Stokes asked his followers to contact the police if they could help, before saying: "Finally, I want to say thank you to the police service. Both now and whilst I was away in Pakistan, their support for my family has been outstanding," he said.

They continue to work incredibly hard in trying to find these people," Stokes tweeted.



A screenshot of Ben Stokes' 'X' handle showing the England Test captain making a public appeal after his house was burgled by 'masked gang'.

SECOND TEST

Mulder joins run-fest with ton as SA declare at 575-6

Reuters
Chittagong, Bangladesh

South Africa declared their first innings at a daunting 575-6 thanks to Tony de Zorzi's 177 and Wiaan Mulder's unbeaten 105, before the tourists reduced Bangladesh to 38-4 on day two of their second Test yesterday.

Mominul Haque was batting on six with Najmul Hossain Shanto unbeaten on four with Bangladesh trailing by 537 runs when poor light brought play to a close early.

Mulder endured nervy moments and dived into the crease to avoid being run out before his first century in tests, but he got there in the next over with a big six down the ground off spinner Taijul Islam and raised his arms aloft.

With De Zorzi and Tristan Stubbs also getting their maiden centuries, it marked only the second time in test history that three

batsmen had done so in the same innings.

Gerry Gomez, Robert Christian and Clyde Walcott were the first trio, when the West Indies faced India in 1948.

After South Africa's stand-in captain Aiden Markram called time on their innings, Kagiso Rabada gave them the ideal start by removing Shadman Islam for a duck and Zakir Hasan for two before Mahmudul Hasan Joy fell to Dane Paterson for 10.

Nightwatchman Hasan Mahmud was castled by Keshav Maharaj for three, leaving Bangladesh in deep trouble.

Earlier, De Zorzi picked up from where he left off after notching up his century on Tuesday, as South Africa accumulated runs with ease having resumed at 307-2 on a batting-friendly track at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium.

He reached his 150 with a lofted boundary off Taijul and followed it up with another immediately, as the hosts came under pres-

sure early on another hot, humid day on the southeastern coast of Bangladesh.

Bedingham was equally aggressive at the other end and hit a quick-fire 59 but was bowled out by Taijul, who then trapped De Zorzi lbw and removed Kyle Verreynne for a duck shortly before lunch to claim his 14th five-wicket haul. It was expensive, however, as he finished with 5-198.

Senuran Muthusamy made an unbeaten 68 as he combined well with Mulder in another 100-run stand in the afternoon session and help the Proteas go past 500 runs in tests for the first time since 2020.

South Africa are 1-0 up in the two-match series after their seven-wicket victory in Dhaka.

BRIEF SCORES
Bangladesh 38 for 4 (Mahmudul 10, Rabada 2-8, Maharaj 1-4) **trail South Africa 575 for 6 dec** (de Zorzi 177, Stubbs 106, Mulder 105*, Taijul 5-198) **by 537 runs**



South Africa's Wiaan Mulder celebrates after scoring a century during the second day of the second Test against Bangladesh at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong yesterday. (AFP)

McDonald gets contract extension as Australia coach

Sydney: Andrew McDonald has been rewarded for his success as Australia coach with a contract extension which will keep him in the job until the end of 2027, Cricket Australia said yesterday.

The unassuming former test all-rounder took the job in early 2022 at the end of Justin Langer's divisive reign and has since led Australia to a first Twenty20 World Cup triumph and a sixth 50-overs World Cup title.

In test cricket under McDonald, Australia retained the Ashes after a drawn series in England in 2023 and have risen to the top of the world rankings. They are ranked second in both shorter formats.

"I am very fortunate to have an exceptional group of leaders, players, coaches and staff who are fully invested in the ongoing well-



being, success and development of this group," McDonald said in a news release.

"The professionalism, commitment and experience of my fellow coaches and the wider staff have ensured the journey has been extremely successful but just as importantly created a culture of unity, trust and inclusivity.

"International cricket has many challenges for all teams and I am particularly proud how the group, players and staff, across all formats

have navigated those together." The extension means McDonald, who is currently preparing his team for five Tests against India, will lead Australia into a home Ashes series in the 2025-26 season. In 2027, Australia are scheduled to undertake a test tour of India, defend the World Cup title in Southern Africa and host the 150th anniversary test against England in Melbourne.

"Andrew is an outstanding coach and we are thrilled that he has extended his commitment to the Australian men's team," said Ben Oliver, Cricket Australia's Executive General Manager of national teams.

"Andrew has created a performance environment that resonates strongly with the playing group and has produced some outstanding results."

Every year I get offers from European clubs: Afif

SEOUL: Qatar's premier playmaker and newly-minted Asian Player of the Year Akram Afif has said he 'gets offers' from European clubs 'every season'.

For the last five or six years the 28-year-old remains the hottest property across Asia for his dazzling runs for Qatar who successfully defended their Asian Cup title this in February.

Afif scored a hat-trick of goals in the final when Qatar beat Jordan to lift the Asian Cup trophy for the second time in succession.

In an interview with *fifa.com*, Afif candidly admitted he remained the target of European clubs wanting the dynamic Qatari to make a move away from Doha where he plays for former Asian Champions League winners Al Sadd.

"There is no player who doesn't want to play with big clubs in Europe, every year I get offers but if there is something serious they will communicate with my club to proceed with it," Afif told *fifa.com* in an interview posted on their website.

On Wednesday, Afif won the Asian Player of the Year award for the second time but the player with dancing dreadlocks clearly wants more.

"I want to make history, I want to make something big for my life, so my sons and other people will speak about me, what I did for the country, what I did for my club, what I did for myself," he added in the interview.

"Yes, I've won (individual awards) twice but there are others who have won twice, yes I've won the



Asian Cup twice but there are others who won it more than two times so I still haven't done anything, nothing big. "Of course, I'm proud of what I've achieved but I want more, I want to be better than yesterday, so I want to win for the third time, the first one to do that. I want to win the Asian Champions League with my club, there's many things I haven't done. I will do my best every day, starting from tomorrow," he added.

Afif said Qatar can script a turnaround in the third and decisive round of AFC qualification for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

Qatar, the back-to-back AFC Asian Cup champions, are languishing in fourth in their six-team group, with only the top two in the phase receiving automatic World Cup qualification.

"It's true that our situation in World Cup qualification is very

tough. It's not easy, this situation is different to the Asian Cup where you just play seven games and either you win the tournament or you go out in the knockout stage and that's it," Afif told *fifa.com*.

"The qualification for the World Cup is a long-term one, over many months and if you don't qualify (directly) there are also play-offs, so it's like a marathon.

"Of course we are not happy with the points that we have so far, as players we try our best and sometimes we face difficult moments, difficult situations, bad results, it happens.

"This is part of football but the most important thing is how we come back, how we can find wins and make our fans and supporters happy."

Sitting six adrift of section pace-setters IR Iran and Uzbekistan, the Maroons are approaching a critical qualification junction in the

upcoming international window when they host the Uzbeks on 14 November before hopping across to Al Ain for a clash with United Arab Emirates five days later.

"We are trying our best, still we are not out and still we have not qualified; if we win the next two games we are back, maybe we are up to second," Afif said.

"I don't want to think too far ahead, just the next match against Uzbekistan. It's not easy because they are a big team and we respect them. Yes, we won against them on penalties (in the quarter-finals of this year's Asian Cup) but that was eight months ago and everything is different but we will try our best for sure."

The 27-year-old forward is exacting and driven to keep improving. Not content with his status as arguably the greatest Qatari player of all-time, Afif is determined to raise his game to yet another level.

"This (award) is something big for my career, to be the first Qatari player and one of three players to win twice, it's not easy. Imagine being Messi or Ronaldo where they win awards seven or eight times, it's not like that!

"I hope this serves as an inspiration for other Qatari players to also try to win these kind of awards but they need to do a lot of things; to sacrifice, to work hard, to lead. Sometimes they will lose, they will fail, they will get fans angry and receive negative comments but they need to stay strong, try harder and just to work every day."

Turning 28 next month, Afif is



arguably at the peak of his powers with the vision, pace, off-the-ball movement, technique and finishing still as good as they've ever been. Having continually rebuffed

moves abroad, there are hints that he may now see the next logical step towards becoming one of the continent's all-time greats is testing himself at a higher level.

TENNIS

Medvedev loses to Australian Popyrin in Paris

'IT IS THE FIRST TIME I HAVE BEATEN HIM (IN FOUR MEETINGS)'

AFP
Paris

Daniil Medvedev is still searching for his first ATP tournament victory this year after the world number five lost to Australia's Alexei Popyrin for the first time in his career at the Paris Masters yesterday.

Medvedev won the Paris title in 2020 but has not found the indoor tournament to his liking in recent years - the defeat to Popyrin is the third successive time he has gone out in his opening round.

Popyrin, who has been in a rich vein of form this year winning his first Masters tournament in Montreal in August and beating Novak Djokovic in the US Open, edged Medvedev 6-4, 2-6, 7-6 (7/4) in a gripping second round match.

For Popyrin, ranked 24 in the world, it was only his third win over a player in the top five.

"It is the first time I have beaten him (in four meetings)," said Popyrin, who will play the winner of the match between France's Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard and Karen Khachanov of Russia.

"We have had some right old battles in the past and it is a real pleasure to have performed like this this time round."

Medvedev, who has already qualified for the season-ending Masters, fought back twice in the deciding set.

He came back from 4-1 down to force a tie-break and then trailing 4-1 in that he levelled at 4-4.



Australia's Alexei Popyrin celebrates after winning against Russia's Daniil Medvedev at the end of their singles match on day three of the Paris ATP Masters 1000 at the Accor Arena in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

However, with Popyrin leading 5-4, Medvedev double-faulted giving the 25-year-old Australian two match points and he wasted no time in sealing the victory on the first one.

Medvedev is not the first high profile seed to fall at the first hurdle as his compatriot Andrey Rublev and Norway's Casper Ruud have already lost.

"It was a tough match," said Medvedev. "I should have played

better but at the same time, I had my opportunities, and I did not take them.

"It was a very tight match."

Carlos Alcaraz remains in the mix having won his first match on Tuesday and is favoured to take the title after Italian world number one Jannik Sinner withdrew from the tournament due to an intestinal virus.

Alcaraz will play France's Ugo Humbert in the third round, the

French number one breezed past America's Marcos Giron 6-3, 6-2 on Wednesday.

A potential dark horse for the title is Bulgarian eighth seed Grigor Dimitrov who beat Tomas Martin Etcheverry 6-7 (9/11), 6-3, 7-5.

Dimitrov still has a chance of qualifying for the Masters, if he won the Paris title he would move past Djokovic (sixth), Ruud (seventh) and Rublev (eighth).

ANNOUNCEMENT

Doha chosen Padel Asia Headquarters



QNA
Doha

Secretary-General of the Qatar Tennis, Squash, Padel and Badminton Federation **Tariq Zainal** said he was happy with the selection of Doha to permanently host the newly created Padel Asia.

Speaking to Qatar News Agency, Zainal took pride in being elected the first Padel Asia president by the International Padel Federation's 34th General Assembly.

He attributed his election as

Padel Asia President to Qatar's huge efforts to support padel globally, which was evident in Qatar's hosting of the first World Padel Championship in 2021, the first to be staged outside Europe and the Americas.

Qatar will press on its great support to this sport by hosting the World Padel Championship Qatar 2024 for the second time in three years, he said, hailing Qatar as one of the best countries in hosting major events and tournaments.

He added he would work to develop and spread padel across Asia and the Middle East.

PREVIEW

Qatar International Open Taekwondo Championship begins



QNA
Doha

The Qatar International Open Taekwondo Championship begins at Lusail Hall today, with 1,440 players from 40 countries competing across four categories: cadet, juniors, youth, and adults.

The tournament, featuring morning and evening sessions, will run through Saturday with daily awards for winners up for grabs.

Secretary-General of the Qatar Taekwondo, Judo and Karate Federation and Tournament Director Eid al-Muraikhi confirmed full readiness and noted an increase in participants compared to previ-

ous years reflects on the championship's growing popularity. The event grants (GI) category winners 10 classification points, benefiting their international rankings.

Al-Muraikhi highlighted the success of the previous tournament, which set a high standard and posed an organisational challenge for this year's edition. He added Qatar's experience in hosting major events like the Master Judo, Arab Judo, and World Judo Championships, emphasising ongoing discussions with the International Taekwondo Federation to host global events in Qatar.

With over 150 Qatari athletes competing, the tournament reflects strong local engagement, al-Muraikhi said.

FOCUS

2024 MotoGP world title battle reaches Malaysia

Jorge Martin and Italy's Francesco Bagnaia go into battle this weekend at Sepang in Malaysia with the MotoGP world championship crown within the Spaniard's reach.

Martin holds a 17-point lead heading into the penultimate leg of the season as the Pramac Ducati rider attempts to win the title for the first time.

Two-time defending champion Bagnaia, also on a Ducati, has little room for error and knows that his rival can mathematically seal the crown in Malaysia.

More likely is that the title battle goes to the final weekend at Valencia next month. A maximum 74 points are still up for grabs in the season.

At a rainy Thai Grand Prix at Buriram on Sunday, Bagnaia started on pole and took the chequered flag ahead of his rival for his ninth GP win of the season.

Given the wet conditions, Martin was content to settle for second, knowing repeat performances at Sepang and Valencia will be enough to clinch the championship.

Steamy Sepang is threatening to be similar,

with possible rain forecast for the Saturday sprint race and Sunday main event.

Martin suffered a couple of hairy moments in the Buriram wet as he struggled to keep hold of his Ducati, but emerged from a tricky weekend unscathed in the title tussle.

"Trust me, it's really difficult to be Pecco or me at this stage of the championship," the 26-year-old Martin said, referring to Bagnaia. "He's always difficult to beat, he's a great champion."

"For me it's a pleasure to be at this point of the championship battling with him."

SHEIKH JOAAN ATTENDS ANOC GENERAL ASSEMBLY MEETING



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, Senior Vice-President of the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC) and President of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC), attended the ANOC 27th General Assembly meeting held in Cascais, Portugal yesterday. The meeting was attended by Dr Robin Mitchell, President of ANOC, Dr Thomas Bach, President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and representatives from more than 200 National Olympic Committees, as well as officials from the IOC, international sports federations, and the Organising Committees of the Olympic Games. The assembly reviewed reports on ANOC's programmes and activities, along with a presentation on its future plans. Additionally, it discussed reports concerning the recent Paris 2024 Olympics and upcoming Olympic Games. On the sidelines of the ANOC General Assembly, and during the ANOC Awards Ceremony, HE Sheikh Joaan presented the award for Best Men's Team at the Paris 2024 Olympics to the Denmark Handball Team.

The Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) delegation, led by Secretary-General Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain participated in the 27th General Assembly of the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC) in Cascais, Portugal. The first day of the meet, which brought together more than 200 National Olympic Committees, served as a platform for knowledge exchange and discussions on key issues impacting the Olympic Movement.

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar capable of hosting Olympics: world padel chief

'Qatar has played a distinguished role in the development of padel'

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Luigi Carraro, President of the International Padel Federation (FIP), believes Qatar has the capability to host the Olympic Games, given its success in organising major sporting events and its advanced infrastructure.

Speaking at the World Padel Championship, which is currently underway in Doha, Carraro praised the efforts of the Qatar Tennis, Squash, Padel, and Badminton Federation in developing and promoting padel in the region. He noted that Qatar's hosting of the World Padel Championship in 2021 significantly raised the sport's profile and professionalism, and that the current championship is witnessing strong international participation.

Carraro said: "Qatar has always played a distinguished role in the development of padel, particularly through its support for the establishment of the Padel Premier Tour, which held its inaugural tournament, the Qatar Grand Padel Championship, in Doha."

He highlighted the Qatari Federation's fundamental role in hosting numerous high-level international tournaments. Carraro expressed hope that padel will be included in the Olympic Games, mentioning ongoing efforts to train players and organise competitions in anticipation of this inclusion.

He noted the sport's rapid growth worldwide saying: "Our ambition is for padel to become an Olympic sport. We believe in its potential to enter the Olympic programme, especially with our strong relationship with the International Olympic Committee as we work to meet the necessary conditions."

QATAR GO DOWN AGAIN; ARGENTINA, SPAIN CRUISE INTO QUARTERS

Meanwhile, World Champions Argentina and four-time winners Spain were the first to book their places in the quarter-finals of the FIP World Padel Championships, while Qatar went down fighting to Uruguay in their last Group C tie.

Although Uruguay clinched a 2-1 victory over Qatar, home pair Ahmed Alhijji and Mohammed Saadon al-Kuwari impressed with a 3-6, 6-1, 6-3 win against Nicolas Rosas and Ignacio Rosas Etulain in the last of the three



Qatar went down fighting to Uruguay in their last Group C tie.



Luigi Carraro, President of the International Padel Federation.

encounters. Uruguayan pair Martin Araujo de Lizarza and Matias Ilerdia Meyer opened the tie with a strong 6-3, 6-3 win over Qatar's Hassan A. Waly and Jabor al-Mutawa. Higor Ensslin Alves and Diego Ramos put Uruguay 2-0 up defeating Mohamed al-Khanji and Ahmed Hassan 6-2, 6-1.

Earlier, the women's quarter-final lineup was completed with heavyweights Spain, Ar-

gentina and France booking their last eight spots without conceding a set throughout the group stage. The group toppers, along with Italy, who lost only one set in the Group stage, will face off against the best second-placed teams, including Brazil, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Sweden, in the quarter-finals today.

In yesterday's last round of group stage action, Argentina powered past Portugal 3-0 while France achieved a similar clean sweep over Germany.

Brazil also displayed formidable strength against Chile, winning 3-0, while Italy defeated Sweden 2-1 in a closely contested match. Japan secured their first win in Doha by overcoming Uruguay 2-1, while the USA crushed Egypt 3-0. Reigning champions Spain also put on a dominant display, blanking Germany 3-0 to stamp their dominance once again.

In today's quarter-finals, Spain will face Sweden, while France will go up against Portugal. Eight-time champions Argentina are set to take on the Netherlands in another last-eight clash, while Italy will take on Brazil for a place in the semi-finals.

SERIE A

Champions Inter Milan thump Empoli



Inter Milan's forward Lautaro Martinez (left) vies for the ball with Empoli's Mattia Viti during the Italian Serie A match. (AFP)

AFP
Rome

Inter Milan consolidated their second place in Serie A yesterday with a 3-0 away thrashing of 10-man Empoli. Napoli are top of the table, four points clear of Inter after they beat AC Milan 2-0 on Tuesday courtesy of a Romelu Lukaku goal and a sensational strike by Khvicha Kvaratskhelia.

Defending champions Inter overwhelmed Empoli after they were reduced to 10 men on the half hour as Saba Goglichidze walked for a dangerous tackle on Marcus Thuram.

A brace from Davide Frattesi, a deflection and a composed finish in the 50th and 67th minutes put Simone Inzaghi's charges in the driving seat while Lautaro Martinez's 79th minute clincher came after a defensive blunder.

"It was important to win after Napoli's victory," Inter captain Martinez said.

This was a fifth league match without defeat for Inter following their barnstorming 4-4 draw with Juventus at the weekend. After the game Inzaghi said he hadn't been thinking about Empoli or Napoli. "I've been thinking a lot over the last two days about our draw against Juve, there are things that didn't work and we should have won this match," Inter coach Inzaghi admitted.

Juventus can pull to within a point if they beat Parma later. Udi-

nese were beaten 3-2 by promoted Venezia, who trailed 2-0 before Joel Pohjanpalo converted a pair of penalties followed by a strike from Hans Nicolussi Cavaglia to climb off the bottom of the table.

Meanwhile, Napoli manager Antonio Conte can no longer brush off talk of a Scudetto title triumph, a return to European football is still the main objective. After their dismal title defence last season left Napoli without any European action in this campaign, Conte continues to try to balance the expectations at the club.

"Scudetto? No one is hiding. We see realistically what we are doing this year," he said. "After 10 games it has something of the incredible and unexpected, not even the craziest would have predicted it. But we remain with our feet on the ground. We know what our goal is, which is to return to Europe. But there are five or six teams that have the same idea. Winning in Naples would be something incredible. We have given ourselves three years. We are rebuilding something and it takes time."

After such an impressive start, Conte knows it will be hard to stop the Napoli supporters thinking of another title success. "We try to feed the dreams of the fans, but we need to have balance," Conte added. "Our fans followed us with passion even today, it is right that they dream. We have to be prepared when there is some setback. "We want to make the Neapolitan fans proud of this team."

FOOTBALL

Historic AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 wins several awards

The AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 Local Organising Committee (LOC) has received several awards for a historic edition of the continental championship. Both Qatar Tourism and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) recognised the achievements made by Qatar in hosting the tournament earlier this year. The LOC received two Qatar Tourism Awards for Premier Sports Events of the Year and Accessibility Initiative of the Year. The awards were presented to the LOC by Qatar Tourism and Visit Qatar Chairman Saad bin Ali al-Kharji, UN Tourism Executive Director Natalia Bayona, and Regional Director (Middle East) Basma al-Mayman.

At the AFC Annual Awards, the Qatar Football Association (QFA) received the AFC Asian Cup Host Appreciation Award for the tremendous role they played

in delivering a memorable tournament. The Award was presented by Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim al-Khalifa, AFC President, to Jassim Rashid al-Buenain, QFA President.

The AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 was hosted by Qatar in the beginning of 2024, having previously organised the competition twice before, in 1988 and 2011. The tournament, which saw Qatar defend its title on home soil, broke records for overall attendance, digital engagement and press coverage. A total of 86,492 spectators made their way to the iconic Lusail Stadium for the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 final. With that, a record-breaking attendance of 1,509,496 fans was registered for the tournament, surpassing the previous attendance record of 1.04mn set during the 2004 edition hosted by China.



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