To subscribe
GULF TIMES
Newspaper
Please call
44466635



CRICKET | Page 2

Linde bats and then bowls South Africa to victory over Pakistan



FOOTBALL | Page 4

Liverpool on the verge of last 16 as Salah seals Girona win

To advertise here,
PLEASE CALL
444 666 21

Wednesday, December 11, 2024
Jumada II 10, 1446 AH

GULF TIMES
SPORT



FOOTBALL

FIFA to confirm 2030 World Cup hosts and hand Saudi 2034 tournament

Page 3

QATAR MASTERS CHESS

Sargsyan, Espipenko share lead as Erigaisi, Karthikeyan give chase

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Armenian GM Shant Sargsyan and Russian GM Andrey Esipenko yesterday shared the lead after round seven of the $110,00 Qatar Masters. Sargsyan yesterday drew with Indian GM Arjun Erigaisi – the top seed – while Esipenko edged UAE's GM A.R. Saleh Salem.

Sargsyan, 22, has a tally of 6 points. Esipenko, who has been in good form in Doha this week, also has 6 points. Erigaisi and Indian GM Murali Karthikeyan both have 5.5 points. Karthikeyan yesterday beat Iranian GM M Amin Tabatabaei. A group of 11 players are staggered at 5 points each.

Also yesterday, Qatar's IM Hussein Aziz posted his second win of the tournament when he beat India's Mahendru Jaiveer, ranked 133 in the world, to raise his score to 3.5 points.

Hamad al-Tamimi, Executive Director of the Qatar Chess Association (QCA) and the Tournament Director, yesterday said 'the outcome of the fourth Qatar Masters title remains unpredictable'. Despite two rounds remaining, multiple players are closely vying for the lead, he said.

Al-Tamimi highlighted the intriguing battle between Armenian player Sargsyan and Erigaisi, suggesting that either could potentially claim the title in Doha tomorrow. "The tournament has been characterised by intense competition and high-level performances. As the tournament nears its conclusion, anticipation is building for the final two rounds," al-Tamimi said yesterday.



Armenian GM Shant Sargsyan (left) notes down a move during his game against Indian GM Arjun Erigaisi during the Qatar Masters yesterday. **PICTURES:** *Anna Shtourman*



India's Nihal Sarin ponders his next move against compatriot B Adhiban.

KARTHIKEYAN EYES TOP SPOT

Indian player Karthikeyan, ranked 20th in the tournament, yesterday expressed his determination to secure a strong finish in the Qatar Masters. He acknowledged the intense competition and the challenges posed by players in the final two rounds.

After achieving 5.5 points following the seventh round, Karthikeyan attributed his victory to 'a bit of luck'. He emphasised that the top seven players still have a chance to win the title and vowed to strive for victory in the upcoming match.

The player concluded by commending 'the excellent organisational setup at Aspire Zone Hall' and expressed his delight at participating in the fourth edition of the tournament in Qatar.

KEY RESULTS

Armenian GM Shant Sargsyan drew with Indian GM Arjun Erigaisi
Russian GM Andrey Esipenko beat UAE's GM A.R. Saleh Salem
Indian GM Murali Karthikeyan beat Iranian GM M. Amin M Tabatabaei

TODAY'S TOP GAMES

Sargsyan vs Esipenko
Erigaisi vs Karthikeyan

INTERCONTINENTAL CUP

Exhausted but ambitious Botafogo face Pachuca today

The winners of this match will face Al Ahly in the FIFA Challenger Cup on December 14



Botafogo's coach Artur Jorge talks to his players during a training session at 974 Stadium in Doha. **PICTURES:** *Noushad Thekkayil*



Pachuca head coach Guillermo Almada (left) and forward Luiz Henrique at a press conference in Doha yesterday.



Botafogo coach Artur Jorge (left) speaks during a press conference as defender Alex Telles looks on at 974 Stadium yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

In an eagerly-awaited contest, Brazilian side Botafogo will face Mexican outfit Pachuca in the FIFA Derby of the Americas at the Stadium 974 in Doha today at 8pm

Botafogo won their first CONMEBOL Copa Libertadores crown, thanks to a 3-1 win over Atletico Mineiro, on November 30th before conquering the Brasileirao title on Sunday. Pachuca stormed to a sixth Concacaf Champions Cup conquest in June. They will be keen to rewrite the wrongs of a 16th-place finish in Liga MX.

The winners of this match will face Al Ahly in the FIFA Challenger Cup on December 14 back at the same venue. The winner of that tie will then take on Real Madrid in the 2024 FIFA Intercontinental Cup final at Lusail Stadium – the venue of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 decider.

Bastos, who missed Botafogo's last three games, is back at the disposal of coach Artur Jorge, who must decide whether to reinstall him alongside Alexander Barboza at centre-back or stick with Adryelson. Mateo Ponte will deputise for the injured Vitinho at right-back, while long-time absentee Matheus Nascimento is unavailable.

"The desire to win titles will overcome fatigue. We know the difficulties, but today we are proud to be here. We finished a difficult championship (Brasileirao), where we were winners. We only had one day of work here and we need to adapt to the schedule. But the team is determined," said coach Jorge at the pre-match conference in Doha. "Botafogo has its philosophy, its stance. Playing in this competition is a wonderful feeling and now we have to give our all and make this game a historic moment," he added.

"We finished the championship on Sunday night, celebrated with the fans and then embarked on a long trip, with time differences, that lasted almost 24 hours. We only had one real day to adapt to the differences. Despite this, we are confident and prepared to face adversity. Our mentality is clear: we will be a competitive and competent team to win."

Botafogo player Alex Telles said, "Botafogo has its philosophy, its stance. Playing in this competition is a wonderful feeling and now we have to give our all and make this game a historic moment. I played at the 974 stadium in the 2022 World Cup and I am very happy to return to Qatar and play at this very special stadium. Our match tomorrow against Pachuca is difficult because it is a big and special team with great players," he added.

Pachuca, meanwhile, are without Javier Eduardo Lopez. Pachuca head coach Guillermo Almada, said, "First of all, we have been wonderfully welcomed, all of the organisation, the training setup and the availability of the hotel staff. But like I said, it is a very big responsibility but the motivation is at the fullest, as is the responsibility."

Almada also hoped for the presence of a lot of their fans at the stadium. Yes, surely (of our fans) many are going to come. They are also going to take part in this Intercontinental Cup that is a challenge for the club, for us and undoubtedly for the fans. They are going to participate in great numbers in the match."

About the Mexican opponents, the coach stressed, "I'm Uruguayan, so I'm on the border with Brazil and I know a lot about Brazilian competition. They (Botafogo) are a team with a great coach, a very large squad, with great footballers. Everything that they have achieved lately speaks for itself, for the technical and football capacity that they have. We expect that they will demand the maximum. It will be tough, but as I tell the players, believe in our work, in your teammates and compete in a final with them."

Luiz Henrique, Botafogo forward had earlier said, "We have to be very careful with their attack because it is excellent, but we can also take advantage of their weaknesses. It will be tough, obviously, it's an extremely difficult competition. We'll give our all to come out victorious."

Brazilian and Mexican clubs have faced off three times before in FIFA competitions. Vasco da Gama defeated Necaxa 2-1 in the group stage of FIFA Club World Cup 2000. Gremio then sunk Pachuca 1-0 in the semi-finals of UAE 2017. The sole Mexican victory came at the final-four stage of Qatar 2020, as Tigres defeated Palmeiras 1-0 in Al Rayyan.

PREDICTED LINE-UPS

Botafogo: John, Mateo Ponte, Adryelson, Alexander Barboza, Alex Telles, Gregore, Marlon Freitas, Luiz Henrique, Thiago Almada, Jefferson Savarino, Igor Jesus.
Pachuca: Carlos Moreno, Carlos Sanchez, Sergio Barreto, Gustavo Cabral, Bryan Gonzalez, Pedro Pedraza, Elias Montiel, Arturo Gonzalez, Oussama Idrissi, Nelson Deossa, Salomon Rondon.

SPORT

SPOTLIGHT

QOC, UDST sign co-operation agreement



HE Qatar Olympic Committee Secretary-General Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain and Dr Salem Al-Naemi, President of University of Doha for Science and Technology, are joined by other officials following an MoU signing yesterday.

Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) yesterday signed of an agreement with University of Doha for Science and Technology (UDST) to boost joint co-operation in the sports and physical health field.

At the signing ceremony, QOC Secretary-General Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain signed on behalf of QOC while Dr Salem al-Naemi, President of University of Doha for Science and Technology, signed on behalf of UDST.

The agreement aims to enhance the collaboration between the two organisations across various domains, including: training, leadership development, and providing academic support to athletes nationwide. It will also cover the exchange of expertise in organizational management, consulting, human resources development, and facilitate opportunities for participation in both local and international events and competitions.

Additionally, the agreement will foster cooperation in the media sector and the sharing of marketing strategies to strengthen mutual growth.

Following the signing of the agreement, QOC Secretary General al-Buenain, emphasised that the partnership underscores the unwavering commitment of both institutions to advancing integrated sports programmes.

Al-Buenain emphasised that the agreement also seeks to raise awareness about the importance of physical activity while advancing scientific research and specialised training to support athletes and enrich the broader community.

UDST president affirmed that the agreement aligns with Qatar's national strategy to establish sports as a cornerstone of sustainable development.

"By merging sports with academic research, this initiative drives innovation, enhances athletic performance, and promotes public health," he added, noting its critical role in realising Qatar's vision of becoming a global leader in sports and education.

CRICKET

Linde bats and then bowls South Africa to victory

PAKISTAN CAPTAIN FAILS TO INSPIRE TEAM IN THE RUN CHASE

Reuters
Durban

Spinner George Linde took four wickets, plus scored 48 runs off 24 balls with the bat, to lead South Africa to an 11-run win over Pakistan in the first of their Twenty20 internationals at Kingsmead yesterday.

Linde ensured South Africa, who won the toss and chose to bat first, set a tough target as they made 183-9 off their 20 overs.

Pakistan were 172-8 in reply, falling short of the target.

David Miller top scored for South Africa with 82 off 40 runs in a swashbuckling innings that included four sixes and eight fours.

Linde then took 4-21 in four overs, but was denied a hat-trick when his last ball was initially adjudged to have trapped Haris Rauf leg before wicket.

The decision was overturned on review when the ball tracker said the ball would have missed the leg stump.

Linde, Player of the Match, said yesterday: "Like a dream comeback. I have played quite a lot of cricket, had a pretty good season so far. I just try to stay calm at the crease and take a deep breath and always ask myself what does the team needs from myself, and I am just glad I delivered for the team. I just felt calm today for some reason. Also, I missed the bus coming to the ground today and I felt like I had to deliver for the team today and glad I did. Police escort me to the bus, and they waited for me, it was a little embarrassing."

Pakistan were always struggling to keep up the required run rate despite captain Mohamed Rizwan batting through to the last over before being dismissed for 74.

The two teams meet next in Pretoria on Friday and then again on Saturday at the Wanderers in Johannesburg. Next week the two countries will meet in a three-match One Day International series.



South Africa's David Miller watches the ball after playing a shot during the first T20 against Pakistan at the Kingsmead Stadium in Durban yesterday. *(AFP)*

BRIEF SCORES
South Africa 183/9 in 20 overs (David Miller 82, George Linde 48) **beat Pakistan 172/8 in 20 overs** (Mohammad Rizwan 74, Linde 4 for 21) **by 11 runs**



South Africa's George Linde (left) celebrates after the dismissal of Pakistan's Irfan Khan in Durban yesterday. *(AFP)*

Trott to continue as Afghanistan coach until end of 2025

London: Jonathan Trott will continue as Afghanistan's head coach until the end of 2025 after being awarded a one-year extension, the country's cricket board said.
Afghanistan made significant progress under former England batsman Trott, reaching the semi-finals of the Twenty20 World Cup for the first time earlier this year.
He also guided Afghanistan to victories over former champions England, Pakistan and Sri Lanka at last year's ODI World Cup, where their top-eight finish ensured they will make their Champions Trophy debut next year.
"The decision comes in after his successful two-and-half year tenure during which he made significant contributions to the team's progress and development," the Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) said in a statement yesterday.
Trott will oversee the team during the ODI leg of their multi-format tour of Zimbabwe this month but will miss other matches for personal reasons, the ACB said.
Hamid Hassan will fill in for Trott in Zimbabwe.

FOCUS

India's drubbing puts Rohit under scrutiny

AFP
New Delhi

India's second Test drubbing in Adelaide showed that captain Rohit Sharma was failing to bring the aggression needed to beat Australia on their own turf, leading cricket luminaries said.

The tourists were thrashed by 10 wickets inside three days of the pink ball match on Sunday, as Australia levelled the series 1-1.

Rohit, 37, returned to lead the team after missing India's opening win in Perth due to the birth of his second child, but crashed out with scores of three and six.

He had dropped down to number six in the batting order from his usual opening slot in favour of K L Rahul, who played a key part in the Perth Test victory.

Former India all-rounder Ravi Shastri said Rohit should revert to the top to allow him to play to his attacking strengths.

"Thought he was a little too subdued, just seeing his body language," Shastri told broadcasters on Sunday.

"That's the reason I want him at the top.

"That's where he can be aggressive and expressive.

"I just wanted to see him more involved, and a little more animated."

Former opener Aakash Chopra was more blunt in his criticism of the skipper.

"Let's call a spade a spade," he said.

"We saw defensive captaincy. He allowed the match to drift."

India's loss was greeted with derision by newspapers on Monday, with a headline in the *Times of India* calling the third-day finish "short and not so sweet".

The Indian Express branded the spectacle "Sad-elaide".

Rohit conceded after the loss that India's batting fell short after the tourists were bundled out for 180 in the first innings of the day-night Test.

Former captain Sunil Gavaskar urged Indian batsmen to show more patience and better shot selection in the third Test, starting Saturday in Brisbane.

He also said Rohit should be brought back to the top of the order to take advantage of the new ball and make a quick and early total.

"If he can get going and get to 20-30 then you could have Rohit Sharma getting a big hundred and (that) is the kind of start which you want," Gavaskar told broadcaster *India Today*.

Rohit has managed just one 50 - and eight single-digit scores - in his last 12 Test innings since India's home series against Bangladesh in September.

He also led India to a 0-3 whitewash against New Zealand - their first home series defeat in more than a decade - ahead of the Australia series.

CYCLING

Pogacar to defend Tour de France, world title on ambitious 2025 programme

AFP
Benidorm, Spain

Tadej Pogacar insisted yesterday he would not ease off after a record-breaking 2024, declaring he was hungry for more success with a plethora of one-day classics and two Grand Tours on the 2025 menu.

The 26-year-old Slovenian dominated the 2024 season winning two one-day monuments, the Italian Giro, the Tour de France and the world title on his way to 25 wins in total for the year.

He will get his 2025 season underway at the UAE Tour. He will race the Strade Bianche, Milan-San Remo, the E3 Grand Prix, Gent-Wevelgem and the Tour of Flanders before the Ardennes classics.

One race off the agenda is the Paris-Roubaix, suited to heftier riders due to its harsh old cobbled mining roads.

"I wanted to get back on the cobbles and I'll do it again in the future. I'm saving Paris-Roubaix for later. But I love racing the classics." he said in Benidrom, Spain, yesterday.

"After the Giro-Tour thing this season, I'd like to do the Tour-Vuelta, or even the Giro-Vuelta. But the Tour is the Tour, and it will still be my priority next year, along with the Worlds," he confirmed.

As well as the Tour de France, which will run from July 5-27, Pogacar will choose between the Giro and Vuelta once the routes have been revealed.

If he foregoes the Giro (May 9-June 1) in favour of the Vuelta (August 23-September 14), the Slovenian will take part in the Criterium du Dauphine (June 8-15) in preparation for the Tour de France.

"What's certain is that he won't be doing the three big Tours next year," Team UAE sports director Joxean Fernandez Matxin said.

Pogacar is also due to defend his title at the World Championships, which will be in Rwanda in September, on a very demanding course in Kigali.

"I'd like to race all three Tours one day but there are 30 riders in the team you know, and I can't race everything," Pogacar said.



UAE Team's Slovenian cyclist Tadej Pogacar speaks to members of the media during the press conference at the Grand Luxor hotel in Benidorm yesterday. (AFP)

He should then end his season on October 11 at the Tour of Lombardy, the last Monument of the year, where he will be aiming for a fifth consecutive success.

"Last year was an exceptional year for me. I had a great time. Everything went super smoothly, I managed to be in great shape in every race," said Pogacar who at only 26 years old, feels "still young" and believes he can "progress", particularly on the "small details".

Australian champion cyclist admits lesser charge

Australian former world champion cyclist Rohan Dennis admitted yesterday to a charge of creating a risk of harm in relation to the December 2023 road death of his Olympian wife.

Dennis pleaded guilty in Adelaide Magistrates Court to an aggravated charge of creating likelihood of harm after a car he was driving hit her, according to Australian public broadcaster *ABC*.

Prosecutors had agreed not to proceed with charges of "causing death by dangerous driving" and "driving without due care and endangering life", the ABC said.

His lawyer reportedly told the court that Dennis, 34, did not intend to kill his wife Melissa Hoskins.

Hoskins, a retired track cyclist who represented Australia at the 2012 and 2016 Olympics, died in an Adelaide hospital from serious injuries after the incident.

She rode in the Australian team that won the team pursuit event at the 2015 Track Cycling World Championships in France.

Dennis won the world time trials in 2018 and 2019, as well as a 2015 stage win in the Tour de France.

Qatar athletes shine in Kids Triathlon Championship







Qatar cyclists won six medals in the Kids Triathlon Championship which started in October in Bahrain, followed by the second round in Qatar in November and concluded on December 7 in Saudi Arabia. Qatar's Jassim Malallah al-Jaber won the gold medal in the junior category, while his teammate Shaheen Abdullah al-Kaabi won the bronze medal. In the sub-junior category, Fahad Abdullah al-Kaabi claimed the gold medal, while his teammate Khalid Jassim al-Kaabi claimed the bronze medal. Abdullah Nasser al-Misnad also won a gold medal in his category, while Muqbil Fahad al-Qahtani won silver.

FOOTBALL

FIFA to confirm 2030 World Cup hosts today

Saudi Arabia set to get 2034 event



Argentina players celebrate with the trophy after winning the FIFA World Cup 2022 at Lusail Stadium in Lusail, Qatar, on December 18, 2022. *(Reuters)*

AFP
Lausanne

FIFA will confirm the hosts of the 2030 and 2034 World Cups today, with a joint bid led by Morocco, Spain and Portugal set to be awarded the former, and the latter being handed to Saudi Arabia.

The awarding of hosting rights for both tournaments will go to a vote during a FIFA Congress to be held virtually, but there is no doubt about the outcomes with neither bid having a rival. The 2030 tournament will mark a century since the first World Cup was held in Uruguay, and as a result the bid will also see the South American nation handed a game along with Argentina and Paraguay.

That makes it a remarkable and completely unprecedented bid, involving three different continental confederations.

FIFA already confirmed over a year ago that the joint proposal led by Morocco, Spain and Portugal was the sole contender for 2030, with all other potential candidacies having fallen by the wayside. A joint British and Irish bid was abandoned when they decided to focus on hosting Euro 2028, while there were suggestions of a bid from South Korea, China, Japan and North Korea.

Four South American countries launched a joint bid in 2019, convinced that the centenary World Cup should entirely take place on the same continent where it all began. In late 2022, UEFA promoted a bid uniting Spain and Portugal with war-torn Ukraine in a show of "solidarity" following the Russian invasion.

However, Ukraine was quietly dropped from that candidacy last year as Morocco joined forces with the Iberian neighbours, while South America agreed to step aside in exchange for being awarded the hosting of three games, one each for Uruguay, Paraguay and Argentina.

Morocco plans mega stadium

Following these "centenary celebrations" in the comparative chill of the southern hemisphere winter, the six teams involved – along with their fans – will have to cross the Atlantic Ocean to play a part in the remaining 101 matches. This tentacular tournament will conclude with the final on July 21, and it remains to be seen where that game will be staged.

Spain, which hosted the 1982 World Cup, is set to be the centrepiece as it boasts 11 of the 20 proposed stadiums. Morocco – which has tried and failed on five previous occasions to be awarded the staging of the tournament – will become the second African nation to host the competition after South Africa in 2010.

Potential venues for the final include the Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid and Barcelona's renovated Camp Nou, as well as the planned Hassan II stadium between Casablanca and Rabat, which is set to become "the biggest stadium in the world" with a capacity of 115,000.

Portugal, which hosted Euro 2004, will offer two stadiums in Lisbon and one in Porto, and hopes to stage a semi-final.

As for 2034, FIFA invoked its principle of continental rotation, therefore only welcoming bids from Asia or Oceania – the 2026 World Cup, the first involving 48 teams, will take place across North America.

Controversially, the body gave potential bidders barely a month late last year to submit candidacies, and Australia and Indonesia quickly abandoned their interest.

That left Saudi Arabia as the sole candidate, clearing the way for the World Cup to return to the Gulf region following Qatar's hosting in 2022.

The kingdom's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has been using sport for some time now to amass influence and improve its global image.

Being handed the 2034 World Cup will be a crowning moment, and Saudi will win despite currently only boasting two stadiums with a capacity of 40,000, when 14 are required.

Beyond that logistical challenge, the baking temperatures in the northern hemisphere summer could mean pushing the tournament back to later in the year, as happened in 2022.

However, the fact that Ramadan will take place in December that year is an added complication.

FOCUS

Al Annabi can win Gulf Cup, says former Qatar player Mubarak

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Former Qatar national team footballer **Meshal Mubarak** has said that Al Annabi can win the Arabian Gulf Cup title a fourth time at the forthcoming 26th edition of the tournament to be played from December 21, 2024 to January 2, 2025 in Kuwait.

Mubarak said that the twice Asian Cup champions Qatar have the presence of a distinguished generation of players who will be eager to win the Gulf Cup title for a fourth time in history, and please the fans again despite the strong competition expected in the tournament.

Qatar have previously won the Gulf Cup in 1992, 2004 and 2014.

Qatar are in Group A along with hosts Kuwait, Oman and the United Arab Emirates while Group B comprises Bahrain, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Qatar will play their opening match against UAE at the Jaber Al Mubarak Al Hamad Stadium in Sulaibikhat, Kuwait, on December 21 (Saturday).

Regarding his expectations for the tournament, Mubarak while speaking to QNA said that many teams have a chance to win, but the Gulf Cup is not often subject to prior calculations but the indicators may go in favour of Qatar, along with hosts Kuwait and defending champions Iraq.

He stressed that it will be a good opportunity to invest in the tournament from a competitive perspective, in light of the need for seven out of the eight participating teams to raise their readiness to compete in the rest of the qualifiers for the 2026 World Cup.

The former international player Mubarak, played in the 17th edition of Gulf Cup hosted by Qatar in 2004. He said that it was one of the important tournaments in his career where Al Annabi won their second title and he considers it as an important milestone of his career and that it remains one of the historical achievements of Qatari football.

He noted that Oman were strong contenders after reaching the final which was decided on penalties and won by Qatar.

Mubarak, who has also previously played for Qatar SC, Al Wakrah, Al Rayyan, Al Gharafa and Al Ahli, added that the presence of seven teams in the third and decisive stage of the 2026 World Cup qualifiers will reflect well on the technical level, and that the timing of the tournament will be appropriate in light of the current seasonal break for the Asian qualifiers for the World Cup, which will resume in March.

The left-back, who had a professional experience with the Dutch club Feyenoord, also talked about the memories of the 15th edition of the Gulf Cup, pointing out that Qatar performed wonderfully in that tournament, in which they were one step away from winning the title.

Mubarak, who also participated in two editions of the Asian Cup in 2000 and 2007, opined that the Gulf Cup championships have greatly contributed to the development of football in the region in terms of technical and administrative aspects, as well as in terms of infrastructure, noting that the upcoming 26th edition will witness strong competition.





SABALENKA NAMED WTA PLAYER OF THE YEAR FOR THE FIRST TIME

Aryna Sabalenka has been voted the WTA Player of the Year for the first time after the Belarusian won two Grand Slam titles and secured the year-end world number one ranking, the governing body of women's tennis said.

After successfully defending her Australian Open trophy in January, Sabalenka won the US Open crown in September for her third Grand Slam title and leapfrogged Iga Swiatek to top the world rankings a month later.

She also won tournaments in Cincinnati and Wuhan to end her 2024 campaign with four titles.

International tennis media also voted for Paris Olympics gold medallists Sara Errani and Jasmine Paolini as the year's top doubles team, while American Emma Navarro was named the season's most improved player.

Ranked 38th at the end of 2023, Navarro broke into the top 10 in September after winning her first title in Hobart and making six semi-final appearances, including at Flushing Meadows, during the season.

Lulu Sun won the Newcomer of the Year award following the New Zealander's run to the quarter-finals at Wimbledon as a qualifier, which helped her climb to 40th in the world after being ranked outside the top 200 in January.

Former world number two Paula Badosa, who ended her 2023 season early due to a back problem that cast doubt about her future in the game, was named Comeback Player of the Year.

After returning to the tour this season, the Spaniard won the Washington title and also matched her best Grand Slam performance by reaching the US Open quarters to finish the year ranked 12th.

Saudi PIF names Berrettini as tennis ambassador

Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) has named Matteo Berrettini as its tennis ambassador, a role in which the Italian will aim to help nurture the next generation of players and elevate the sport globally. The sovereign wealth fund has made significant forays into tennis in recent months, coming on board as the official naming partner of the men's and women's world rankings as well as partnering several tournaments.

"One of my roles is to inspire the next generation, the youth, the kids," the former world number six said in a video posted social media on Monday. "Together with the PIF I'm going to be able to do that. This is one of the greatest things I can do." In January, Rafa Nadal was named an ambassador for the Saudi Tennis Federation, with the Spaniard saying that he was eager to help train children and grow interest in the sport. Berrettini, who has previously played in Riyadh during the Diriyah Tennis Cup in 2022, would also promote inclusivity and create opportunities at all levels of the sport, the PIF said in a statement.

SPOTLIGHT

QMMF launches Qatar Motorsport Academy Stars youth initiative

By Sports Reporter
Doha



The Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) has announced its youth detection programme, Qatar Motorsports Academy Stars, an exciting new initiative designed to discover and develop young talent in motorsport. This programme seeks to identify promising Qatari individuals and support them on a pathway to competitive racing careers. The entry requirements for the programme is: The individual should be a Qatari citizen; The individual should be between ages 15 and 25 (15 and 25 included); Entry is open for both genders, boys and girls; Prior motorsport experience or driving license is not required.

The testing will take place at the Qatar Motorsports Academy located at Lusail International Circuit on January 17, 2025. Those interested in participating can register now (https://forms.gle/bdik3hZSuZpBjjBc7) or visit our Instagram page @qma_lcsc.

The top three drivers will have the opportunity to compete in the MERC Junior Category and the Qatar National Baja Championship, based on jury selection.

Amro al-Hamad, Executive Director of QMMF and CEO of Lusail International Circuit, said: "The programme is a testament to our belief in the untapped potential of Qatar's youth. We aim to provide a platform that identifies and nurtures the next generation of Qatari motorsport talent. This initiative is not just about racing; it's about building future ambassadors for Qatari motorsport."

The selection process will feature a short slalom course using plastic obstacles such as cones and techpro barriers. Participants will drive easy-to-use vehicles, competing to achieve the best times. Top qualifiers from the initial round will advance to compete on longer slalom courses. Ultimately, the 35 fastest drivers will proceed to the finals, which will be held on January 18 and January 19, 2025.

In the final stages of the selection process 25 drivers, aged 15-25 years old, will be selected (including at least 15 with no prior racing experience). Moreover, 5 additional slots will be kept for young participants aged 15-18 years old. Finalists will be tested over two days on different vehicles and surfaces, and evaluated by a jury of motorsport experts. The jury will also assess participants' psychological and physical, to ensure a holistic evaluation of their potential.

The top three drivers will have the opportunity to compete in the MERC Junior Category and the Qatar National Baja Championship, based on jury selection. Younger participants (under 18) may join the Qatar Motorsport Academy's training programme until they are eligible for a driving license, with at least one receiving the chance to compete in the Qatar national team.

This initiative reflects QMMF's commitment to fostering local talent, in line with the Qatar National Vision 2030, and growing the motorsport community in Qatar. By providing young individuals with expert guidance and access to professional platforms, QMMF aims to inspire the next generation of racing champions.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Liverpool close in on last 16 after Girona win

Slot's men have won all six of their matches to move provisionally five points clear

AFP
Girona, Spain



Liverpool's Mohamed Salah scores a penalty during the UEFA Champions League match against Girona. *(AFP)*

Champions League group phase leaders Liverpool virtually sealed a place in the last 16 with a 1-0 victory at Girona yesterday after Mohamed Salah struck from the penalty spot. Liverpool have made a stunning start in the competition under coach Arne Slot, winning all six of their matches to move provisionally five points clear of second place Inter Milan.

The English giants, six-time winners of the competition, were given a tough night by Champions League debutants Girona, who fell to a fifth defeat and are on the verge of elimination. Teams finishing in the top eight will avoid an extra round of play-off matches. Slot started fit-again goalkeeper Alisson Becker after a two-month injury lay-off and the Brazilian showed no sign of rust on a busy night.

After their Mersyside derby clash at Everton was called off because of a storm at the weekend, Slot was able to pick a fresh side, going with arguably his strongest available team to try and assure a top eight finish as soon as possible.

Champions League newcomers Girona, who lost several key players in the summer and are still rebuilding, opted for Arnaut Danjuma in attack with support from spritely duo Bryan Gil and Yaser Asprilla. Liverpool pinned the hosts back in the first 10 minutes and Girona stopper Paulo Gazzaniga pushed away a Joe Gomez header.

After that Girona found their footing on a chilly night at their sold-out Montilivi stadium, reduced to under 10,000 capacity due to UEFA regulations, and they began to put Alisson to the test. The goalkeeper saved from Alejandro Frances and then denied former Tottenham winger Gil, who slipped as he ran through on Liverpool's goal.

Alisson also beat away a Miguel Gutierrez drive as the qualities of the side which pushed Real Madrid close for the Spanish title last season shone through. Darwin Nunez spurned Liverpool's first big chance after Salah slipped him in, with Gazzaniga keeping out the Uruguayan striker's low poke.

Alisson was tested again early in the second half by former Bournemouth forward Danjuma. The Dutchman then gave Liverpool's defence the slip with a clever dribble but fired over, as Slot's words ahead of the game were proven true – Girona were better than the standings suggested after four defeats in their first five matches.

Despite their valiant efforts, the Liverpool juggernaut is proving hard to stop and the Premier League leaders took the lead with a penalty won by Luis Diaz. The Colombian winger went down under a challenge from Donny van de Beek and after a VAR review, the referee pointed to the spot.

Salah sent Gazzaniga the wrong way to net his 50th Champions League goal, pulling the Egyptian level with Filippo Inzaghi as the 10th highest goalscorer of all-time in the competition.

The winger is out of contract at the end of of the season but his 16 goals across all competitions have been essential in Liverpool's superb first half of the season.

Slot replaced the wasteful Nunez with Cody Gakpo as he tried to see the game out, while Girona were deflated after conceding and unable to make further inroads as their Champions League dream draws towards a close.

CELTIC HELD TO GOALLESS STALEMATE AT DINAMO ZAGREB

Celtic and Dinamo Zagreb played out an uninspiring 0-0 draw in the Champions League. The result leaves both sides still firmly in contention for a place in the next stage of the tournament, with the Scottish champions sitting 17th and Zagreb in 21st. Teams placed ninth to 24th in the new league format will enter a play-off round to reach the round of 16.

Zagreb started their campaign with a 9-2 thrashing at the hands of Bayern Munich but have won two and drawn two of their subsequent five matches, and have eight points.

Celtic have enjoyed their best recent run in European football this term under Brendan Rodgers after several disappointing seasons, and are one spot outside securing themselves a seeded draw in the play-off round.

Rodgers' side have nine points, the same as six-times winners Bayern in 13th and one more than 2023 champions Manchester City, though both sides now have a game in hand. The first half was one of few chances for either side, with none of the four shots recorded in the opening 45 minutes troubling either goalkeeper. Schmeichel made a fine save from Pjaca on 80 minutes as the tie finished goalless, breaking Zagreb's run of 43 games in European competition without a 0-0 draw.

Barcaelona must learn from league stumbles, says Flick

Barcelona: Barcelona's young team can learn from the setbacks they have faced in their La Liga campaign and continue to improve, manager Hansi Flick said yesterday ahead of their Champions League meeting with Borussia Dortmund.

On Saturday, Barca put in an unconvincing display in a 2-2 La Liga draw at Real Betis, which left them vulnerable to being overtaken by rivals Real Madrid in the title race. The draw was not the ideal result ahead of a vital clash against Champions League regulars Dortmund, but Flick said it was natural for teams to have a slump in form during the season.

"In the end it all depends on how the season ends. We are convinced," Flick told reporters yesterday. "We have to play the way we want to play and that's how we'll continue to improve. We are very clear about that. We are a very young team and that's normal. We have lost two points that have hurt us a lot but we have to learn from our mistakes. We are very united."

Today's match at the Westfalenstadion will have added significance for Barcelona striker Robert Lewandowski, who spent four seasons at Dortmund and won two Bundesliga titles with the club.

The Polish striker has been in remarkable form this season, scoring 23 goals in 21 appearances across all competitions.

Asked if Barcelona were overly reliant on Lewandowski, Flick said: "We need Robert, but Robert needs the team. A player alone can never win a game by himself. "I think when you look at how many goals he has scored so far, you can see that he is very lucky to have this team around him. But he has got a lot of quality as well. In the box is where he is most lethal and important... At the moment he is in a great form, great phase."

Barca will be able to call upon Ronald Araujo against Dortmund, with the defender back in the squad for the first time since suffering a muscle injury while playing for Uruguay at the Copa America in July.

However, Flick stopped short of providing a date for his return.

BOTTOMLINE

Arsenal battling injury crisis, says Arteta

Reuters
London



Arsenal midfielder Declan Rice (left) and manager Mikel Arteta during training. *(Reuters)*

Arsenal must adapt to the situation of having a growing injury list, manager Mikel Arteta said, as his side prepare to face AS Monaco in the Champions League at home today with several key players set to miss out.

Arsenal have concerns over the fitness of Gabriel, Riccardo Calafiori, and Oleksandr Zinchenko, while Ben White and Takehiro Tomiyasu are already sidelined. Jurrien Timber and Thomas Partey also missed full training.

"It is what it is. We need to accept the reality and move forward," Arteta told reporters yesterday. "We have to manage a lot of the players. Some of them probably aren't going to be fit. Some are still a doubt. We have 24 hours to make a decision and hopefully it will be the right ones."

Kieran Tierney, back in training after six months out with a hamstring injury, could make his first appearance in European competition for Arsenal since November 2022, with Arteta pleased with the left back's determination. "He's ready and training really well and he's going to have an opportunity for sure the way the team is looking at the moment," the Spanish coach said.

"He's going to do that for that reason and because he's earned it. The way he's behaved, the way he's been with us and because he's willing to do it. When that happens you have to give opportunities to those kinds of players."

Arsenal are seventh in the Champions League standings, ahead on goal difference over their French opponents who began their campaign with a win over Barcelona. "I'm really impressed. You see the run that they've been on in the Champions League. They're a real threat with a lot of qualities," Arteta said.

FOCUS

Bove undergoes heart surgery after collapse

Reuters
Milan

Fiorentina midfielder Edoardo Bove has had successful surgery to implant a removable heart starter device following his recent collapse during a Serie A match, the Italian club said yesterday.

Bove collapsed on the pitch during Fiorentina's home game with Inter Milan on Dec. 1 leading to the abandonment of the match.

Yesterday's operation was part of the medical protocol before he can be discharged from hospital. "Edoardo contacted the club a few minutes ago and in his own words he informed us that he is fine and that he will have to continue the post-operative process before being discharged from the hospital in the next few days," Fiorentina said in a statement.

The Implantable Cardioverter Defibrillator (ICD), a type of pacemaker that can prevent fatal cardiac arrest by delivering a shock to restore a normal heart rhythm, is not permitted in Serie A.

Once all the results of the medical tests carried out on the 22-year-old over the past few days are in, Bove will be able to decide whether to have the device removed, which would allow him to return to the Italian top flight.

Denmark's Christian Eriksen was unable to continue playing for Inter Milan after being fitted with an ICD following a cardiac arrest during a European Championship match in 2021, and he later joined Brentford after the Serie A club terminated his contract.