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Glory Of The Stars claims Distaff Cup with commanding win



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Sabalenka eyes Australian Open win to widen gap on rivals rankings

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FOOTBALL

Title race heats up as Qatar Stars League resumes

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DAKAR RALLY

Quintero takes fifth stage after penalty denies al-Attiyah victory

AFP
Hail, Saudi Arabia

American driver Seth Quintero won the fourth stage of the Dakar Rally in Saudi Arabia yesterday by one second after Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah, who was first across the line, was penalised 10 minutes.

Al-Attiyah, the five-time champion, had produced what appeared to be a masterclass in his Renault-owned Dacia as he tried to make up the half-hour he lost the day before and was initially proclaimed the winner of the 428km special stage between Al-Ula and Hail. However, the judges handed him a penalty, which left him just behind Quintero who took his second win of the rally in his Toyota.

"Nasser al-Attiyah received a 10-minute penalty. The explanation is that he arrived with a spare wheel missing from his vehicle," the organisers told the press. Since the start of the Dakar last Friday, this is the third stage in which the organisers have changed the stage winner after the finish,

due to penalties or bonuses.

Al-Attiyah remained 35 minutes behind leader Henk Lategan after starting the stage 35 minutes and 53 seconds adrift. Without the penalty he would have had a career 49th stage win, one short of the record held jointly by Stephane Peterhansel and Ari Vatanen. The 54-year-old is still waiting to extend his record of winning at least one stage in the Dakar Rally to 18 editions in a row.

Quintero completed the stage in 4 hours 32 minutes and 53 seconds, one second better than al-Attiyah's adjusted time. He was a further seven seconds in front of Swedish driver Mattias Ektstrom.

"The first week was pretty good for us, with a victory at the start and two second places. But, on the other hand, we also lost 40 minutes on the '48hr Chrono' stage and with the punctures yesterday," said Quintero, who won stage 1 on Saturday and is ninth in the overall rankings, one and half hours behind Lategan (Toyota). "All in all, it's not too bad. Now, for us it will be upwards and onwards."

South African Lategan, came in fourth.

He is 10min 17sec ahead of Saudi driver Yazeed al-Rajhi in the overall standings with Ekstrom third at 20min 54sec. Defending champion Carlos Sainz withdrew on Monday after rolling his car the previous day while nine-time world rally champion Sebastien Loeb was forced abandon his dream of a first Dakar win after he was ruled out on Tuesday.

A time penalty also resulted in a change of winner in the bikes with Luciano Benavides on a KTM handed win after Frenchman Adrien Van Beveren was docked two minutes for speeding on his Honda. Benavides finished in 4hrs 53min, 47sec ahead of Van Beveren's adjusted time.

"I hope that the strategy will work in my favour for the second week," said Benavides, the 2023 rally-raid world champion. Chilean rider Jose Ignacio Cornejo Florimo rounded off the day's podium on his Hero. Australian Daniel Sanders (KTM) remains comfortably in the lead, 7min 2sec ahead of Spaniard Tosha Schareina (Honda).

Today is a rest day with the second half of the two-week event starting tomorrow from Hail to Al-Duwadimi.



Dacia Sandriders' Nasser al-Attiyah and Edouard Boulanger in action. (Reuters)

EQUESTRIAN

Bastida and Erman shine on opening day of Doha Tour

Egypt's Sayed claims the top spot in CSI2* 130cm class, while Italy's Gaudio wins CSI2* 145cm class

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Under the slogan "Where nobility meets history", the opening round of the Doha International Equestrian Tour 2025 kicked off at the glorious Longines Arena at Al Shaqab yesterday.

The first day of the three-day tour witnessed the one-star, two-star and four-star categories in 6 rounds and at different heights, in addition to holding a local round for future riders at a height of 60cm. The two-star category rounds were exciting until the very last.

The World Cup qualifying CSI4*-W - Faults & Time - 145cm (LR) class saw Spaniard Mariano Martinez Bastida excel on Jup with a flawless time of 65.51secs while Saudi Arabia's Abdullah Alsharbatly astride Fiumicino van de Kalevallei was second in 65.80secs, and his compatriot Abdulrahman Alrajhi astride Ventago third in 66.52secs. The winners were honoured by Hamza al-Kuwari, Director of Corporate Services at Al Shaqab.

The CSI4*-W - Two Phases - 140cm class saw French rider Antoine Erman emerge best clocking a superb 25.94 seconds on the back of Pegasus Dawsons Flex, followed by the British eider Millie Allen finishing a close second in 26.51 seconds astride Quick Diamant HR. Qatar-based French rider Cyrine Cherif claimed a creditable third spot with a 26.53 seconds routine on Triple T Calamando Blue. The winners were honoured by Faisal al-Kahla, the Tour's Deputy Director.

In the two-star category (CSI2*-130cm), Egyptian Ali Osama Sayed claimed the top spot returning a time of 34.47 seconds astride mare Obama van de Kwachthoeve, while Inigo Lopez De La Osa Franco from the Principality of Monaco was second clocking 34.75 seconds on stallion Golden Diamond. Egyptian Ismail Osama El Borai finished third with a time of 35.3 seconds on mare Kadoki. The winners were honoured by Sheikh Ahmed bin Noah al-Thani, Secretary-General of Qatar Equestrian Federation, and by Dr Ismail Mohamed Shaker, President of the Egyptian Equestrian Federation.

In the second round of the same category (145cm), Italian rider Emanuele Gaudio claimed the top podium place with a flawless routine in a swift 61.7 seconds on Quirinus 27, followed by Italian Mariano Martinez Bastida (62.54 seconds on Quark de Preuille Z), while Austrian Gerfried Back was third in 63.08 seconds on Idiaal Special H J Nasser al-Kuwari, Director of Purchasing and Logistics at Al Shaqab, honoured the winners.



Spain's Mariano Martinez Bastida celebrates with gelding Jup after winning the World Cup qualifying CSI4*-W - Faults & Time - 145cm class during the Doha International Equestrian Tour at the Al Shaqab yesterday.



CSI4*-145cm winner Mariano Martinez Bastida, runner-up Abdullah Alsharbatly and third-placed Abdulrahman Alrajhi pose with Hamza al-Kuwari, Corporate Services Director at Al Shaqab.

In the CSI1* - Special Two-Phase - 110cm category, Saudi rider Hassan al-Hady took the top honours astride Morgana finishing the routine in 27.39 seconds, followed by Qatari rider Abdulaziz Ahmed al-Mohannadi on Peppercrack K in second place (27.69 seconds), and Qatari Mohammed Faisal al-Marri finished third with Miss Chile (27.7 seconds).

In the CSI1* - Faults & Time - 120cm category, Jordanian Mohammed Abu Hamour stood first in 50.01 seconds on his mount Mandela, followed by Egyptian rider Saif Yasser Fekry in second place with a time of 51.18 seconds on Mambria, and Qatar's Fahad bin Jassim bin Hamad al-Thani came third with a time of 52.22 seconds on Ciara LU. The winners were honoured by Abdulrahman al-Kaabi, Commercial Director of Al Shaqab.

In order to prepare Future Riders and involve them in the championship and to help develop their abilities and skills, the organising committee ensured a round at a height of 60cm wherein 28 riders entered the class. The round witnessed excitement among the riders, and at the end of the round, Mohammed Jaber al-Khayarin, the Event Director, honoured the owners of the first three places and distributed prizes to the winners.

Commenting on the start of the event, al-Khayarin said the first day witnessed a diverse class of riders claiming the top places, along with the presence of Qatari riders on the podiums despite the toughness of the competition given the presence



Future riders 60cm podium finishers Nasser Hamd al-Thani, Asmaa Ahmad al-Sulaiti, Salman Faisal al-Marri, Shaikha Mohamed al-Thani, Khalifa Joaan al-Thani and Mohammed Saleh al-Fadala were honoured by Doha Tour Event Director Mohammed Jaber al-Khayarin.

of top riders from all over the world.

He pointed out that the Tour is being held in an ideal atmosphere and is organised according to the plan, thanks to the

efforts of the various committees supervising the conduct, which include Qatari cadres who have gained extensive experience in organising international tourna-

ments held in the country. Qatar has also become a major destination for equestrianism, as it hosts many global events and competitions in this field.

HORSE RACING

Glory Of The Stars secures Distaff Cup with fine victory at Al Uqda Racecourse

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Glory Of The Stars, owned by Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik, continued her winning streak by securing the Distaff Cup in style at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

The five-year-old mare, trained by Debbie Mountain Clare Mountain and ridden by Jefferson Smith, showcased her growing confidence after breaking her maiden just two weeks ago.

Displaying an impressive turn of foot in the final 200m, she surged past the leading pack to claim a commanding three-and-a-half length victory.

The win marked a superb double on the day for her connections as Clare Mountain –trained Road To The East had earlier won the Thoroughbred Handicap 50-70 under Alberto Sanna.

Also yesterday, Marco Casamento completed a double after

guiding Dhouha to Local Purebred Arabian Handicap 70-90 title. The jockey, who secured a treble on Wednesday including the Al Gharafa Cup triumph, also claimed the Local Thoroughbred Handicap 35-55 with Jassim Ghazali-trained Moharb.

Jockey Gavin Matt Ryan also grabbed two titles, riding Al Mosayterah (Purebred Arabian Handicap 55-75) and Muqtarib (Local Purebred Arabian Handicap 55-75) to victories.

Meanwhile, Gaeeda Al Shahania, ridden by Lukas Delozier, also notched up a win after prevailing in Purebred Arabian Novice Plate.

Results

WINNERS: Horse, Trainer, Jockey

- 1 - Distaff Cup - Thoroughbred Fillies & Mares Graduation Plate**
Glory Of The Stars, Deborah Amanda Clare Mountain, Jefferson Smith
- 2 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap 70-90**
Dhouha, Hadi Al Ramzani, Marco Casamento
- 3 - Purebred Arabian Novice Plate (4yo Only)**
Gaeeda Al Shahania, Rudy Andre Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier
- 4 - Purebred Arabian Handicap 55-75**
Al Mosayterah, Julian Colin Smart, Gavin Matt Ryan
- 5 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap 35-55 (Class 5) (Rail out 3m)**
Moharb, Jassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento
- 6 - Thoroughbred Handicap 50-70 (Class 5)**
Road To The East, Deborah
- 7 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap 55-75 (Class 5)**
Muqtarib, Julian Colin Smart, Gavin Matt Ryan



Jefferson Smith rides Glory Of The Stars to Distaff Cup victory at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim



The connections of Glory Of The Stars celebrate with the trophies after the five-year-old mare won the Distaff Cup at Al Uqda Racecourse.

CRICKET

Maxwell ignored as Australia pick squad for SL tour

Mitch Marsh fails to make the cut for the two-match Test series

Reuters
Melbourne

Glenn Maxwell's hopes of reviving his Test career may be over after the all-rounder missed out on selection in Australia's much-changed squad for the Sri Lanka tour.

All-rounder Mitchell Marsh has also been overlooked for the squad, which will be captained by Steve Smith, having been dropped for the fifth test against India in Sydney after a poor run with the bat.

Selectors have instead opted for uncapped all-rounder Cooper Connolly as another spin option, joining Nathan Lyon, Todd Murphy and Matthew Kuhnemann.

Batter Nathan McSweeney, who was dropped mid-series against India after struggling as an opener, has been recalled in the 16-man roster named yesterday for the two-test series starting in Galle from Jan 29.

"Sri Lanka is a challenging and exciting place to tour given the different conditions the players may experience," chair of selectors George Bailey said. "This squad provides several ways to structure the XI depending on what type of wickets they may encounter in each match."

"We are excited about the opportunity ahead for the squad members who are at the start of



Australian Test players Sam Konstas (left) and teammate Beau Webster seen in this 2024 file photo. Both players are set for their overseas Test tour with the Australian side that will head to Sri Lanka for a two-Test series later this month.

their Test careers to continue to grow their games in subcontinent conditions where we have a number of important tours in coming years."

Regular skipper Pat Cummins is on paternity leave and focusing on an ankle issue which he managed against India, while pace stalwart Josh Hazlewood was omitted as he recovers from a calf injury that sidelined him during

the India series. Teenage opener Sam Konstas and all-rounder Beau Webster have been retained in the squad following impressive Test debuts against India in the last two weeks.

Uncapped quick Sean Abbott joins Mitchell Starc and Scott Boland among the pace options.

Australia, who beat India 3-1, have already sewn up their place in the World Test Champion-

ship final against South Africa at Lord's in June.

Squad: Steve Smith (captain), Sean Abbott, Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Cooper Connolly, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Usman Khawaja, Sam Konstas, Matt Kuhnemann, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Nathan McSweeney, Todd Murphy, Mitchell Starc, Beau Webster

SPOTLIGHT

QCA and QWSC sign co-operation agreement



Qatar Cricket Association President Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Saoud bin Abdulrahman al-Thani and Qatar Women's Sports Committee President Lolwah Hussein al-Marri at a press conference in Doha.

QNA
Doha

Qatar Cricket Association (QCA) signed a co-operation deal with Qatar Women's Sports Committee (QWSC), intended for boosting women's participation in cricket.

The agreement was disclosed at a press conference at the Qatar Olympic Committee, attended by QCA President Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Saoud bin Abdulrahman al-

Thani, and QWSC President Lolwah Hussein al-Marri, along with officials from both sides.

Under the deal, the two parties would collaborate in holding joint tournaments and training courses and organising awareness campaigns to introduce girls to the importance of practising cricket.

Sheikh Abdulaziz said the agreement boosts the QCA's efforts to enhance women's participation in cricket. Al-Marri stressed QWSC's commitment to supporting Qatari women, voicing hopes the deal will inspire future generations.

US withholds \$3.6mn payment to world anti-doping body

Washington: The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) is facing a crisis after the US government refused to make a \$3.6mn contribution to the global watchdog's annual budget amid an ongoing row over a doping scandal involving Chinese swimmers. WADA said on Wednesday the US had missed the December 31, 2024 deadline for payment and as a result US representatives would be barred from the global anti-doping watchdog's foundation board or executive committee.

The chief executive of the US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA), Travis Tygart, said his organisation "fully supports this decision" by the US government "as the only right choice to protect athletes' rights, accountability and fair competition."

"Unfortunately, the current WADA leaders left the US with no other option after failing to deliver on several very reasonable requests, such as an independent audit of WADA's operations, to achieve the transparency and accountability needed to ensure WADA is fit for purpose to protect athletes," Tygart said.

The Americans' move comes after a series of rows between WADA and USADA sparked when it was revealed last year the global body had cleared 23 Chinese swimmers to compete at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, despite testing positive for the banned heart drug trimetazidine. Tygart was furious WADA accepted the Chinese anti-doping agency's argument that all of the swimmers could have been contaminated by a kitchen at the team hotel.

The funding decision indicates

however a more formal breakdown in relations between WADA and the nation that will host the men's football World Cup in 2026 and the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.

"Since the exposure of WADA's failed handling of the 23 Chinese swimmers' positive tests that gave China and its athletes special treatment under the rules, many stakeholders from around the world, including athletes, governments, and national anti-doping agencies, have sought answers, transparency, and accountability from WADA leadership," Tygart said.

"Significant reform at WADA must occur to ensure this never happens again," he added. In a statement, WADA confirmed the non-payment and said the move would prevent US representatives participating in its decision-making bodies in 2025. WADA said the US government owes a total of \$3.625mn out of the global body's overall 2024 operating budget of \$57.5mn.

China, by comparison, paid \$778,000. WADA President Witold Banka said last year Tygart had accused him of "really terrible things" over the Chinese swimmers' affair and threatened legal action. The United States has been the top government contributor to WADA's budget since it was created in 2000.

Tygart noted on Wednesday that the authority to withhold payment to WADA was established in 2019 when Donald Trump was last US president. That came in the aftermath of the Russia state-sponsored doping scheme surrounding the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics.

TABLE TENNIS

Eerland stuns Batra to reach last 16 in Doha



Britt Eerland celebrates after beating No 14 seed Manika Batra to reach the last 16 of the Women's Singles draw at WTT Star Contender Doha 2025. Eerland won 10-12, 11-8, 11-8, 11-3. (@WTTGlobal)

worldtabletennis.com
Doha

Celebrating with a beaming smile on her face, Britt Eerland reached the last 16 of the Women's Singles draw at WTT Star Contender Doha 2025 after pulling off an eye-catching 3-1 win over No 14 seed Manika Batra (10-12, 11-8, 11-8, 11-3).

Coming to terms with an early setback in game one, Eerland kept her cool in the heat of pressure to mount a fine comeback, picking up not one, not two, but three games on the bounce to punch her ticket to the third round for the first time at WTT Star Contender level.

Digging deep at 3-7 down in the second game having already lost out in the first, Bernadette Szocs showed excellent fighting spirit to reverse her fortunes against Zong Geman yesterday. Keeping her eye on the prize all the way to the finish line, Bernie celebrated a hard-fought win with

passion, denying Zong the upset win in five (3-11, 11-9, 8-11, 11-9, 11-9).

The Men's Singles draw has been blown wide open following a shock round of 32 exit for No.3 seed Patrick Franziska. All appeared to be going smoothly for the German in the early stages of his clash against Park Ganghyeon, but the qualifying hero would go on to completely turn the scoreboard on its head, fighting back from 0-2 to stun Franziska 3-2 (9-11, 8-11, 11-8, 11-8, 11-8).

Thibault Poret is on a roll in Doha, picking up another impressive win yesterday against No.14 seed Lim Jonghoon (11-6, 9-11, 8-11, 11-8, 11-8) to reach his first round of 16 on the WTT Star Contender stage.

Sending a real message of intent to the rest of the Mixed Doubles playing field, Shi Xunhao and Huang Youzheng tapped into each other's strengths to eliminate No.1 seeds Doo Hoi Kem and Wong Chun Ting in the quarter-finals (11-8, 10-12, 11-2, 11-6).

PREVIEW

Sabalenka targets AO win to widen gap on rankings

Big question ahead of year's first Grand Slam: Can anyone stop the Belarusian in Melbourne?

Reuters
Melbourne

Aryna Sabalenka will look to join a select group of players to win three straight Australian Open titles this month but the big question ahead of the year's first Grand Slam is can anyone stop the Belarusian from tightening her grip on the women's game?

The 26-year-old world number one is the red-hot favourite at Melbourne Park, where another victory would give her a fourth major title and widen the gap in the rankings to Poland's Iga Swiatek and Coco Gauff of the United States.

Sabalenka, who started her season by winning an 18th career WTA title in Brisbane on Sunday, has reached at least the semi-finals at nine of her last 12 Grand Slams, a run which included the addition of the US Open crown to her trophy cabinet.

That kind of form has earned comparisons with Serena Williams, who got to the final four at 10 Grand Slams between 2014 and 2017 during a run when the American great won six of her 23 major titles.

"Definitely, I've got some confidence at the Grand Slams," said Sabalenka, who can become the first woman to capture three successive Australian Open titles since Switzerland's Martina Hingis achieved the feat from 1997-1999.

"I know I'm capable of so many things, that I'm able to hold that beautiful trophy. It's good to know that."

"But there's still (some) way to go. A lot of things have to be done. You have to focus on improving yourself every day, do your best, and hope for the best. That's my



Aryna Sabalenka (left) of Belarus and Poland's Iga Swiatek are seen during separate training sessions ahead of the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters/AFP)



mentality going into the Australian Open."

After being replaced by Sabalenka as world number one at the end of last season, Swiatek has no shortage of motivation heading into the Melbourne Park major.

The Pole held the top spot for 125 weeks during two spells from the 2022 season and while the clay courts of Paris continue to offer her the best chance of adding to her five major titles she is already showing strong form in Australia.

A Melbourne semi-finalist in 2022, Swiatek, 23, delivered some strong individual performances in

the United Cup mixed team competition, taking Poland to the final last weekend.

"I'm very satisfied with my game," said the world number two, who served a month-long suspension late last year over a doping violation. "I was able to overcome difficult moments by maintaining a high level of tennis for a long time. This is what all players seek, so it's nice to feel like this already in the first week of competition."

Swiatek came up short in her bid to lead Poland to victory at the United Cup after she lost in straight sets to American Gauff,

who hailed the win over the Pole as one of the best performances of her career. Gauff's sole Grand Slam title came at Flushing Meadows in 2023 and she underlined her hard-court credentials by beating both Sabalenka and Swiatek en route to winning the WTA Finals in November.

"I think after the way she finished (last season), she's going to be really interesting to see," said Australia's former women's doubles world number one Rennae Stubbs.

"I believe she has absolutely put her hands up to be one of the fa-

vourites for the Australian Open."

Last year's tournament highlighted the depth of the women's game with China's Zheng Qinwen enjoying an inspired run to the final and the Olympic champion will be fresh for another tilt at the title after opting out of warm-up tournaments. Melbourne's blue courts have often favoured big hitters like Zheng and there are few women on the tour who pack a punch like Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina, the 2022 Wimbledon champion.

Rybakina, who lost to Sabalenka in the 2023 Australian Open final, has bolstered her team by adding

Novak Djokovic's former coach Goran Ivanisevic and has already started to reap the rewards with dominant displays in the build-up to the Jan. 12-26 Grand Slam.

Four-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka should also be in the mix, providing she overcomes the abdominal issue that scuttled her Auckland title bid. Jasmine Paolini was the surprise package of the 2024 season with runner-up finishes at the French Open and Wimbledon and the ever-smiling Italian will hope she can be three-time lucky in the tournament dubbed the "Happy Slam".

SPOTLIGHT

Djokovic gets tough draw, Sinner faces Jarry test

AFP
Melbourne

World number one Jannik Sinner was drawn yesterday against big-hitting Nicolas Jarry to start his Australian Open defence while Novak Djokovic is on a collision course to meet Carlos Alcaraz in the quarter-finals.

Italy's Sinner defeated Russia's Daniil Medvedev in last year's final in Melbourne to secure his first major and went on to add the US Open and ATP Finals crowns to his collection.

But the top seed will begin his title defence under a doping cloud after twice testing positive for traces of the steroid clostebol in March.

He was exonerated by the International Tennis Integrity Agency but is awaiting the outcome of an appeal by the World Anti-Doping Agency.

The 23-year-old could meet Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas or Australian Alex de Minaur in the quarter-finals, and Medvedev in the semis.

Serbia's Djokovic drew American wildcard Nishesh Basavareddy to start but has a huge



Britain's Andy Murray (left) reacts with Serbia's Novak Djokovic during a charity event titled 'Night with Novak' on Rod Laver Arena in Melbourne ahead of the Australian Open starting on January 12. (AFP)

task in front of him to win an 11th Australian Open and record 25th Grand Slam.

He is seeded to meet world number 10 Grigor Dimitrov in round four and Spain's Alcaraz in the last eight, before a potential

clash with Alexander Zverev in the semi-finals.

Alcaraz gets under way against Kazakhstan's Alexander Shevchenko, who scored a confidence-boosting win over world number 11 Tsitsipas at the recent

United Cup tournament. Zverev will meet French wildcard Lucas Pouille.

In the women's draw, world number one Aryna Sabalenka kicks off her title defence against American former US Open winner Sloane Stephens.

World number three Coco Gauff also faces a tricky start, against 2020 Australian Open winner Sofia Kenin.

But second seed Iga Swiatek was handed an easier assignment against Czech doubles specialist Katerina Siniakova, ranked 46.

However, the Polish star has sixth seed Elena Rybakina and eighth seed Emma Navarro in her half of the draw. Two-time major runner-up and fourth seed Jasmine Paolini takes on a qualifier, as does Chinese fifth seed Zheng Qinwen, who lost to Sabalenka in last year's final.

In another notable match, four-time Grand Slam winner Naomi Osaka opens against Caroline Garcia in a repeat of last year's first round clash that the French player won.

Djokovic says he was 'poisoned' before 2022 Australian Open

Paris: Novak Djokovic claimed yesterday that he was "poisoned" by lead and mercury in his food during his troubled and brief stay in Melbourne in 2022 before he was deported on the eve of the Australian Open.

The former world number one had his visa cancelled and was eventually kicked out of the country over his refusal to be vaccinated against Covid.

He was held in a detention hotel as he fought a fruitless legal battle to remain.

"I had some health issues. And I realised that in that hotel in Melbourne I was fed some food that poisoned me," the 37-year-old Djokovic told GQ magazine in a lengthy interview.

"I had some discoveries when I came back to Serbia. I never told this to anybody publicly, but discoveries that I had a really high level of heavy metal. I had lead, a very high level of lead and mercury."

When asked if he believed his food was contaminated, the Serb replied: "That's the only way."

GQ said they reached out to Australia's Department of Home Affairs for a response but were told that they couldn't comment "for

privacy reasons". Djokovic will be bidding for an 11th Australian Open title and a record-setting 25th major when the season's first Grand Slam event gets underway on Sunday.

He insists that he does not hold "any grudge over the Australian people" despite the 2022 controversy. Indeed, 12 months later, he returned to Melbourne where he swept to the title.

"A lot of Australian people that I meet in Australia the last few years or elsewhere in the world, have come up to me, apologising to me for the treatment I received because they were embarrassed by their own government at that point," he said.

"And I think the government's changed, and they reinstated my visa, and I was very grateful for that."

"I actually love being there, and I think my results are a testament to my sensation of playing tennis and just being in that country."

However, he added: "Never meet the people that deported me from that country a few years ago. I don't have a desire to meet with them. If I do one day, that's fine as well. I'm happy to shake hands and move on."

AUSTRALIAN OPEN SINGLES CHAMPIONS

MEN'S

- 2024 Jannik Sinner (Italy) beat D Medvedev (Russia) 3-6 3-6 6-4 6-4 6-3
- 2023 Novak Djokovic (Serbia) beat S Tsitsipas (Greece) 6-3 7-6(4) 7-6(5)
- 2022 Rafa Nadal (Spain) beat Medvedev (Russia) 6-4 6-4 7-5
- 2021 Djokovic (Serbia) beat Medvedev (Russia) 7-5 6-2 6-2
- 2020 Djokovic (Serbia) beat Dominic Thiem (Austria) 6-4 4-6 2-6 6-3 6-4
- 2019 Djokovic (Serbia) beat Nadal (Spain) 6-3 6-2 6-3
- 2018 Roger Federer (Switzerland) beat Marin Cilic (Croatia) 6-2 6-7(5) 6-3 3-6 6-1
- 2017 Federer (Switzerland) beat Nadal (Spain) 6-4 3-6 6-1 3-6 6-3
- 2016 Djokovic (Serbia) beat Andy Murray (Britain) 6-1 7-5 7-6(3)
- 2015 Djokovic (Serbia) beat Murray (Britain) 7-6(5) 6-7(4) 6-3 6-0

WOMEN'S

- 2024 Aryna Sabalenka (Belarus) beat Zheng Qinwen (China) 6-3 6-2
- 2023 Sabalenka beat Elena Rybakina (Kazakhstan) 4-6 6-3 6-4
- 2022 Ash Barty (Australia) beat Danielle Collins (US) 6-3 7-6(2)
- 2021 Naomi Osaka (Japan) beat Jennifer Brady (US) 6-4 6-3
- 2020 Sofia Kenin (US) beat Garbine Muguruza (Spain) 4-6 6-2 6-2
- 2019 Osaka beat Petra Kvitova (Czech Republic) 7-6(2) 5-7 6-4
- 2018 Caroline Wozniacki (Denmark) beat Simona Halep (Romania) 7-6(2) 3-6 6-4
- 2017 Serena Williams (US) beat Venus Williams (US) 6-4 6-4
- 2016 Angelique Kerber (Germany) beat Serena Williams 6-4 3-6 6-4
- 2015 Serena Williams beat Maria Sharapova (Russia) 6-3 7-6(5)



Current Australian Open champions Aryna Sabalenka (left) of Belarus and Italy's Jannik Sinner hold the trophies in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

PREVIEW

Title race heats up as Qatar Stars League resumes

Al Duhail hold a three-point lead at the top over Al Sadd

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The second half of the Qatar Stars League begins today, with the title race still wide open. Al Duhail hold a three-point lead at the top, but defending champions Al Sadd are breathing down their necks after a poor start to the season.

Neither of the two bigwigs will be in action today, as they are scheduled to play on Sunday, with Al Duhail facing Qatar SC and Al Sadd taking on Al Shamal.

Third-placed Al Ahli, who have exceeded expectations this season, will play tomorrow against Al Wakrah. Meanwhile, Al Gharafa, fourth in the table, face Al Khor.

Today, two high-profile teams – Al Rayyan and Al Arabi – who have both underperformed so far this season, will kick off the second half hoping to turn their fortunes around.

Al Rayyan will take on Umm Salal to kick off the 12th round of matches at the Grand Hamad Stadium. Both teams are eager for a win to avoid further setbacks at this critical juncture in the league. Separated by just one point, Umm Salal sit in sixth place with 14 points, while Al Rayyan are eighth with 13 points.

Umm Salal will aim to avenge their first-leg defeat to Al Rayyan, which ended in a 1-3 loss. They approach this match with renewed confidence after a victory over Al Arabi in the eleventh round.

Umm Salal coach Pablo Machin acknowledged the importance of the match and said the recent break was beneficial for his players. "The Al Rayyan match is very important, and we had a good preparation period during the break. Our full focus is on this match, especially since it comes after the break, which was very beneficial for the players," he said.

"We used this period to treat injuries, correct mistakes, and focus on the game plans we will rely on in upcoming matches. We realise that the second leg of the league will be challenging, and we hope to perform better against Al Rayyan to win three points. The players have shown great enthusiasm during the past period," Machin added.

Al Rayyan, on the other hand, will have new coach Artur Jorge on the sidelines after the Portuguese replaced Younes Ali. Jorge will be looking to inject fresh ideas into their faltering campaign.

Meanwhile, Al Thumama Stadium will host the match between Al Shahaniya and Al Arabi, who are ninth and tenth in the standings, respectively. During the break, Al Arabi reached the final of the QSL Cup but lost to Al Duhail.

Al Arabi's new coach Yeray Rodriguez expressed confidence in his team ahead of the



Al Rayyan and Umm Salal (bottom) players train ahead of their Qatar Stars League clash.



game. "We will enter the match with full focus and commitment. It is very important for us to get back on the right track and regain the team's balance," Rodriguez said.

Al Shahaniya coach Alvaro Mejia said: "We will face a strong team with good players. We must trust ourselves, respect our rivals, and play without fear. Our goal is three points. Coming from the second division, we aim to remain in the first division, and while that task is difficult, we have confidence in ourselves. The management, players, and everyone are

working hard this season."

QSL ROUND 12 FIXTURES

Today: 4:15pm: Umm Salal vs Al Rayyan at Grand Hamad Stadium; 6:30pm: Al Arabi vs Al Shahania at Al Thumama Stadium
Tomorrow: 4:15pm: Al Gharafa vs Al Khor at Thani Bin Jassim Stadium; 6:30pm: Al Ahli vs Al Wakrah at Al Thumama Stadium
On Sunday: 4:15pm: Al Duhail vs Qatar SC at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium; 6:30pm: Al Sadd vs Al Shamal at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium

SPOTLIGHT

Struggling Everton sack manager Dyche hours before FA Cup tie

AFP
Liverpool

Premier League strugglers Everton sacked manager Sean Dyche yesterday, just hours before their FA Cup third-round tie against Peterborough. Speculation about Dyche's future had intensified with reports suggesting Everton's new owners, the US-based Friedkin Group, were talking to potential successors since completing a £400m (\$492m) takeover last month.

Everton said in a statement Dyche had been "relieved of his duties as senior men's first-team manager with immediate effect" after two years in charge, with the process to appoint a new boss under way. The Toffees are once again battling to avoid relegation from the Premier League after winning just one of their past 11 games, with that sole success coming against fellow drop candidates Wolves in December.

Everton Under-18s head coach Leighton Baines and club captain Seamus Coleman will take charge against third-tier Peterborough on an interim basis while the Liverpool side seek a permanent replacement for Dyche.

Former Manchester United and Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho, currently in charge of Turkish club Fenerbahce, has recently been linked with Everton.

Mourinho has experience of working with the Friedkin Group at Roma, although the Italian club sacked him just under a year ago. David Moyes, who managed Everton between 2002 and 2013, ex-England coach Gareth Southgate, Brentford boss Thomas Frank and Bournemouth manager Andoni Iraola are also among the reported contenders to succeed Dyche.

Everton have won only three times in 19 league matches this season and are languishing in 16th place, with only one point separating them from the relegation zone. Asked earlier this week if the club

were considering his position, Dyche's answer suggested he knew the sack could be looming.

"To be clear, it should be," the former Burnley boss said. "At the end of the day, if you're a business of this size, succession planning should surely be part of their diligence. I've got no problem with that at all. I think the noise has grown very powerful here. It does. But we've had it before. The players haven't lacked effort but it's obviously affecting them because you can see it in their performances."

Dyche took charge at Everton in January 2023 and kept them in the top-flight despite numerous issues, including last season's points deduction for breaching Premier League rules on profit and sustainability. They finished 17th in Dyche's first season, avoiding the drop with a victory against Bournemouth on the last day, and came 15th last term, extending their streak of being ever-present in English football's top-flight since 1954.

But chief among Everton's problems under the 53-year-old Englishman were a lack of entertainment and a paucity of goals. Everton's tally of just 15 this season is the second worst in the Premier League, behind only bottom of the table Southampton's 12. Dyche's reliance on aggressive long-ball tactics had worked well on a limited budget at Burnley, who defied the odds to stay in the Premier League for much of his 10-year spell as manager.

But Everton fans demand more entertaining fare from their team, making it especially painful when they failed to muster a single shot on target in Saturday's 1-0 defeat at Bournemouth and managed only two in their 2-0 loss to Nottingham Forest in the previous game.

That proved the final straw for the Friedkin Group and Everton will now begin the search for their fifth permanent manager in the past four years.



Sean Dyche took charge at Everton in January 2023 and kept them in the top-flight despite numerous issues, including last season's points deduction for breaching Premier League rules. (Reuters)

PREMIER LEAGUE

West Ham name Potter as manager

AFP
London

Graham Potter said it felt like "Christmas for the adults" after he was named as West Ham's new manager yesterday, just a day after Julen Lopetegui's sacking.

The Englishman, who has signed a two-and-a-half-year contract at the London Stadium, has been out of management since he was fired by Chelsea in April 2023. West Ham said in a statement that Potter was a highly sought-after coach who was the "board's unanimous choice."

He takes charge with the Hammers languishing 14th in the Premier League, seven points above the relegation zone, after just six wins in 20 league matches during Lopetegui's six-month tenure. "Very excited, very proud," Potter said. "Proud day to be head coach, manager of this amazing club. Big tradition, big history, big expectation, big challenge. I'm really excited. It's almost a bit like Christmas for adults."

Potter, dismissed by Chelsea just seven months into five-year contract, said West Ham felt like a good fit. "It was important that I think I chose the right option for me at the right time and as soon as I spoke to this club it felt right for me," he said. "It's an amazing tradition here," he added.

"There's expectation, there's demands, a recent history of success. My experience is if you can build a team that is recognisable on the pitch, that supporters proudly identify with and enjoy watching – if you get that connection between the players and supporters, every-



body aligned." The 49-year-old's first match will be an FA Cup third round-tie against Aston Villa on Friday, followed by Premier League games against Fulham and Crystal Palace. Potter had successful spells with Swansea and Brighton before taking over at Stamford Bridge in September 2022.

He was linked with the England job before Thomas Tuchel, his predecessor at Chelsea, was appointed as Gareth Southgate's successor. Potter was asked yesterday whether he felt he had something to prove after his disappointing Chelsea stint and his lengthy spell out of the game.

"Professional sport, on one level you've always got something to prove every day," he said. "It drives you forward. I'm comfortable in my own skin, I'm comfortable with who I am and what I've done. Clearly no one's perfect and life's about taking the successes and accepting the setbacks. I think I'm a better person for the experience, a better coach for the experience, well-rested."

Former Real Madrid and Spain boss Lopetegui replaced David Moyes, who left West Ham at the end of last season after a second spell at the London club.

Under the Scot, they 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 were among the biggest spenders in the Premier League in the summer transfer window 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.

A 4-1 hammering at champions Manchester City on Saturday was the final straw for club chiefs. Lopetegui was the fifth Premier League manager to lose his job this season, following the sackings of Erik ten Hag (Manchester United), Steve Cooper (Leicester), Gary O'Neil (Wolves) and Russell Martin (Southampton).

LEAGUE CUP

Slot fumes after Spurs' Bergvall avoids red card to sink Liverpool

AFP
London

Liverpool boss Arne Slot slammed the controversial decision not to send off Tottenham's Lucas Bergvall before the teenager sealed a 1-0 win in the League Cup semi-final first leg on Wednesday.

Slot was furious that Bergvall avoided a second booking after tripping Kostas Tsimikas with a sliding tackle. Tsimikas was forced off the pitch following the challenge but referee Stuart Attwell opted to give Liverpool the chance to counter-attack.

When Liverpool lost possession just seconds later, Tottenham took advantage by breaking into the space vacated by Tsimikas to score the 86th minute winner. Dominic Solanke's pass was converted by Bergvall for the 18-year-old's first Tottenham goal. But fuming Slot said: "The decision made had a lot of impact on the result tonight."

"The fourth official told me why he thought it wasn't a second yellow and he heard that probably from the referee. What we can say about it is that he said he didn't stop the counter-attack, every manager would say they prefer the second yellow than a free-kick. Spurs weren't happy with a few decisions that happened (against Newcastle) on Sunday. Maybe today a decision went in favour of them, which is of course very unlucky for us."

Inevitably, Tottenham manager Ange Postecoglou saw the incident differently. Asked if Bergvall was lucky to avoid a red card, Postecoglou said: "Great question, no he wasn't. It's happened to us consistently, you look at our games, and we've asked the officials and they've said if you play advantage, as long as it's not a cynical tackle, then yellow card doesn't get shown. Now to me, that was pretty clear."

It was a cathartic victory for Postecoglou, who has been under fire from frustrated fans throughout a turbulent season. Injury-hit Tottenham are languishing in 12th place in the Premier League amid criticism of the Australian's overly-attacking tactics.

Postecoglou, who saw his injury problems mount when Rodrigo Bentancur was taken to hospital with a head injury suffered in the first half, admitted it was a relief to see his side overcome adversity for a change. "Very proud. We had to deal with some adversity again. We started well



Tottenham Hotspur's Lucas Bergvall celebrates after scoring against Liverpool in the League Cup semi-final in London. (Reuters)

and then lost Rodrigo, in the way it happened with quite distressing scenes when he went down in that manner. We had to compose ourselves," he said.

Postecoglou's claim earlier this season that he always wins a trophy in his second campaign with a club has been used to ridicule the former Celtic boss as Tottenham's struggles increased. But he is convinced Tottenham are heading in the right direction as he tries to bring the club their first silverware since the 2008 League Cup.

Liverpool's first defeat in 24 games in all competitions was only their second loss since Slot replaced Jurgen Klopp in the close-season. The Premier League leaders have gone two matches without a win after Sunday's disappointing 2-2 draw with lowly Manchester United.

But Slot isn't overly concerned, with Liverpool having the chance to overturn the deficit in the second leg at Anfield on February 6.