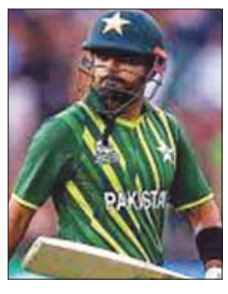
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Pakistan recall Babar Azam for South Africa tour, Sajid Khan out



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Djokovic to begin bid for 25th Grand Slam crown in Brisbane

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TENNIS

World No 1 Sinner leads star-studded line-up for Qatar ExxonMobil Open

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SPOTLIGHT

QOC President meets FIVB chief

Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) President HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani and Secretary-General Jassim bin Rashin al-Buenain met with recently-elected President of the International Volleyball Federation (FIVB) Fabio Azevedo in Doha yesterday.

During the meeting, the development of volleyball in Qatar was discussed as the QOC expressed its commitment to strengthening co-operation with the FIVB and contributing to the delivery of the FIVB Strategic Plan 2032 with the motto "Together as One" empowering Global Volleyball Movement.

HE Sheikh Joaan appreciated Doha's hosting of the Beach Pro Tour Finals, highlighting its significant role in enhancing the sport's popularity and elevating its technical and skill standards across all age groups throughout the Middle East.

Qatar has a strong history in the sport, particularly beach volleyball, with Doha regularly hosting the Beach Pro Tour. Doha has successfully hosted 2024 WAVA U20 Women's Beach Volleyball Championship recently and now is hosting the Beach Pro Tour Finals at Aspire Park.

Qatar's Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan also claimed bronze for Qatar at the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020. President Azevedo was in Doha this week for a number of volleyball initiatives delivered in partnership with the QOC, Qatar Foundation, Qatar Volleyball Association (QVA) and FIVB Volleyball Foundation.



Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) President HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani with International Volleyball Federation (FIVB) President Fabio Azevedo in Doha yesterday.

The 'Women in Sports: Creating Pathways' Seminar was held on December 2 at Education City Stadium. Organised in collaboration with Qatar Foundation, QVA and the FIVB, it featured international administrators, Olympians and Olympic medallists, who came together to discuss important topics surrounding women's roles in sports.

On December 3 a mass participation volleyball event was held for more than 100 children at the Al Gharafa Beach Complex.

Sheikh Joaan honours former presidents of Qatar's national federations



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC), honoured the former presidents of Qatar's national federations when he met them yesterday at the QOC headquarters. The meeting was attended by Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain, Secretary-General of the QOC. This recognition reflects profound appreciation for the former presidents' dedication and exceptional contributions to the development of sports in Qatar as their efforts have been instrumental in elevating the nation's status as a prominent global sports hub. The list of honorees included; Hassan Nasser al-Naimi, former president of the Qatar Golf Association, Khaleel Ibrahim al-Jabir, former president of the Qatar Swimming Association and Muhammed Jaham al-Kuwari, former president of the Qatar Cycling and Triathlon Federation.

BEACH PRO TOUR FINALS

Younousse and Tijan start strong with two wins

Qatar pair are second in Pool A, with two matches remaining

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's duo of Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan delivered a stellar performance winning both their matches on the opening day of the Beach Pro Tour Finals 2024 at Aspire Zone yesterday.

With two consecutive victories in Pool A, the former World No 1 pair now occupy the second spot in the Pool A, with two more matches remaining in the preliminary round.

In their first match against the reigning world champions Ondrej Perusic and David Schweiner of Czech Republic, the Qatari duo fought back after dropping the first set 22-20 as they found their rhythm to claiming the next two sets 21-15 and 15-12.

In their second match in front of the home fans, Younousse and Tijan overturning a first-set deficit to beat Italy's four-time Olympian, Rio 2016 Games silver medallist Paolo Nicolai and his partner Samuele Cottafava 2-1 (16-21, 21-19, 15-9).

The Qatari pair will next take on Paris Olympic silver medallists Nils Ehlers and Clemens Wickler of Germany at 4pm today in their third pool match, before winding up the pool stage with another blockbuster clash against the world's number four team and former chart leaders Stefan Boermans and Yorick de Groot of the Netherlands at 8pm. The biggest Volleyball World Beach Pro Tour event of the year, the 2024 Doha finals sees a really stellar line up of 10 of the best teams in the world, and continues until Saturday, December 7.

In the women's Terese Cannon & Megan Kraft made a solid start to the Doha Finals, producing two straight-set victories on opening day and were the only women's team to do so. Eighth-seeded Cannon and Kraft started their Pool A campaign with an emphatic 2-0 (21-16, 21-10) shutout of fourth-seeded Brazilians Agatha Bednarczuk and Rebecca Cavalcanti. Dominating both in attack and in serving, the two Americans contributed 18 points apiece to the victory. Cannon & Kraft were just as convincing in their second match, when they hammered out a 2-0 (21-18, 21-10) upset of top-seeded Latvians Tina Graudina and Anastasija Samoilova. Cannon added the block as one of the team's big weapons in this match, raising five stuffs towards a 19-point match high.



Qatar's Ahmed Tijan goes for a smash as partner Cherif Younousse looks on during their match against Italy's Paolo Nicolai and Samuele Cottafava on the opening day of the Beach Pro Tour Finals 2024 at Aspire Zone yesterday.

The other two Pool A matches were both pushed to tie-breaker resolutions. First, Tina and Anastasija opened their campaign with a 2-1 (19-21, 22-20, 15-11) comeback against 10th-seeded Italians Valentina Gottardi and Reka Orsi Toth. Orsi Toth was on fire in attack with 21 points and from the serving line with five aces. Anastasija also spiked 21 points in offence while Tina produced six kill blocks towards their success, facilitated by abundant Italian errors.

Agatha & Rebecca suffered a second defeat yesterday, this time at the hands of fifth-seeded Xue Chen & Xia Xinyi of China. Xue's impenetrable block produced seven kill blocks and her serve delivered four aces, while Xia's offensive effort achieved a match-high 25 points towards a 2-1 (18-21, 21-14, 15-12) comeback victory.

Four different teams came up with one win each in Pool B yesterday, while young Spanish Olympians Daniela Alvarez & Tania Moreno conceded two defeats.

After a 2-1 (21-16, 18-21, 15-9) battle, third-seeded Katja Stam & Raisa Schoon of the Netherlands got back at the Spaniards for the Paris Olympic eighth final defeat. Stam was the best scorer of the match with 22 points.

At the same time on centre court, Paris 2024 silver medallists Melissa Humana-Paredes & Brandie Wilkerson of Canada, seeded ninth, squeezed out a narrow 2-1 (16-21, 21-13, 17-15) comeback against second-seeded Germans Svenja Muller & Cinja Tillmann. Later in the day, the German duo bounced back with a 2-0 (21-18, 21-16) win over seventh-seeded Alvarez & Moreno. In each of the two games, Muller produced a 25-point match high, including four blocks and two aces.

QATAR MASTERS CHESS

Mahdavi posts second successive win, Arjun held

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Teenaged Iranian FIDE Master Reza Mahdavi yesterday posted his second successive win as he beat Mexico's Sion Radamantys Galaviz Medina on day two of the at Qatar Masters at Aspire Zone Hall.

The 16-year-old Iranian, who tops the rankings after round two, on Tuesday stunned Nodirbek Abdusattorov of Uzbekistan for his first win in Doha. Mahdavi leads a group of 16 players with 2 points after the second round.

Top seed Arjun Erigaisi of India shared points against Murtas Kazhgaleyev of Kazakhstan. On Tuesday, Arjun beat Mukhammadali Abdurakhmonov of Uzbekistan. Recently Erigaisi made history by becoming only the second Indian, after the legendary Vishwanathan Anand, and only the 16th in the world to breach the elite 2800 ELO rating barrier.

Abdusattorov, ranked 6th in the world, yesterday drew with UAE's Omran al-Hosani, ranked 135th as both picked up half points each.

Iranian GM Parham Maghsoodloo and compatriot FIDE Master Artin Ashraf shared points on day two of the tournament being hosted by Qatar Chess Association (QCA). Qatar International Master Husain Aziz yesterday lost to Uzbekistan's Abdimalik Abdisalimov, ranked 35th. Also yesterday, UAE's Grandmaster AR Saleh Salem beat Poland's Oliwia Kiolbasa. Hamad al-Tamimi, Executive Director of QCA and Tournament Director, expressed his delight after witnessing 'strong competition' in what is the fourth edition of the hugely popular FIDE tournament. The event has attracted a star line-up of players, including 50 international masters.

Al-Tamimi highlighted several key matches yesterday, such as the clash between top-ranked Erigaisi and Kazakh player Kazhgaleyev, as well as the encounter between Egypt's Adham Fawzi and Russian Andrey Esipenko thrilled those watching live action. "Despite some surprise results, including the loss of world number six Abdusattorov on Tuesday, the tournament has showcased high-level chess," al-Tamimi said yesterday.

Al-Tamimi thanked the Ministry of Sports and Youth for their support in organising the event. He also thanked the Ministry of Education and Higher Education for their involvement in the chess project in schools, which aims to promote the sport among young people.

Meanwhile, Qatari national team player Khaled al-Jumaat, who recently won the Arab Championship, is participating in the International B Championship being staged on the sidelines of the Qatar Masters. Khalid said he anticipates tough competition but is optimistic about his 'performance' and hopes 'to improve his international ranking'.



A young fan makes a ceremonial move before India's Arjun Erigaisi's (left) match against Murtas Kazhgaleyev of Kazakhstan at the Qatar Masters in Doha yesterday. Mohammed al-Mudahka, President of the Qatar Chess Association is also in the picture.

CRICKET

FOCUS

Taijul takes five as Bangladesh level series with Windies

'It's a great feeling to win a Test match abroad which we don't often do'

AFP
Kingston, Jamaica

Taijul Islam snared five wickets for the 15th time in a Test innings to lead Bangladesh to a series-levelling 101-run victory over the West Indies on the fourth evening of the second and final Test at Sabina Park on Tuesday.

After Jaker Ali's Test-best innings of 91 lifted the tourists to 268 all out in their second innings and left the home team with a daunting victory target of 287, left-arm spinner Islam broke the back of the Caribbean side's effort with five for 50 as they were dismissed for 185 in the day's final session.

Fast bowler Nahid Rana, whose maiden five-wicket haul in the first innings pulled Bangladesh back into contention, had the satisfaction of administering the final rites when he yorked last man Shamar Joseph for his only wicket of the innings.

"It's a great feeling to win a Test match abroad which we don't often do and all the boys really put in a tremendous effort," said player-of-the-match Islam.

Seamers Taskin Ahmed and Hasan Mahmud took two wickets each with Taskin emerging as the leading wicket-taker in the brief series with 11 victims to his name.

Kavem Hodge topscored for the West Indies with 55, while captain Kraigg Brathwaite played with unusual adventure at the top of the order in contributing 43 off 63 deliveries.

But they lost wickets at regular intervals and eventually succumbed in just 50 overs as Bangladesh swiftly avenged the 201-run mauling they endured in the first Test in Antigua a week earlier.



Kraigg Brathwaite, the West Indies captain, and Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Bangladesh's skipper, pose with the trophy after the Test series ended in a 1-1 draw. *(@windiescricket)*

"We wanted to be positive and I thought we started well but obviously we couldn't carry it through to the end of the day," said a rueful Brathwaite.

This was Bangladesh's first Test victory in the West Indies since their 2-0 sweep over a depleted Caribbean side in 2009.

Earlier Ali's belligerent innings, which occupied 106 deliveries and was embellished by eight fours and five sixes, tilted the balance heavily in favour of Bangladesh as the highest successful run-chase in a Test at Sabina Park was the 212 achieved by the West Indies over Sri Lanka in 2003.

Such was the extent of the 26-year-old right-hander's dominance of the morning that he contributed 62 of the 75 runs added by the tourists after resuming at the overnight position of 193-5.

Alzarri Joseph and Kemar Roach took three wickets each for the West Indies, Joseph ending Ali's quest for a maiden Test hundred when he was last out, caught at deep midwicket a half-hour before lunch.

BRIEF SCORES
Bangladesh 164 (Shadman Islam 64; Jayden Seales 4-5, Shamar Joseph 3-69) **and 268** (Jaker Ali 91; Kemar Roach 3-36, Alzarri Joseph 3-77) **v West Indies 146** (Nahid Rana 5-61) **and 185** (Kavem Hodge 55; Taijul Islam 5-50)
Result: Bangladesh won by 101 runs

ANNOUNCEMENT

Pakistan recall Babar Azam for South Africa tour, Sajid Khan out

AFP
Lahore, Pakistan

Pakistan recalled former skipper **Babar Azam** yesterday for the away Test series and white-ball matches against South Africa starting next week, but there was no place for spinner Sajid Khan.

The 30-year-old star batsman Azam was dropped following defeat in the first Test against England in October and rested for the ongoing limited-over series against Zimbabwe.

Pakistan will play three Twenty20 internationals in South Africa starting from December 10, followed by three one-day matches and two Tests.

Fast bowler Mohammad Abbas also returns to the Test side after last playing in 2021.

Off-spinner Sajid misses out despite taking 19 wickets in the 2-1 home Test series win over England, with selectors taking into consideration the less spin-friendly pitches in South Africa.

"We have adopted a horses for courses policy to ensure squads are well-balanced and leaving out Sajid was an extremely difficult decision," Aaqib Javed, a senior member of the selection committee, said in a Pakistan Cricket Board statement.

Sajid's spin partner Noman Ali, who took 20 wickets against England, is the only spinner for the Tests in Centurion and Cape Town. The first Test starts on December 26.

Javed said fast bowler Shaheen Shah Afridi has been picked only for the white-ball matches to manage his workload.

Opener Fakhar Zaman is still out because he has yet to regain form and match fitness, said Javed.

Pakistan squads for South Africa tour:
TESTS: Shan Masood (captain), Saud Shakeel, Aamer Jamal, Abdullah Shafique, Babar Azam, Haseebullah Khan, Kamran Ghulam, Khurram Shahzad, Mir Hamza, Mohammad Abbas, Mohammad Rizwan, Naseem Shah, Noman Ali, Saim Ayub, Salman Ali Agha
ODIs: Mohammad Rizwan (captain), Abdullah Shafique, Abrar Ahmed, Babar Azam, Haris Rauf, Kamran Ghulam, Mohammad Hasnain, Muhammad Irfan Khan, Naseem Shah, Saim Ayub, Salman Ali Agha, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Sufiyan Muqeem, Tayyab Tahir, Usman Khan
T20Is: Mohammad Rizwan (captain), Abrar Ahmed, Babar Azam, Haris Rauf, Jahandad Khan, Mohammad Abbas Afridi, Mohammad Hasnain, Mohammad Irfan Khan, Omair Bin Yousuf, Saim Ayub, Salman Ali Agha, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Sufiyan Muqeem, Tayyab Tahir, Usman Khan.



SPOTLIGHT

England unchanged for second NZ Test

Reuters
Wellington

Ollie Pope is set to continue as England wicketkeeper in the absence of an injured Jordan Cox, with the visitors naming an unchanged playing eleven for the second of their three-Test series against New Zealand.

Pope took up wicketkeeping duties after Cox fractured his thumb during a net session. Replacement wicketkeeper Ollie Robinson has flown to New Zealand, but the team have decided to put their faith in Pope for the second Test.

Middle-order batter Pope, who previously served as wicketkeeper when Ben Foakes fell ill in 2022, impressed behind the stumps in the first test, taking two catches.

He also scored 77 in the first innings.

England, who won the first test by eight wickets, will look to win their first test series away from home in two years when the second test gets underway in Wellington tomorrow.

England playing XI: Zak Crawley, Ben Duckett, Jacob Bethell, JJoe Root, Harry Brook, Ollie Pope (wicketkeeper), Ben Stokes (captain), Chris Woakes, Gus Atkinson, Brydon Carse, Shoaib Bashir.

Bethell receives contract upgrade after impressive debut
England batter Jacob Bethell has been awarded a central contract upgrade, signing a two-year extension until September 2026, the country's cricket board (ECB) said yesterday.

Bethell, who made his Test debut last week during England's eight-wicket win over New Zealand in Christchurch, has been upgraded from a development contract that the 21-year-old received last month.


Jacob Bethell

Against New Zealand, Bethell scored 10 in the first innings but smashed his maiden half-century in the second innings, helping England take a 1-0 lead in the three-match test series.

The ECB has also handed two-year contract extensions to seamers Jofra Archer, Brydon Carse, and Matthew Potts, running until September 2026.

England's central contracts
Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Jacob Bethell, Harry Brook, Jos Buttler, Brydon Carse, Matthew Potts, Joe Root, Jamie Smith, Ben Stokes, Mark Wood.
England's one-year central contracts: Rehan Ahmed, Jonny Bairstow, Shoaib Bashir, Zak Crawley, Sam Curran, Ben Duckett, Will Jacks, Jack Leach, Liam Livingstone, Ollie Pope, Adil Rashid, Phil Salt, Olly Stone, Josh Tongue, Reece Topley, Chris Woakes.
England development contracts: Josh Hull, John Turner.

COMMENT

Rahul ready to bat anywhere for India in Adelaide Test

AFP
Adelaide

KL Rahul said yesterday he will bat "wherever" as India face a conundrum in the second Test against Australia with the expected return of Rohit Sharma and Shubman Gill.

The 54-Test veteran opened in the first Test at Perth, which India won by 295 runs, alongside Yashasvi Jaiswal in the absence of skipper Rohit, who stayed home for the birth of his second child.

Number three Gill also missed the match with a thumb injury, but both are set to return for the day-night clash starting in Adelaide tomorrow, leaving selectors with a headache.

Rahul and Jaiswal shared a 201-run second innings opening partnership in Perth that proved pivotal in securing victory with both again set to pad-up.

Devdutt Padikkal and Dhruv Jurel appear likely to make way for Rohit and Gill, but who bats where remains to be seen.

"I've been told, but I've also been told not to share it," Rahul told reporters when asked if he knew what position he would be batting in Adelaide.

"I just want to be in the playing XI. Fit me in wherever. I want to go out there and bat and play for the team.

"Luckily for me I have batted in different positions," he added.

"Whether I am batting top of the order or in the middle order, if I can manage the first 30-40 balls at start, everything then seems like regular batting, that's what I try to focus on."

Rahul scored a patient 26 in the first innings in Perth then a solid 77 in the stand with Jaiswal, who slammed 161.

While India head into the second match of the five-Test series full of confidence, they have less experience of pink ball cricket than Australia.

And Adelaide has been a successful venue for the home side, who have won all seven day-night Tests they have played there, including against India in 2020-21 when the visitors were bundled out for 36.



India's batsman K L Rahul is seen during a press conference in Adelaide yesterday. ***(@BCCI)***



India's Test captain Rohit Sharma throws the ball during a net session in Adelaide yesterday. *(@BCCI)*

Adelaide pitch 'best in the world'
Nathan Lyon, Australia's premier spinner, has hailed the Adelaide Oval pitch as the 'best cricket wicket in the world' and expects plenty of spin in the upcoming day-night Test.


Nathan Lyon

"I love Adelaide. Adelaide's my favourite venue," Lyon said yesterday. "I love playing cricket here. I think the whole atmosphere here with the crowds, the whole town, the whole city and then with the pitch here and the conditions here, I really enjoy bowling here for the spin and bounce. So red ball, pink ball, white ball. I just love playing cricket here," Lyon said at the pre-match news conference.

"Red ball, white ball, pink ball, it is exactly the same. Not overly challenging.

"I think it is a great venue to play spin. I think what Damien (Hough, head curator) does here is he produces a great wicket that has got enough in it and it is challenging for both bat and ball," he added.

"If you are good enough with the bat, you will score runs. If you are good enough with the ball, you will hopefully create a few chances along your way.

"So I think this is probably the best cricket wicket in the world, if I am being honest with you. So I am expecting it to be pretty helpful for spin and bowling as well," Lyon said.

AL RAYYAN NATIONAL PENINSULA ARABIAN HORSE SHOW

Nabeel Al Rayyan, Salomeh claim top honours

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Nabeel Al Rayyan of Al Marroona Stud won gold in the Stallions 11+ Years Old class while Salomeh, owned by Abdullah Salem al-Hajri, claimed top honours in Mares 11+ Years Old category as Qatar Racing & Equestrian Club's (QREC) 1st Al Rayyan National Peninsula Arabian Horse Show 2024 concluded with some majestic and graceful performances of horses from Qatari farms and individual owners.

The third and final day of the show at the outdoor arena of Qatar Equestrian Federation also saw Dhari Alzobair of Fuwairit Stud win gold in Stallions 7-10 Years Old category. RB Suhail of Al Jaham won gold in Stallions 4-6 Years Old category. Ehsan Al Shahania, owned by Saef Mohammed al-Hajri, was best in Mares 7-10 Years Old category while Attar Al Arab, owned by Mohamed Jassim KA al-Kuwari, won gold in Mares 4-6 Years Old class.

RESULTS

Mares 4-6 Years Old: Gold: Attar Al Arab (Owned by Mohamed Jassim KA al-Kuwari); **Silver:** Farha Ainain (Owned by Abdulla Jassim Mohammed al-Buainain); **Bronze:** Hawa Al Rayyan (Owned by Ali Abdullah AA al -Kaabi).

Mares 7-10 Years Old: Gold: Ehsan Al Shahania (Owned by Saef Mohammed al-Hajri); **Silver:** Shahrazad Al Waab (Owned by Abdulla Saeed MA al-Hajri); **Bronze:** Anood Jathab of Jathan Arabians.

Mares 11+ Years Old: Gold: Salomeh (Owned by Abdullah Salem al-Hajri); **Silver:** Tbrah Al Shaqab of Al Sraiya Stud; **Bronze:** Smissma Al Nasser (Owned by Mesfer Mohammed MA al-Hajri).

Stallions 4-6 Years Old: Gold: RB Suhail of Al Jaham Stud; **Silver:** Afas Al Rayyan of Al Sraiya Stud; **Bronze:** Al Adeed Laffan (Owned by Jassim Kayed M al-Muhannadi).

Stallions 7-10 Years Old: Gold: Dhari Alzobair of Fuwairit Stud; **Silver:** Hakeem Al Waab (Owned by Mrs. Khulud Abdulla AA al-Rabeea); **Bronze:** Masrour Al Waab of Al Hamad Stud.

Stallions 11+ Years Old: **Gold:** Nabeel Al Rayyan of Al Marroona Stud; **Silver:** Mohaned Al Waab (Owned by Abdullah Saad Hilal al-Mohannadi); **Bronze:** Haisam Al Maha of Al Yasra Stud.



Nabeel Al Rayyan of Al Marroona Stud won gold in the Stallions 11+ Years Old championship class on the third and final day of Qatar Racing & Equestrian Club's 1st Al Rayyan National Peninsula Arabian Horse Show at QEF's outdoor arena yesterday.

TENNIS

Djokovic to begin bid for 25th Grand Slam in Brisbane

'I'm excited to be kicking off my Australian swing at Brisbane International'

AFP
Brisbane

Novak Djokovic will begin his 2025 season and bid for an 11th Australian Open title at the Brisbane International, it was announced yesterday, with the Serbian superstar now coached by Andy Murray.

The 37-year-old is targeting a record 25th Grand Slam crown after failing to add to the total during a frustrating 2024, although he did win Olympic singles gold in Paris.

The ATP-WTA event runs December 29-January 5, with the Australian Open to begin on January 12. "I'm excited to be kicking off my Australian swing at the Brisbane International and to compete again at Pat Rafter Arena," said Djokovic.

"I am looking forward to experiencing the incredible support from the Australian fans and making this tournament one to remember."

Should he win, it would be his 100th career title, just the third man in the Open era behind Jimmy Connors (109) and Roger Federer (103) to achieve the feat.

Djokovic was beaten in the Australian Open semi-finals this year by eventual champion Jannik Sinner with his failure to lift another major leaving him tied with Margaret Court on a record 24 Grand Slam singles crowns.



In a bid to surpass her in Melbourne, he has teamed up with long-time rival and the now-retired Murray.

The Brisbane tournament will also mark the return to competitive tennis of Australian Nick Kyrgios, who has played just one ATP Tour singles match in two years after knee, foot and wrist injuries.

Other men's players starting their year in Brisbane include Grigor Dimitrov, Holger Rune, Frances Tiafoe and Matteo Berrettini.

Reigning Australian Open women's champion and world number one Aryna Sabalenka had previously announced she too would start her season at the Queensland Tennis Centre.

Three other top-10 players including Jessica Pegula, Emma Navarro and Daria Kasatkina will also play, as will former Brisbane champion Victoria Azarenka.

A host of other players have opted to start their year at the mixed-teams United Cup in Sydney and Perth, including women's world number two Iga Swiatek, Coco Gauff and Jasmine Paolini.

Men's world number two Alexander Zverev and fourth-ranked Taylor Fritz have also signed up for the United Cup.

CYCLING

Evenepoel says 'long journey' ahead after postal van collision

AFP
Paris

Double Olympic road cycling champion Remco Evenepoel said yesterday he faces "a long journey" after breaking a hand, ribs and shoulder blade in a collision with the door of a postal van during a training ride.

The 24-year-old Belgian, who won road race and time-trial gold at this year's Paris Olympics, was rushed to hospital on Tuesday after striking the open door of a stationary van in Brussels while preparing for the new season.

"After a scary accident on training yesterday, I underwent surgery last night and everything went well," Evenepoel wrote on social media. The message was accompanied by a picture of Evenepoel in his hospital bed, with his right arm in a sling.

"With a fracture to my rib, shoulder blade, hand, contusions to my lungs and a dislocation of my right clavicle which has caused all surrounding ligaments to be torn, it's going to be a long journey," he said.

"But I'm fully focused on my recovery and I'm determined to come back stronger, step by step. "The comeback starts now," he added. Later yesterday, Evenepoel spoke in further detail about the incident to Belgian television. "The accident happened quite quickly," Evenepoel told VTM. "I saw the woman from Bpost was opening her door. I managed to distance myself but I hit the door and I was catapulted to the other side of the road.

"I will need time to recover. The first month I won't be able to do anything pretty much.

"Then we'll measure the damage," he added.

Evenepoel is no stranger to dramatic crashes and in April came off his bike into a concrete ditch in a during the Tour of the Basque Country.

"It hurts much more than after my fall at the Tour of the Basque Country," he said.

"It hit hard especially in my collar bone."

The boss of Evenepoel's Soudal Quick-Step team, Patrick Lefevere, said the Belgian rider, one of the world's highest paid cyclists, had called him shortly after the fall. Witnesses to the accident said Evenepoel, a former international youth footballer, lay stricken and ashen-faced but conscious, with the top tube of his bike frame broken in two by the force of the impact.

Quick-Step said he would be off the bike for at least the next two weeks, but it was not immediately clear what impact the injuries would have on his racing plans for next season.

In 2025, Evenepoel plans to race the one-day races Milan-San Remo in March and Liege-Bastogne-Liege the following month, as well as July's Tour de France and possibly the Giro d'Italia, which starts in May.

Evenepoel thanked the emergency services, medical staff and those who first arrived on the scene after the accident, while also expressing his support for the postal worker.

CHESS WORLD CUP

Ding, teen challenger tied past halfway mark

AFP
Singapore

Defending world chess champion Ding Liren and teenage challenger Gukesh Dommaraju played to a fifth consecutive draw yesterday, with neither player taking the lead after eight games.

Both players were deadlocked at 4.0 points each in the first-ever World Championship encounter between two Asian players, as the 14-match tournament went past the halfway mark.

For the second game in a row, Gukesh appeared to give up a strong position during the middlegame by playing a series of inaccurate moves.

However, the Indian teenager rejected Ding's offer of a draw after 41 moves and played some attacks during the endgame in an attempt to get a result.

But the Chinese grandmaster fended off the offensive and the players eventually shook hands on another draw after 51 moves.

Gukesh admitted that he was not aware of his perilous position when he rejected the draw and immediately put Ding under check.



Defending world chess champion Ding Liren from China and teenage challenger Gukesh Dommaraju from India played to a fifth consecutive draw yesterday.

"I didn't think I was in much danger," said the 18-year-old, who played with the black pieces.

"I always thought that in my position, maybe I would have some chances but it was just a misjudgement of the position."

Ding for his part rued his inability to press home his advantage.

"Today during the game, I didn't realise that I was winning at some point," said the 32-year-old.

"I think he missed some important details which let me get back into the game but before that he was totally outplaying me again.

"Actually I didn't feel too nervous during the game but I felt uncomfortable out of the open."

Game nine of the series will take place at Resorts World Sentosa today.

Ding, who beat Russia's Ian Nepomniachtchi to become the world champion in Kazakhstan last year, defeated Gukesh in 42 moves in the opening game.

But the Indian teenager drew level by winning game three as Ding lost on timing after he was unable to play his first 40 moves in 120 minutes.

The first player to get 7.5 points will be declared the winner.

Tie breaks will take place if the players are tied on seven points after 14 games.

At his age, Gukesh is the youngest player in history to compete in the World Championship and he is looking to surpass Garry Kasparov as the youngest undisputed world chess champion.

MOTORSPORT

Dutch Formula 1 Grand Prix to end in 2026: Organisers

AFP
The Hague

The home Grand Prix of Formula One's Dutch World Champion Max Verstappen will come to an end in 2026, organisers said yesterday.

"We have decided to go out on a high with two more incredible Dutch Grands Prix in 2025 and 2026," GP director Robert van Overdijk said in a statement.

The Dutch Grand Prix has been held since 2021 in the windswept seaside resort of Zandvoort on the North Sea coast. Hundreds of thousands of orange-clad Dutch F1 fans cram into the small town to cheer on their hero Verstappen who, until this year, won every race on his home track.

This year's edition saw a minor speed bump on his drive towards the World Championship, as he endured a miserable weekend in changeable weather, losing out to McLaren's Lando Norris.

Van Overdijk told national broadcaster NOS said there were "various options on the table" to continue holding the Dutch GP, as Formula One looks to expand into new markets.

"We could have rotated with other circuits, there was also the possibility to continue annually," said Van Overdijk.

But in the end, the decision was taken to end the race after the 2026 edition, he said.

"We're going out with a bang. Of course it also makes us a bit sad, but more than anything else, we're proud."

He acknowledged the role that Verstappen - "in my mind the greatest Dutch sporting star ever" - had played in the success of the Grand Prix.

"In 2026, we will close an iconic chapter in Dutch sporting history. Max Verstappen has of course been a big driving force in that," he said.

"Above all, let's enjoy the two race weekends we have left."

The 2025 Dutch Grand Prix will take place from August 29-31.

"I am incredibly grateful for the work that the team at the Dutch Grand Prix have done in recent years," said Stefano Domenicali, President and CEO of Formula 1.

HORSE RACING

Al-Kaabi's Roma lands Zekreet Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha


Jockey Szczepan Mazur guides Roma to Zekreet Cup win yesterday. **PICTURE:** *Juhaim*

Carrying the colours of Sharida bin Nasser bin Sharida al-Kaabi, the Hamad al-Jehani-trained Roma came with a strong run in the straight to land the Zekreet Cup at the Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.

Under jockey Szczepan Mazur, the five-year-old mare got into top gear and knuckled down close home to win the 1200m Local Purebred Arabian Handicap by 1¾ lengths. Abdulaziz Saleh al-Jaber's Habes came second. Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi, QREC Racing Manager, presented the trophies to the winners.

The eight-race 10th Al Rayyan Race Meeting witnessed dazzling performances with jockeys Mazur, Lukas Delozier and Gavin Matt Ryan each sealing a double. Trainers Hamad al-Jehani, Jassim Ghazali and Julian Smart all completed a double on the card.

Mazur had claimed his first win of the day when he guided al-Jehani-trained Pockett Rockett to Thoroughbred Handicap 55-75 (Class 5) title.

Delozier won the Thoroughbred Graduation Plate (Class 4) with Ahmed al-Jehani-trained Imaginary World after guiding Mastoora to a stunning 21-length win in Local Purebred Arabian Novice Plate (Fillies & Mares – Class 5).

Ryan won titles with Nadiraha (Local Thoroughbred Handicap 0-50 – Class 5) and Al Mosayterah (Thoroughbred Maiden Plate – Class 6). The Thoroughbred Handicap 0-80 – Class 4 for Qatari riders saw Youssef Lachhab piloting Jassim Ghazali-trained Meraj to a comfortable win. Action got underway with Marco Casamento steering Dawn Vega to Thoroughbred Maiden Plate – Class 6 triumph.

RESULTS 10TH AL RAYYAN RACE MEETING – ZEKREET CUP

WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

1 - Zekreet Cup - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap 75-95 (Class 3)
Roma, Hamad al-Jehani, Szczepan Mazur
2 - Thoroughbred Graduation Plate (Class 4)
Imaginary World, Ahmed al-Jehani, Lukas Delozier
3 - Thoroughbred Handicap 0-80 (Qatari Rider Race) (Class 4)
Meraj, Jassim Ghazali, Youssef Lachhab
4 - Local Purebred Arabian Novice Plate (Fillies & Mares) (Class 5)
Mastoora, Rudy Andre Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier
5 - Thoroughbred Handicap 55-75 (Class 5)
Pockett Rockett, Hamad al-Jehani, Szczepan Mazur
6 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap 0-50 (Class 5)
Nadiraha, Julian Colin Smart, Gavin Matt Ryan
7 - Purebred Arabian Handicap 45-65 (Class 6)
Al Mosayterah, Julian Colin Smart, Gavin Matt Ryan
8 - Thoroughbred Maiden Plate (Class 6)
Dawn Vega, Jassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento

TENNIS

World No 1 Sinner to take part in Qatar ExxonMobil Open

By Sports Reporter
Doha



The Qatar Tennis Federation has announced that Italian sensation Jannik Sinner, the reigning World No. 1, will compete in the Qatar ExxonMobil Open 2025. The tournament, now elevated to an ATP 500 event, will take place from February 17 to 22 at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex, featuring some of the biggest stars in the sport.

Sinner, a dominant force in men's tennis, has solidified his place in history with an extraordinary 2024 season.

At just 23 years old, he claimed eight titles, including landmark victories at the Australian Open and the US Open, becoming the first Italian to win two Grand Slam tournaments. He capped the year with his maiden ATP Finals title and secured three prestigious ATP Masters 1000 crowns in Miami, Cincinnati, and Shanghai, further cementing his legacy as one of the modern game's brightest stars.

This year's Qatar ExxonMobil Open is particularly significant as it transitions from an ATP 250 to an ATP 500 event, a historic upgrade after 32 years of hosting world-class tennis in Doha.

Tournament Director Karim Alami said: "We are excited to welcome Jannik Sinner to the Qatar ExxonMobil Open 2025. His presence, alongside a lineup of top players, will undoubtedly enhance the level of competition and offer fans an exceptional display of world-class tennis. Sinner's remarkable achievements and skill set the stage for a thrilling event."

Alami also highlighted the tournament's progression to ATP 500 status as a reflection of Qatar's dedication to enhancing its global tennis profile and promoting the sport within the region. He extended his gratitude to ExxonMobil Qatar and other sponsors for their unwavering support. Rashid al-Hajri, Vice-President and Public and Government Affairs Manager for ExxonMobil Qatar said: "As title sponsor, ExxonMobil Qatar is honoured to partner with the Qatar Tennis Federation to create a remarkable experience for both fans and players."

Tickets for the Qatar ExxonMobil Open 2025 are now available www.qatartennis.org

FOOTBALL

FIFA Club World Cup draw today amid apathy, legal threats

Players have spoken of frustration at an ever-lengthening fixture schedule

AFP
Miami


The MetLife Stadium in New Jersey will host the final of next year's FIFA Club World Cup. *(AFP)*

The draw for the expanded FIFA Club World Cup takes place in Miami today, offering a first glimpse into the fine detail of a tournament that has been viewed with indifference or even outright hostility across parts of the football world.

Thirty-two star-studded club teams will battle it out in gleaming state-of-the-art arenas in what is effectively a curtain-raiser for the 2026 World Cup taking place a year later in the United States, Canada and Mexico. In theory, the new-look competition ought to be an enticing prospect that sells itself: a month-long football festival, the first large-scale club tournament to feature teams from all corners of the globe.

Yet for many, FIFA president Gianni Infantino's passion project is a tournament too far, an unwelcome addition to an already crowded global calendar that exhausted players say has pushed them close to breaking point. The loudest antipathy towards the tournament, and FIFA, has come from Europe.

In October, an umbrella grouping of top European leagues, together with the players' union, FIFPro, filed a legal complaint to the European Commission accusing FIFA of abusing its position over its handling of the international fixture calendar.

Javier Tebas, the chief of Spain's La Liga, has been one of the Club World Cup's most outspoken critics, telling Infantino in October to cancel the tournament, citing apathy from broadcasters and opposition from clubs. "Mr President, you know you have not sold the broadcast rights for the Club World Cup, you know you have not sold any sponsorship rights," said Tebas. "Scrap the Club World Cup. It is not needed by the players, the clubs or FIFA."

However yesterday, FIFA announced it had reached a deal with British streaming service *DAZN* to broadcast all 63 games free to view worldwide. A source close to the negotiations said the contract was worth around 1bn euros.

Players though have spoken of frustration at an ever-lengthening fixture schedule that leaves them with fewer opportunities for rest and recuperation. Manchester City and Spain star Rodri, the winner of this year's Ballon d'Or, warned in September that players were "close" to striking over the calendar, citing the demands imposed by this season's expanded UEFA Champions League followed by the Club World Cup. "If it keeps this way we will have no other option," Rodri said of possible industrial action. "It is something that worries us."

FIFA though has pushed back at the criticism forcefully, insisting its calendar was approved by the FIFA Council following consultation from all continents including Europe as well as FIFPro and league bodies. The world football body also took aim at leagues in Europe who have opposed the tournament, accusing them of "acting with commercial self-interest and hypocrisy" while preferring a calendar "filled with friendlies and summer tours."

Infantino meanwhile has brushed off the criticism, insisting the launch of the expanded club tournament will usher in a new era for world football. "The FIFA Club World Cup next year will bring the magic of a national team (FIFA) World Cup into the realm of club football, and this tournament will be the start of something historic, something that will change our sport for the better, and for future generations, who will come to love it as much as we do," Infantino said last month.

The opportunity to embrace the historic opportunity touted by FIFA ultimately tempted *DAZN*, whose chief executive officer Shay Segev called the broadcasting arrangement a "groundbreaking deal".

The tournament itself will take place from June 15 to July 13, 2025, with the opening match hosted by Miami's Hard Rock Stadium and the final taking place at the MetLife Stadium in New York – the venue for the 2026 World Cup final. Europe will provide the largest contingent of teams, with 12 sides including Real Madrid, Manchester City, Bayern Munich, Paris Saint-Germain and Inter Milan taking part.

South America will field six teams, with Africa, Asia and the CONCACAF region receiving four slots each. Oceania will be represented by New Zealand's Auckland City, while host nation the US has an additional slot, controversially awarded to Lionel Messi's Inter Miami despite the team being bundled out in the first round of the MLS Cup playoffs this year.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

Ravshan score shock win over Wakrah

By Sports Reporter
Al Wakrah

FC Ravshan stunned Qatar's Al Wakrah 2-0 to end their AFC Champions League Two Group A campaign with a solitary win yesterday. The Tajikistan side bowed out of the tournament after finishing third in the standings with Al Wakrah – on four points – having already confirmed their knockout stage spot ahead of the match.

Al Wakrah got in the groove quickly with Moayed Hassan's long range attempt having to be parried away by Ravshan keeper Yevhen Hrytsenko. The Qatar side tested Ravshan again in the 15th minute after Alexander Scholz sent a deep lob to Moayed Hassan, whose volleyed attempt from inside the area was denied by Hrytsenko. Ravshan's efforts barely troubled the home side with Sorbon Ghiyosov, Muhammadjon Rahimov and Masrur Kiyomidinov all failing to find the target from distance.

Both teams toiled in front of goal with Al Wakrah's Omar al-Osad seeing his shot from above the box blocked, while Mawutor failed to test the Iraqi side following a counter-attacking sequence as Ravshan failed to get a single shot on target in the first half. Al Wakrah came close to taking the lead in the 50th minute after Farid Boulaya sent a cross into the box for Nasser al-Yazidi, whose headed attempt from close range was foiled by Hrytsenko.

The Tajikistan side, yet to register a point, stunningly took the lead five minutes later after Sorbon Ghiyosov broke free down the right flank with a surging run before setting up Azizbek Khaitov to strike past keeper Omair al-Sayed. The visitors came close to doubling their advantage in the 61st minute after Masrur Kiyomidinov set up an unmarked Mawutor, only for the midfielder to strike the crossbar.

Ravshan exploited Al Wakrah's weaker right flank with Matic dispossessing Farid Boulaya before striding down and laying the ball for Amirdzhon Safarov to strike home in the 81st minute.


Al Wakrah and Ravshan players vie for the ball during the AFC Champions League Two Group A match at the Al Janoub Stadium.

Tottenham must bolster attack in transfer window, says Postecoglou

London: Tottenham Hotspur will use the mid-season transfer window to strengthen their attacking options, manager Ange Postecoglou said yesterday ahead of his side's Premier League clash away to Bournemouth. Former Bournemouth forward Dominic Solanke should be fit to face his old club today after missing the draw with Fulham on Sunday with illness, but Tottenham are not awash with forwards despite being the Premier League's highest scorers. Brazil striker Richarlison is out until the new year after suffering a hamstring injury while winger Wilson Odobert is also out long term with a hamstring injury that required surgery.

Youngster Mikey Moore is also unavailable as is first-choice goalkeeper Guglielmo Vicario while centre back Cristian Romero will miss today's game, according to Postecoglou. "Dom (Solanke) is due to train today. He's still not 100% but he's much better," Postecoglou, whose side are seventh in the standings. "He's (Romero) due to have his last couple of sessions with the rehab guys today or tomorrow. "We're hoping that he's back in training by Friday and at the latest early next week."

Tottenham's resources are likely to be stretched during an extremely busy month with crucial games in the Premier League and Europa League and a League Cup quarter-final against Manchester United.

"With Richarlison it has been frustrating because I see the potential in him and to be fair when he's been fit he's always made an impact. That's what you kind of hold on to, but there's no doubt we need some bolstering in that front third over the next couple of transfer windows," Postecoglou said.

"Dom coming in has been great, but again we can't overload him either, because ultimately, even if he stays fit and nothing happens, performance will invariably drop if his energy levels drop. So it's something we're aware of and need to plan for."

After Bournemouth, Tottenham host Chelsea on Sunday and then travel to Rangers next Thursday for a Europa League tie before an away clash at Southampton. Consistency has been an issue for Tottenham this season with some standout performances like the recent 4-0 win at Manchester City countered by disappointing defeats by struggling teams.