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EQUESTRIAN

# Top riders set for Doha Tour showdown at Al Shaqab

Largest number of participants is from Qatar with 86 riders, while Saudi Arabia has fielded 41 riders

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The Organising Committee of the Doha International Equestrian Tour 2025 yesterday announced the completion of all arrangements for the launch of the first round of the most awaited event, which will begin at the glorious Longines Arena at Al Shaqab from today and continue till Saturday. The event has attracted more than 150 riders from 30 countries.

The Doha International Equestrian Tour 2025 has a total prize money of more than 1.7mn euros. The showjumping event comprises three international rounds, with the first and second rounds allocated to the one-star, two-star, and four-star categories, while the third and final round includes the one-star and three-star categories, in addition to the major five-star category. The second round of the championship will be held from January 16-18, and the third and final round is from January 23-25. This year's edition has been organised by the Qatar Equestrian Federation, Al Shaqab and the Qatar Olympic Committee.

At a press conference yesterday, Event Director Mohammed Jaber al-Khayarin confirmed that the Doha rounds are one of the most prominent international championships on the global equestrian calendar, as they attract an elite group of internationally ranked riders from around the world to compete in the various categories of the championship, with the number of participating riders reaching 277 riders from around the world.

He pointed out that this version of the championship is to enhance the status of equestrian sports, in line with Qatar National Vision 2030, which seeks to modernize while preserving the ancient traditions and heritage values. He also revealed the total prize money for all international equestrian championships for the year 2025, amounts to more than 5.5mn euros, including 1.7mn euros for the Doha rounds. He added: "Organising this event requires exceptional effort and high professionalism to achieve the required success and contribute to the success of the championship competitions, so we extend our thanks and appreciation to all sectors that worked tirelessly to make this event come out in the best possible way. We invite everyone to attend this exceptional global event and spend a time full of fun and excitement."

Nasser Mubarak al-Hajri, the championship's Sports Director, while delving into the technical aspect of the champi-



The Doha Tour, which will be held at the Longines Arena at Al Shaqab, has a total prize money of more than 1.7mn euros.



Doha International Equestrian Tour 2025 Event Director Mohammed Jaber al-Khayarin, Sports Director Nasser Mubarak al-Hajri and Director of Marketing and Communications Abdullah al-Qashouti address a press conference at Al Shaqab yesterday.

onship noted that the Tour witnesses the participation of a number of world-class riders such as Scott Brash and Janne Friederike Meyer, in addition to riders from many different and also neighbouring countries.

The number of participants in the first round of the championship reached 150

riders from more than 30 countries, which reflects the high level and great diversity of participants. The largest number of participation is from Qatar with 86 Qatari riders, then Saudi Arabia with 41 riders, 35 European riders, Egypt with 27 riders, in addition to riders from other countries.

Regarding the registered horses, he

explained the number has reached 410, including: 150 from Qatar, 135 from European countries, 86 from Gulf countries, in addition to horses from Arab countries. The championship will feature stables for different categories, with the stables for European riders hosting 134 horses, the stables for local riders hosting 133 horses,

the stables for Gulf riders hosting 69 horses, the stables for Middle Eastern riders hosting 32 horses, and the stables for local Al Shaqab horses hosting 40 horses.

He added: "To ensure a world-class sporting experience, the championship arena has been shaped by international course designers with experience in designing the arenas of dozens of international championships. International judges were also consulted alongside a local jury, with the aim of enhancing local expertise in line with the highest international standards, which contributes in raising the level of the championship and enhancing its position on the global stage."

Abdullah al-Qashouti, Director of Marketing and Communications of Doha International Equestrian Tour 2025, informed that the organising committee has allocated a special area for the public that has many recreational facilities including a variety of foods and drinks for all, besides the multiple options of cafes and shops, in addition to many entertainment events for all age groups and segments of the society.

Accompanying events will be held on the outer perimeter of the Longines Arena, where contracts have been signed with service providers, business owners and the artist community to provide an exceptional experience for the fans, demonstrating Qatari hospitality and heritage. The Longines outdoor arena also includes games for children and an area for visual artists, ensuring an enjoyable and enriching experience for all visitors.

He also informed that in an effort to provide an exceptional experience for the riders. "A Riders' Corner has been allocated in a distinguished location directly overlooking the competition field. A ticket has been provided for one person at a price of 800 euros for the event, or a private table reservation for 6 riders at a price of 3,500 euros for the tournament inside the pavilion.

"As for the fans, they can purchase tickets from the official platform Qtickets, with general audience ticket prices ranging from QR50 per day for adults, QR25 for children aged 7-12, while entry is free for children under the age of 7. Other options include hospitality packages and VIP tickets, which offer multiple benefits such as exclusive access to the platform, premium seating service and valet parking," he added.

The event is sponsored by Doha Bank, Al Abdulghani Motors, and Zabargad Jewellery. The Tour is also partnered by Qatar Airways as the official airlines, Visit Qatar, Al Kass Sports Channels as the broadcasters, So Cast as the social media partner, and Sahil as media partner.

DAKAR RALLY

# Al-Attiyah slips to seventh as Lategan retains lead

Agencies  
Hail, Saudi Arabia

Five-times winner Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah hit trouble in the Dakar Rally yesterday, the latest front-runner to struggle in the Saudi Arabian sands after the departures of Sebastian Loeb and defending champion Carlos Sainz.

The Qatari ace, driving a Dacia Sandrider, started the day in second place and chasing Toyota's South African leader Henk Lategan but dropped to seventh and 35 minutes adrift after suffering wheel issues. Al-Attiyah suffered a puncture and then a broken suspension arm. He waited for Dacia teammate Cristina Gutierrez who gave him the part from her car.

Despite dropping over half an hour yesterday, he is not going down without a fight. "We didn't have many problems - just one! Actually, we stopped once for a puncture and then again because we broke a rear suspension arm. We had to wait for Cristina, who gave us hers, and then we re-

paired it and got going again... What else could we do? That's just how it is. Now the car is fine and we'll have to adapt tomorrow and next week. My only option is to attack," al-Attiyah said.

Local hero Yazeed al-Rajhi won the 415km stage four from Al Henakiyah to Al-Ula for the Toyota Overdrive Racing team, with Lategan four minutes and 51 seconds slower. Lategan's overall lead shrank to six minutes and 54 seconds, with Al-Rajhi again his closest rival after moving up from fourth. The stage ended at a makeshift overnight bivouac where competitors won't be able to call on their support team before hitting the road again today.

France's nine-times world rally champion Loeb, al-Attiyah's teammate, was ruled out with a damaged car on Tuesday while four times Dakar winner Sainz went out on Monday after rolling his Ford.

In the motorcycle category, Australian Red Bull KTM rider Daniel Sanders stretched his lead to 13 minutes and 26 seconds over Spaniard Tocha Schareina after a fourth stage win out of five, including the prologue. Worries about protecting

his bike and tyres led Spaniard Schareina to deliberately surrender the lead near the finish in the motorcycle category.

The 29-year-old Schareina led by 2 min 30 sec with 32 km to go, and was closing in on the first stage win of his career when he slowed to allow Sanders to pass.

"I lost a couple of minutes so I wouldn't have to open up tomorrow. I had to be careful with the bike, with the tyres, because this is the marathon stage and tomorrow," said Schareina.

Sanders won the prologue and three of the other four stages so far and leads Schareina by 13min 26sec in the overall standings. "I got lost a fair bit," Sanders said. "A little bit of cat and mouse at the end, trying to slow down. And yeah, Tocha was leading and he stopped for two minutes."

Botswana's Ross Branch remained third overall, with defending champion Ricky Brabec of the United States in fifth place but nearly half an hour off the lead.

Today's fifth stage is a 428km special from Al-Ula to Hail ahead of a much needed rest day on Friday. The two-week rally ends on January 17.



Dacia Sandrider's Qatari driver Nasser al-Attiyah and French navigator Edouard Boulanger repair their car during stage 4 of the Dakar Rally 2025 between Al Henakiyah and Al-Ula in Saudi Arabia yesterday. (AFP)

FOCUS

# UK Athletics charged over Hayayei's death

Reuters  
London

UK Athletics and the former head of sport for a Paralympic event have been charged over the death of Abdullah Hayayei in 2017 when the Paralympic athlete was training in London, British prosecutors said yesterday.

Hayayei, from the United Arab Emirates, was preparing for the 2017 World Paralympic Athletics Championships at the Newham Leisure Centre when a metal throwing cage fell on him.

The 36-year-old athlete - who had made his debut in the javelin and shot put at the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro - was pronounced dead at the scene.

UK Athletics has been charged with corporate manslaughter and an offence under the Health and Safety at Work Act,

Britain's Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) said in a statement.

The CPS said the head of sport for the 2017 World Paralympic Athletics Championships, Keith Davies, aged 77, was also charged, with gross negligence manslaughter and an offence under the Health and Safety at Work Act.

Both UK Athletics and Davies are due to appear at London's Westminster Magistrates' Court on Jan 31.

UK Athletics declined to comment due to the upcoming proceedings. Davies could not be reached for comment.

The United Arab Emirates thrower had been set to compete in the F34 shot put, discus and javelin events, BBC reported yesterday.

Hayayei, a father of five, finished sixth in the javelin and seventh in the shot put when making his Paralympic debut at Rio 2016, the report added.

London 2017 was due to be his second

appearance at a World Championships. At the 2015 athletics championship held in Doha, Hayayei finished fifth in the discus and eighth in the shot put.

A moment of silence was held in honour of Hayayei during the opening ceremony of the World Championships at London Stadium.

## Obiri seeks Boston 'three-peat', Lemma to defend men's title

Kenyan Hellen Obiri will pursue a third straight Boston Marathon title in April, the Boston Athletic Association said yesterday, while Ethiopian Sisay Lemma will defend his title in a speedy men's field.

The 35-year-old Obiri has been dominant in the distance event since making her marathon debut in 2022, winning New York in 2023 in addition to her pair of Boston titles, picking up the bronze in Paris last year.

"Defending a win is never easy, and to



Hellen Obiri

win the Boston Marathon twice in a row was hard, but I am happy to have done it," Obiri said in a statement. "On race day I will again push for the

win and hope to make it three in a row." She will be joined at the starting line by other past champions including two-time winner Edna Kiplagat of Kenya and American Des Linden.

Lemma, the fastest in the men's field with a 2:01:48 personal best, will line up with a formidable Kenyan cohort that includes two-time winner Evans Chebet and last year's Chicago champion John Korir.

"I was very happy after winning the Boston Marathon last year, and in 2025 I know it will be an even bigger challenge to win again," said Lemma, who missed the Paris Games due to injury.

"I was not completely ready at the Valencia Marathon last December, but I will be 100% ready next April because the Boston Marathon is a special event," Lemma added.

The 129th running of the Boston Marathon will take place on Monday, April 21, 2025.

CRICKET

# New Zealand crush Sri Lanka by 113 runs

Ravindra scores 79 as the hosts grab 2-0 lead in the ODI series

AFP  
Hamilton, New Zealand

New Zealand ripped through Sri Lanka's top order yesterday to win the rain-reduced second one day international in Hamilton by 113 runs and clinch the series.

Sri Lanka spinner Maheesh Theekshana took a hat-trick as the home side posted 255-9 off 37 overs, but the tourists could only muster 142 all out off 30.2 overs in response.

It followed New Zealand's comfortable nine-wicket win in Wellington to go 2-0 up in the series, with the third match to be played in Auckland on Saturday.

Sri Lanka's top order has misfired badly in both games.

They slumped to 22-4 at Seddon Park, leaving little chance of reaching their target of 256 in a match reduced to 37 overs each because of early rain.

Kaminu Mendis top-scored for Sri Lanka with his ODI best of 64 off 66 balls, but fell to a spectacular running catch from Daryl Mitchell from the bowling of Will O'Rourke to seal the visitor's fate yesterday.

Janith Liyanage's 22 was the next best score in a Sri Lanka chase marred by two run-outs and a series of risky shots that didn't pay off.

O'Rourke was too quick for the tail, taking 3-31 off 6.2 overs while Jacob Duffy was responsible for some of the early damage, claiming 2-30, including the key scalps of Patham Nissanka and Kusal Mendis.

Sri Lanka captain Charith



New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra plays a shot during the second one day international against Sri Lanka at Seddon Park in Hamilton yesterday. (AFP)

Asalanka said their run target should have been achievable.

"I think it was a fair score for batsmen in this kind of small ground, and it's a fair pitch," he said.

"I think again the bad batting in the power play cost us the game."

Earlier, recalled off-spinner Theekshana capitalised on some wayward New Zealand hitting to finish with 4-44 off eight overs. He removed Mitchell Santer and Nathan Smith with successive deliveries at the end of the 35th over.

The hat-trick was completed - all from mistimed lofted shots

- when Matt Henry was caught off the first ball of the final over. It helped to pull back a New Zealand innings which threatened to surpass 300 when opener Rachin Ravindra raced to 79 off 63 balls and Mark Chapman scored 62 off 52.

The pair put on 112 for the second wicket, ending when Chapman holed out to long-off from Theekshana.

Ravindra departed soon afterwards, caught brilliantly at short cover by Asalanka off leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga (2-39).

Ravindra, who struck nine fours and a six, believed his bal-

anced batting style was tailored for the 50-over format.

"I do enjoy the ODIs, although you don't see as many games happen anymore, but it's a format I grew up watching, and I think it suits the way I bat," said the 25-year-old, who scored 45 in the first match. "I think it's a nice, natural tempo being able to go out there and play cricket shots."

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**New Zealand 255 for 9** (Ravindra 79, Chapman 62, Theekshana 4-44) **beat Sri Lanka 142** (Kaminu 64, O'Rourke 3-31) **by 113 runs**

SPOTLIGHT

# Devajit Saikia: lawyer, modest player and next India cricket chief

AFP  
New Delhi

The man set to become one of cricket's most powerful figures as head of India's board enjoys close ties to the country's ruling party and is something of an unknown among fans after a modest playing career.

Devajit Saikia was the only person nominated to be secretary of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) and is set to be anointed at a meeting of members in Mumbai on Sunday.

The BCCI holds immense sway in cricket and is one of the richest governing bodies in sport.

The 55-year-old lawyer was made interim secretary after Jay Shah took the top job at the International Cricket Council, the global governing body.

Shah's ascension to BCCI chief in 2019 demonstrated the increasing alignment of India's politics with the management of its most popular sport.

Shah is the son of India's powerful home minister.

Despite standing on the cusp of taking over the BCCI, Saikia - who has a reputation for being feisty - has said previously that he never wanted to be in management.

"It was never my intention to be a cricket or sports administrator. Even today I don't like being an administrator," Saikia told broadcasters last year. He said he was "compelled" to

become involved in running the sport after he saw "corruption" in cricket administration in his home state of Assam.

## 'Misguided criticism'

Before going into cricket office, Saikia was a wicketkeeper who scored 53 runs across four first-class matches for the Assam team in 1990-91.

Saikia began in administration by serving as general secretary of a cricket club in Assam under the leadership of Himanta Biswa Sarma.

Sarma is now Assam's chief minister for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has governed India nationally since 2014 under the leadership of Hindu-nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Saikia and Sarma both later served in the Assam state cricket association.

When Sarma was appointed to lead the state, he appointed Saikia his advocate general - the government's chief legal adviser.

Shah's departure last month to become chairman of the ICC prompted the appointment of Saikia, who was already on the BCCI board, as interim secretary.

Sarma's political opponents in Assam slammed the move, saying it was improper for Saikia to accept an "office of profit" while serving with the state government.

Saikia said the criticism was "misguided". Away from his day job he is an avid biker with a love of adventure sports.



ANNOUNCEMENT

# PCB moves tri-series to Lahore and Karachi ahead of Champions Trophy

Reuters  
Lahore

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has relocated February's tri-nation One Day International (ODI) series with New Zealand and South Africa from Multan to Lahore and Karachi, two cities set to host the Champions Trophy later in the month.

The PCB said the move was due to the advanced stage of preparations at Lahore's Gaddafi Stadium and Karachi's National Stadium, which will host six of the 12 Champions Trophy group stage matches.

Lahore will also host one semi-final as well as the final provided India, who are playing all their matches in Dubai following an agreement that neither India nor Pakistan will visit each other's countries for ICC tournament matches, do not qualify. Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium

will also host three matches of the eight-team tournament.

The PCB is upgrading the facilities at all three venues in the country as Pakistan prepares to host an ICC tournament for the first time since 1996, when they co-hosted the ODI World Cup.

The tri-series will be played from Feb 8-14, while the Champions Trophy will kick off on Feb 19 in Karachi, with defending champions Pakistan playing New Zealand.

The spectator capacity at Gaddafi Stadium has been increased to 35,000, with new chairs installed throughout the venue. Additionally, 480 state-of-the-art LED lights have been installed to enhance broadcast LUX levels, ensuring superior viewing quality for fans worldwide.

To further elevate the spectator experience, two giant digital replay screens - measuring 80 feet x 30 feet and 22 feet x 35 feet - will be installed next week. The stadium is set to be inau-

gured in the last week of January. A brand-new players' and officials' hospitality enclosure has also been created, which will be operational by 25 January. The iconic stadium is set to provide an unparalleled experience for all stakeholders.

At the National Bank Stadium, significant enhancements have been made, including the creation of a new players' and officials' hospitality enclosure at the University End.

To improve broadcast coverage, 350 LED lights have been installed, ensuring optimal visibility for global audiences. Two digital replay screens have already been fixed, and 5,000 new chairs have been installed to enhance spectator comfort.

Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium is undergoing minor touch-ups, focusing on the installation of 10,000 new chairs, upgrades to hospitality boxes and the installation of two digital replay screens.

## LIV GOLF'S NIEMANN ACCEPTS SPECIAL INVITE TO MASTERS

**Augusta:** LIV Golf's Joaquin Niemann was among two golfers who accepted a special invitation to compete in this year's Masters as part of the tournament's tradition of inviting leading international players who are not otherwise qualified for the event.

In addition to the 26-year-old Chilean, Augusta National yesterday also said it extended an invitation to Denmark's Nicolai Hojgaard, who in his Masters debut last April held top-six positions after each of the first three rounds.

"In support of Augusta National's efforts to develop interest in golf globally, deserving international players not otherwise qualified have been invited throughout the tournament's history," Fred Ridley, chairman of Augusta National Golf Club, said in a statement.

"The tradition continues as we welcome Nicolai and Joaquin back to the Masters, as both players have showcased their talent while competing around the world. We look forward to their arrival this April."

Niemann, who is 71st in the world rankings, lifted two LIV Golf titles last year and finished runner-up to Spaniard Jon Rahm for the Saudi-backed league's 2024 season-long Individual Championship.

In the final two months of 2024, Niemann finished in a share of seventh place at the DP World Tour Championship in Dubai and earned a share of fifth as defending champion in the Australian Open before winning an Asian Tour event in Saudi Arabia.

Niemann will be making his sixth Masters start this year after having made his debut in 2018 as the

top-ranked amateur in the world and reigning Latin America Amateur champion.

Hojgaard enjoyed a stunning Masters debut last year as he briefly held the lead at one point during the third round before falling off the pace and finishing in a share of 16th place.

The young Dane's 2024 included a seventh place finish at the Paris Olympics and he closed the year with five consecutive top-25 performances on the DP World Tour. World number 60 Hojgaard's twin brother, Rasmus, already qualified for the year's first major, which means a pair of twins will compete in the same Masters for the first time.

This year's Masters will be held April 10-13. World number one Scottie Scheffler won last year's Masters for his second major title.

## Bradley names Kisner third US Ryder Cup vice captain

Kevin Kisner, a four-time PGA Tour winner, will serve as one of Keegan Bradley's vice captains on the US Ryder Cup team who will try to reclaim the trophy from Europe this year at Bethpage Black in New York, the PGA of America said yesterday.

Kisner, who boasts an impressive match-play record as a professional but had never been part of a Ryder Cup team, joins vice captains Webb Simpson and Brandt Snedeker on Bradley's staff.

"Kevin is a great addition to our leadership group and will be a trusted voice throughout the coming months and this year's Ryder Cup," Bradley said in a news release.

FOCUS

# Kyrgios pulls out of Djokovic exhibition event

Reuters  
Melbourne

**N**ick Kyrgios has withdrawn from an exhibition event with Novak Djokovic scheduled for today due to an abdominal strain, casting more doubt on the former Wimbledon finalist's chances of making his Australian Open comeback this month.

Kyrgios, who has battled a succession of injuries since losing to Djokovic in the 2022 Wimbledon final, said yesterday he had pulled out of the 'A Night With Novak' event at Rod Laver Arena due to the issue.

"Unfortunately won't be able to play my good friend @djokernole this Thursday on the 9th as I've had an ultrasound on my abdominal and have a grade 1 strain," the Australian posted on Instagram.

"Will be resting and doing everything I can to be OK by the Aus Open."

The 29-year-old has struggled with knee, foot and wrist injuries and had already raised concerns about his participation in the year's first Grand Slam following a loss to Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard at the Brisbane International last week.

Kyrgios, who last played at the Australian Open in 2022, said after his defeat in Brisbane he was worried that his wrist would not hold up at a Grand Slam.

His long-time friend and doubles partner Thanasi Kokkinakis



is one of many Australians hopeful said Kyrgios can do damage in Melbourne if he stays healthy.

"He's a different cat," he said. "Obviously has a different sort of energy about him, and he's a hell of a player, so I think people are going to love having him back."

That much, at least, is assured for arguably the most explosive

and unpredictable player in the modern game. Kyrgios never fails to pack in the fans and the crowd fervour can be off-putting for opponents, particularly at the home hero's favourite showcourt.

"Everyone was telling me, 'Oh, you'll really enjoy it, it's going to be amazing,'" said Briton Liam Broady, who was heckled relentlessly

in defeat to Kyrgios at John Cain Arena in 2022. "But I thought it was absolutely awful."

Despite his fitness concerns, Kyrgios has been named in Australia's Davis Cup squad to face Sweden on January 31 and February 1.

The Australian Open begins on January 12 at Melbourne Park.

## beIN Media Group extends exclusive rights deal to broadcast Australian Open live across Mena through 2029

**DOHA:** beIN Media Group ('beIN'), the global sports, entertainment, and media group, has announced a major media rights renewal to continue exclusively broadcasting the Australian Open in 24 countries across the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) through to 2029. The extension ensures beIN SPORTS, the broadcaster's flagship sports network, remains the region's undisputed home of tennis.

Building on a long-standing partnership that started with a seven-year deal in 2018, the new multi-year agreement with Tennis Australia starts with the 2025 tournament, which will run from 12-26 January, and will continue for a further four editions.

Tennis fans in the region will continue to enjoy comprehensive coverage of the season-opening Grand Slam on beIN SPORTS, including lead-in events and qualifying managed by Tennis Australia. Under the renewed deal, beIN SPORTS will expand access to all 15 match courts and provide 4K broadcasts from the iconic Rod Laver Arena. Mohammad al-Subaie, CEO of beIN MENA, said: "We are delighted to extend our partnership with the Australian Open to 2029. beIN's coverage of the Southern Hemisphere's only Grand Slam dates back to 2005 and this milestone reflects our ongoing commitment to bringing our viewers the best of international tennis. We look forward

to delivering five more years of high-stakes competition, incredible performances, and unforgettable moments from the sport's top-ranked players, ensuring our subscribers enjoy the very best of this iconic tournament." Cedric Cornelis, Tennis Australia



Chief Commercial Officer, said: "We are delighted to extend our partnership with beIN, a long-term valued broadcast partner of the Australian Open. This extension means the Australian Open will continue to find new audiences globally and that beIN subscribers can enjoy watching tennis in its most exciting form." beIN SPORTS has long been a home for tennis fans in the region, providing unparalleled coverage of the Australian Open alongside the other three Grand Slam tournaments at Roland Garros, Wimbledon, and the US Open at Flushing Meadows, as well as ATP events. Organised annually by Tennis Australia at Melbourne Park in Victoria, the Australian Open is the most-attended Grand Slam event including qualifying, with more than 1.1mn spectators at the 2024 edition.

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

# Djokovic with point to prove against younger rivals

'I'M READY TO COMPETE, WHATEVER IT TAKES, HOWEVER MANY HOURS IT TAKES WITH THE YOUNGSTERS'

AFP  
Melbourne

**N**ovak Djokovic returns to the scene of his greatest triumphs this week at the Australian Open, adamant he is ready and able to see off the challenge from Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz in his pursuit of a record 25th Grand Slam crown.

Chinks in the armour of the 37-year-old former world number one were exposed last year when he failed to clinch a major title for the first time since 2017, although he did win Olympic gold.

The Serb's fallibility was again on show when he was bundled out of the Brisbane International last week in the quarter-finals by American Reilly Opelka.

But with fellow great Rafael Nadal joining Roger Federer in retirement, Djokovic is fired up to prove he still has what it takes against the young brigade.

Djokovic has brought in former rival Andy Murray as coach in an eye-catching move that he hopes will give him a winning edge.

"The way I'm feeling, I still think that I can go strong for years to come," said Djokovic, now ranked seven in the world.

"I still love this sport and I still love competing."

"I'm ready to compete, whatever it takes, however many hours it takes with the youngsters."

Few would bet against Djokovic on the blue hardcourts of Melbourne Park, where he has long been a dominant force, winning a record 10 titles. Another would give him 25 major crowns to move him clear of Margaret Court as the outright leader.

Djokovic's stamina and skill will be put to the ultimate test against world number one and defending champion Sinner, just 23, and Alcaraz, already a four-time Slam winner at 21.

While Djokovic warmed up in Brisbane, Italy's Sinner and Spaniard Alcaraz opted against any competitive action with exhibition matches in Melbourne this week their main preparation.

Sinner won his maiden Slam in Australia last year, battling back from two sets down to beat Russia's Daniil Medvedev.

It lit the fuse to a sensational season where he became the first player since Federer in 2005 to go the year without a defeat in straight sets.

He made the semis at Roland Garros and Wimbledon, won the US Open and ATP Finals, and surged to the top of the rankings.



Novak Djokovic of Serbia (left) hits a return as coach Andy Murray looks on during a training session ahead of Australian Open in Melbourne. (AFP)



Defending champion Jannik Sinner (left) of Italy and Carlos Alcaraz of Spain. (AFP)



But Sinner will start his defence under a doping cloud after twice testing positive for a banned steroid in March.

The International Tennis Integrity Agency accepted his argument that the substance entered his system due to contamination and opted not to suspend him.

But the World Anti-Doping Agency appealed at the Court of

Arbitration for Sport and a verdict remains pending. "Of course it's in the head a little bit," Sinner admitted after leading his country to the Davis Cup title in November.

Alcaraz won Wimbledon and the French Open last season to cement his status as the future of the game, along with Sinner.

But he has yet to perform to his full potential in Australia, with a

quarter-final appearance in 2024 - where he was stunned by Alexander Zverev - his best effort.

According to reports in Spain, Alcaraz has switched to a heavier racquet in the off-season to generate more speed with his forehand on the Melbourne Park surface.

"Everything is an extra weapon to counteract the game of rivals such as Jannik Sinner and Alexan-

der Zverev, among others," said his coach Samuel Lopez.

Germany's Zverev is a threat again after winning the Rome and Paris Masters 1000 titles in recent months, which helped rocket him to two in the world.

He withdrew from the warm-up mixed-teams United Cup with a bicep strain but it was seen as precautionary as he targets a maiden Slam title. The unpredictable Medvedev has reached three of the last four Australian Open finals and can never be discounted.

Like Sinner and Alcaraz, the Russian did not play a warm-up event and his early season form is an unknown.

Local fans will give strong backing to Alex de Minaur, the world number eight, and showman Nick Kyrgios, who made his long-awaited comeback in Brisbane last week after a lengthy injury layoff.

Kyrgios was knocked out in the first round and admitted he would "almost need a miracle" for his wrist to hold up through five sets.

On Wednesday he pulled out of an exhibition match against Djokovic with an abdominal strain, casting fresh doubt on his fitness.

The Australian Open gets under way on Sunday.

MEN'S SEEDS

1. Jannik Sinner (ITA)
2. Alexander Zverev (GER)
3. Carlos Alcaraz (ESP)
4. Taylor Fritz (USA)
5. Daniil Medvedev (RUS)
6. Casper Ruud (NOR)
7. Novak Djokovic (SRB)
8. Alex de Minaur (AUS)
9. Andrey Rublev (RUS)
10. Grigor Dimitrov (BUL)
11. Stefanos Tsitsipas (GRE)
12. Tommy Paul (USA)
13. Holger Rune (DEN)
14. Ugo Humbert (FRA)
15. Jack Draper (GBR)
16. Lorenzo Musetti (ITA)
17. Frances Tiafoe (USA)
18. Hubert Hurkacz (POL)
19. Karen Khachanov (RUS)
20. Arthur Fils (FRA)
21. Ben Shelton (USA)
22. Sebastian Korda (USA)
23. Alejandro Tabilo (CHI)
24. Jiri Lehecka (CZE)
25. Alexei Popyrin (AUS)
26. Tomas Machac (CZE)
27. Jordan Thompson (AUS)
28. Sebastian Baez (ARG)
29. Felix Auger-Aliassime (CAN)
30. Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard (FRA)
31. Francisco Cerundolo (ARG)
32. Flavio Cobolli (ITA)

PAST CHAMPIONS

- 2024 - Jannik Sinner (ITA)
- 2023 - Novak Djokovic (SRB)
- 2022 - Rafael Nadal (ESP)
- 2021 - Novak Djokovic (SRB)
- 2020 - Novak Djokovic (SRB)
- 2019 - Novak Djokovic (SRB)
- 2018 - Roger Federer (SUI)
- 2017 - Roger Federer (SUI)
- 2016 - Novak Djokovic (SRB)
- 2015 - Novak Djokovic (SRB)
- 2014 - Stan Wawrinka (SUI)
- 2013 - Novak Djokovic (SRB)
- 2012 - Novak Djokovic (SRB)
- 2011 - Novak Djokovic (SRB)
- 2010 - Roger Federer (SUI)
- 2009 - Rafael Nadal (ESP)
- 2008 - Novak Djokovic (SRB)
- 2007 - Roger Federer (SUI)
- 2006 - Roger Federer (SUI)
- 2005 - Marat Safin (RUS)
- 2004 - Roger Federer (SUI)
- 2003 - Andre Agassi (USA)
- 2002 - Thomas Johansson (SWE)
- 2001 - Andre Agassi (USA)
- 2000 - Andre Agassi (USA)



## HORSE RACING

## El Ghazi claims Al Gharafa Cup after blistering run

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Representing the colours of HE Mansoor bin Ebrahim bin Saad al-Mahmoud, El Ghazi shed his maiden tag in style, claiming the day's feature race - the Al Gharafa Cup at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

Trained by Jassim Ghazali and ridden by Marco Casamento, the four-year-old Purebred Arabian son of Gazwan settled mid-pack before unleashing a blistering turn of foot in the final 200m to overtake the long-time leaders, secure a comfortable victory and complete a remarkable hat-trick for the trainer-jockey duo.

Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi, QREC Racing Manager, crowned the winners.

The trainer-jockey duo won the penultimate race of the day as Dubawi Spectre, in the colours of HE Mansoor bin Ebrahim bin Saad al-Mahmoud, won the Thoroughbred Handicap (80-105), for the four-year-old+. The five-year-old bay gelding beat Saif Rashid Saif al-Khayarin's Local Law by a length to win the 2,200m contest.

Earlier, Ghazali and Casamento were into the winners' enclosure when Al Rufaa Racing's Townsend Manor won the 1,100m contest for the Thoroughbred Handicap (80-100) for four-year-old+.

In the card opener, Al Shaqab Racing's Mohimma won the 2,000m contest - the Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate for four-year-olds. Jockey Faleh Bughanaim guided the Jean de Mieulle-trained bay colt to victory over Al Shahania Stud's Jeb'ran Al Shahania. In other races, Youssef Lachhab rode Al Amir to Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate title while Proud Samaritan was fastest in the Thoroughbred Novice Plate with Alberto Sanna in the saddle.

**RESULTS 20th Al Rayyan Race Meeting - Al Gharafa Cup at Al Uqda Racecourse WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)**

**1 - Al Gharafa Cup - 4yo Purebred Arabian (Class 2)**

El Ghazi, Jassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento

**2 - Thoroughbred Handicap 80-105 (Class 2)**

Dubawi Spectre, Jassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento

**3 - Thoroughbred Handicap 80-100 (Class 2)**

Townsend Manor, Jassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento

**4 - Purebred Arabian Handicap 70-90 (Class 3)**

Al Nati Up, Mohd Ahmed Mohd Hasan al-Sulaiti, Faleh Bughanaim

**5 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap 50-70 (Class 3)**

Al Nasr Al Washeek, Zuhair Mohsen, Abdulla Rashid al-Hajri

**6 - Purebred Arabian Handicap 65-85 (Class 4)**

Khatar Des Forges, Zuhair Mohsen, Abdulla Rashid al-Hajri

**7 - Thoroughbred Novice Plate (3yo Only) (Class 5)**

Proud Samaritan, Hamad al-Jehani, Alberto Sanna

**8 - Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate (Class 6)**

Al Amir, Alban Elie De Mieulle, Youssef Lachhab

**9 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate (4yo only) (Class 6)**

Mohimma, Jean de Mieulle, Faleh Bughanaim



Jockey Marco Casamento guided El Ghazi to the victory yesterday. PICTURE: Juhaim

## FOOTBALL

## Deschamps to leave France job after 2026 World Cup

'All good things come to an end, and you also need to know when to stop'

AFP  
Paris

France's 2018 World Cup-winning coach Didier Deschamps announced yesterday he will leave his post after the 2026 tournament in North America. "It will be 2026," Deschamps told French broadcaster TF1.

"I have been there since 2012, it is planned that I will be there until 2026... the next World Cup. It will end there because it has to end at some point. It's clear in my mind. I have done my time, with the same desire, the same passion to keep the France team at the highest level, but 2026 is good," he said.

Deschamps, 56, led France to World Cup glory in Russia in 2018 and guided them to the final of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar where they lost to Lionel Messi's Argentina on penalties. Following that heartbreaking loss in Doha, the French Football Federation rewarded Deschamps with a contract extension through to 2026.

That decision was not universally welcomed and criticism grew following last year's European Championship when France never fully convinced and were beaten in the semi-finals by eventual tournament winners Spain.

Deschamps also experienced a difficult end to 2024 with debate raging over the omission from the squad of captain Kylian Mbappe, who had a tough start to his time at Real Madrid and was, according to unconfirmed reports in Sweden, the focus of a rape allegation after a visit to Stockholm. The investigation has since been dropped.

"All good things come to an end, and you also need to know when to stop," Deschamps added as he spoke to reporters at an event in the south-western city of Bordeaux.

"It has been 12 years, and it will have been 14, which is fine. I have done my time, and I still have time left."

Now that Deschamps has resolved the question surrounding his future, he can focus on France's objectives on the pitch over the next 18 months. Zinedine Zidane, who won the 1998 World Cup as a player alongside Deschamps, has long been tipped as the favourite to eventually replace him in the dugout.

Now 52, Zidane has been lying in wait since ending his second spell as coach of Real Madrid in 2021. One of France's greatest ever



Didier Deschamps led France to World Cup glory in Russia in 2018 and guided them to the final of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar where they lost to Argentina on penalties. (AFP)

players, he won the Champions League three times with Madrid but has not managed any other club. "Nobody is irreplaceable," admitted Deschamps. "I have tried to be as indispensable as possible with the results that you know, but that is behind us now."

Zidane's shadow will continue to hang over the France team in the coming months, as they prepare for their next matches, beginning with a two-legged Nations League quarter-final in March against Croatia. Should Les Bleus beat the team they defeated in the 2018 World Cup final, they will advance to the final four of the Nations League in June.

Once that competition is out of the way, they will begin the qualifying campaign for the World Cup, which will take place in the United States, Canada and Mexico in June and July next year. Assuming France qualify, that will be their seventh major tournament finals under Deschamps, who took over a team at a low ebb in 2012 from Laurent Blanc.

He led them to the quarter-finals of the 2014

World Cup, his first tournament in charge. They then reached the Euro 2016 final as hosts before their fine performances at the last two World Cups. France also won the Nations League in 2021 and their only truly below-par showing at a recent major tournament came at Euro 2020, when they lost on penalties to Switzerland in the last 16.

As a player, midfielder Deschamps captained France when they won the 1998 World Cup at home, defeating Brazil in the final. He also captained France to the Euro 2000 title and skippered the great Marseille side that remains the only French team to have won the Champions League, when they beat AC Milan in the 1993 final.

Deschamps is one of only three men to have won the World Cup both as a player and as a coach - the other two, Mario Zagallo of Brazil and Germany's Franz Beckenbauer, both died last year. He also played for and coached Juventus, and led Monaco to the Champions League final in 2004.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Peacock vs Suzuki Muay Thai clash added to ONE 171: Qatar

ONE Championship, the world's largest martial arts organisation, announced that another marquee bout has been added to ONE 171: Qatar, presented by Visit Qatar, scheduled for Lusail Sports Arena on Thursday, February 20.

English-Canadian star Jake Peacock will face Japanese veteran Shinji Suzuki in a three-round bantamweight Muay Thai contest.

ONE 171: Qatar will also feature two massive World Title showdowns. ONE Bantamweight Kickboxing World Champion Jonathan Haggerty will defend his gold against No 1 ranked contender Wei Rui, while ONE Strawweight MMA World Champion Joshua Pacio will face interim titleholder Jarred Brooks for the third time in

a World Title unification bout. More blockbuster matchups for ONE 171: Qatar will be announced at a later date.

**ONE 171: QATAR FIGHT SCHEDULE**

ONE Bantamweight Kickboxing World Championship: (C) Jonathan Haggerty vs. (I) Wei Rui  
ONE Strawweight MMA World Championship: (C) Joshua Pacio vs. (IC) Jarred Brooks  
Welterweight MMA: Roberto Soldic vs. Dagi Arslanaliyev  
Bantamweight MMA: Bibiano Fernandes vs. Kevin Belingon  
Featherweight MMA: (3) Shamil Gasanov vs. (4) Martin Nguyen  
Atomweight MMA: (5) Ayaka Miura vs. Ritu Phogat  
Bantamweight Muay Thai: Jake Peacock vs. Shinji Suzuki



## West Ham sack manager Lopetegui with Potter expected to take over

London: West Ham sacked manager Julen Lopetegui after just 22 games in charge, with former Chelsea boss Graham Potter expected to replace him at the London Stadium.

The Hammers are 14th in the Premier League table, seven points above the relegation zone, after just six wins in 20 league matches during the Spaniard's tenure. A 4-1 hammering at champions Manchester City on Saturday was the final straw for club chiefs.

Lopetegui, 58, took training as usual on Tuesday and reported for work yesterday to be officially told his spell in charge was over. West Ham were among the biggest spenders in the Premier League in the summer transfer window, splashing out around £125mn on players including

Max Kilman, Crysencio Summerville and Niclas Fullkrug.

But Lopetegui won just one of his first six league games and oversaw several heavy defeats, including a 5-2 loss to Arsenal and a 5-0 drubbing by Liverpool, both at home. The former Real Madrid and Spain boss was appointed in May last year to replace David Moyes, who left at the end of last season after a second spell at the London club.

Under the Scot, West Ham qualified for European competition for three consecutive seasons, winning the Europa Conference League in 2023 to secure the club's first major trophy in 43 years. West Ham face Aston Villa in the FA Cup third round tomorrow night in Premier League matches against Fulham and Crystal Palace.

## FOCUS

## Olmo cleared to play for Barcelona by Spanish sports council

AFP  
Madrid

Barcelona players Dani Olmo and Pau Victor can play for the club on a temporary basis after the Spanish sports council (CSD) granted the Catalans precautionary permission yesterday.

The financially-struggling side failed to register the duo before the deadline at the end of last year after Olmo and Victor were given temporary licences when they joined in the summer. The CSD decided Olmo and Victor can be selected by Barca until they make a definitive ruling in the club's case against La Liga and the Spanish football federation (RFEF), who did not let the club re-

new their registrations.

"This measure, which is provisional until the appeal filed by the club and the aforementioned players is finally resolved, suspends (La Liga and RFEF's decision), and the cancellation of the sports licenses of the aforementioned players," said the CSD in a statement. "It also maintains the validity of said licenses until this appeal is finally resolved."

Olmo and Victor missed Barcelona's Spanish Super Cup semi-final clash in Saudi Arabia with Athletic Bilbao last night. The pair would be eligible to play in a potential final on Sunday should they qualify, and in Barcelona's matches after that, until the CSD reach a final ruling.

Olmo and Victor missed the club's Copa del Rey round of 32 win at Barbastro on Sat-

urday, with Barcelona presenting their case to the CSD on Tuesday. The players were initially registered on a short-term basis, as Barcelona took advantage of a financial loophole following an injury to defender Andreas Christensen.

After Barca lost two court cases aiming to secure new licenses for the duo last week, they sold VIP boxes for their new Spotify Camp Nou stadium, still under construction, for a reported 100mn to be able to operate within La Liga's financial fair play scheme. However the deal was finalised and paperwork sent three days after the league's deadline.

La Liga confirmed Barcelona have now met the financial requirements but Olmo and Victor's licenses had expired, and regulations prevent players "obtaining another

license at the same club to which they were already linked" in the course of one season.

Spanish media reported that Barcelona are arguing that the rule is obsolete, as they now have the funds while the transfer window is open, they should be allowed to register the duo.

**BARCELONA TO FACE BETIS IN COPA DEL REY LAST 16**

Record 31-time Copa del Rey winners Barcelona were drawn at home against Real Betis in the last 16. Holders Athletic Bilbao welcome Osasuna while Spanish champions Real Madrid host Celta Vigo.

Diego Simeone's Atletico Madrid visit second-division Elche, while fourth-tier Pontevedra, the lowest ranked side left in the competition, host La Liga team Getafe.