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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Rayyan score five in second half to rout Umm Salal

RAYYAN LEAPFROG TO FIFTH WITH 16 POINTS, WHILE UMM SALAL ARE EIGHTH WITH 14 POINTS

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Rayyan made a robust start to their second-leg campaign of the Qatar Stars League by scoring a comeback 6-2 win over Umm Salal at the Grand Hamad Stadium yesterday. Trailing 1-2 at the half-time break, The Lions scored a whopping five goals – within 30-odd minutes – to subdue The Orange Fortress' challenge.

While Antonio Mance (43rd minute) and Oussama Tannane (45+4 minute) scored for Umm Salal, the goals for Al Rayyan came from Roger Guedes (sixth and 78th minutes), Achraf Bencharki (60th and 68th minutes), Tamim Mansour (84th minute) and David Garcia (88th minute). The win saw Al Rayyan leapfrog to fifth place with 16 points, while Umm Salal are eighth with 14 points.

Forwards – Brazilian Guedes and Moroccan Bencharki – were at the forefront of Al Rayyan attacks and Guedes provided his team with the early breakthrough scoring off a Bencharki cross. The shot was attempted to be stopped by Umm Salal goalkeeper Loukay Sherif Ashour, but it went through his raised hands to hit the inside of the crossbar before bouncing in (1-0).

After a consistent tussle, Umm Salal succeeded in finding the equalizer late in the first half as the tall Mance headed in a corner kick into the right of the goal (1-1).

Umm Salal soon gained advantage in added time of the opening half as Tannane scored superbly after Kenji Gorre provided him with a fine on-the-run ball with the former overlapping an Umm Salal defender to score with his left foot diagonally into the right corner (2-1).

Post-break, Al Rayyan came out firing on all cylinders and soon Umm Salal



Al Rayyan's Roger Guedes (right) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Umm Salal at the Grand Hamad Stadium yesterday.

goalkeeper Ashour was left with all to do. In the 53rd minute, he made back-to-back saves – once leaping to keep the ball away and then keeping a strike off a corner kick at bay. But then, The Lions stepped up their charge. On the hour mark, a fabulous Bencharki fabulous right-footed strike from the top of the box saw Al Rayyan draw parity at 2-2.

In the 66th minute, a Mahmoud Hassan (Trezeguet) shot was blocked by stretched leg of Ashour and the next minute an Al Rayyan header just missed the right post.

That did not matter much as minutes later, Bencharki broke past midway

to make a clean strike that beat the lone keeper with the ball going in just inside of the right post (3-2).

Guedes was back in the act as he made the scoreline 4-2 scoring from the left after substitute Tamim Mansour's header off a corner kick. In the 80th minute, there was another Al Rayyan goal, but the player was ruled offside.

The disappointment was shrugged off by Tameem al-Abdullah as he fetched his team another goal deflecting in a superb Guedes cross from the left (5-2). Soon, Rodrigo Tabata swung into action, but his strike was kept away by the Umm Salal



Rodrigo Sanchez (left) netted a brace as Al Arabi defeated Al Shahania 3-1 at the Al Thumama Stadium yesterday.

goalkeeper. Providing finishing touches to Al Rayyan's delightful win was Garcia as he leapt to reach a corner kick and the ball bounced into the right corner of the net (6-2).

In the other match of the day, Rodrigo Sanchez netted a brace as Al Arabi defeated Al Shahania 3-1 at the Al Thumama Stadium. Sanchez's goals came in the 23rd and

26th minutes before Isaac Lihadji added the third for The Dream Team in the 54th minute, while Al Shahania's consolation goal came off the boot of Pelle van Amersfoort in the 87th minute. Al Arabi's latest victory, their third of the season, increased their points tally to 13 and lifted them one place to night, while Al Shahania remained on 11 points and a dropped to 10th.

DOHA TOUR EQUESTRIAN

Four-star win for Weishaupt, Gaudiano continues to impress

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The second day of the three-day opening round of the Doha International Tour 2025 equestrian championship continued with gripping showjumping at the Longines Indoor and Outdoor Arenas of Al Shaqab.

In the FEI World Cup qualifying four-star category – CSI4*-W Two Rounds – 155cm class saw close contests both in the first round and the jump-off for which nine riders qualified. German rider Philipp Weishaupt riding bay gelding Coby 8 emerged as the winner with a flawless and fastest time of 40.47 seconds.

Italian Roberto Previtali, riding dark-bay gelding Esteban de Hus, was second clocking 41.18 seconds while Belgian Abdul Qader Said on bay mare Bonne Amie finished third with a time of 42.31 seconds. The winners were honoured by Mohammed Jaber al-Khayarin, Event Director of Doha International Tour 2025.

Emanuele Gaudiano continued to show good form as the Italian combined with stallion Vasco 118 topped the CSI4*-W – Faults & Time – 145cm class clocking the best 65.57 seconds. Abdel Said from Belgium stood out on mare Arpege du RU claiming the second place with a time of 67.08 seconds while Austrian Gerfried Puck riding mare Equitron Melody Vd Smidshoeve was third in 67.36 seconds. The winners were crowned by Ahmed Jaber al-Mulla, Member, Organising Committee.

Gaudiano had earlier won the two-star – CSI2* – Faults & Time – 145cm class with a brilliant flawless routine in 60.94 seconds with chestnut gelding Chalou.

He was followed on the podium by his compatriot Roberto Previtali, who rode Hachiko, equally impressively clocking 61 seconds while Austrian Gerfried Puck



German rider Philipp Weishaupt astride bay gelding Coby 8 in action during the Doha International Tour 2025 equestrian championship at Al Shaqab yesterday.

needed 61.16 seconds to claim the third place astride Idiaal Special H J Hamza al-Kuwari, Director of Corporate Services at Al Shaqab, awarded the winners.

In the second round of the same category – CSI2* – Immediate Jump Off – 135cm – it was Brit Grace Healey on mare Jabadabadoo excelling with a best time of 32.15 seconds. Portuguese Luis Alexandre Dolgner Ferreira riding Chedington Talulah was a close second in 32.71 seconds. Egyptian Mustafa Saed riding Rambling Loon finished third in 32.98 seconds. The winners were honoured by Abdullah al-Qashouti, Director of Marketing & Communications, Doha Tour

Saudi rider Hassan al-Hadi stood out in the CSI1* – Faults & Time – 110cm class as he rode mare Morgana with aplomb to secure the top podium place returning the best time of 53.64 seconds. He was followed by Qatari rider Hadi Mansour al-

Shahwani, who excelled with bay gelding Cornett des Forets, to claim the second spot in 57.70 seconds. Qatari rider Ahmed Ali al-Jaber on bay mare Dilandra was third with a time of 58.08 seconds. The winners were crowned by Omar al-Buainain, Deputy Director of the Championship.

The CSI1* – Faults & Time – 120cm class was claimed by Qatari rider Mohammed Yousef al-Jaber astride chestnut mare Serendipity with a time of 55.08 seconds. Jordanian Mohammed Abu Hamour on bay gelding Mandela was second clocking 55.52 seconds while Egyptian Seif Yasser Fekry was third on bay mare Mambria, finishing in 55.72 seconds. The winners were crowned by Abdulrahman al-Kaabi, Member, Organising Committee.

In the Future Riders' – Optimum Time – 80cm – class, it was Khalifa bin Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani who starred by winning the first and third places, achiev-



Emanuele Gaudiano celebrates after winning the CSI4*-W - Faults & Time - 145cm class.



Abdullah al-Qashouti, Director of Marketing & Communications at Doha Tour with the podium finishers of the CSI2* - Immediate Jump Off - 135cm class.

ing ideal times of 47.91 seconds and 47.71 seconds riding Ardfry Apollo and Zion II respectively, while the Nawal Bahamdan, riding Irbal des Marronniers, was second

clocking 47.81 seconds. Ahmed Khaled al-Humaidi, Heritage and Heritage Specialist at Al Shaqab, honoured the winners and awarded them with their prizes.

GOLF

Six players share first-round lead at the Sony Open

7 players, none of them among the leaders, yet to complete round

Reuters
Hawaii

Tom Hoge and England's Harry Hall are off to hot starts again in the Aloha State, as they are among six players tied for the first-round lead at the Sony Open in Hawaii.

Hoge and Hall tied for eighth last week at The Sentry, the PGA Tour's season-opening event in Kapalua, Hawaii.

They sit level with Adam Schenk, Eric Cole, Denny McCarthy and Paul Peterson after each shot a 6-under-par 64 on Thursday at Waialae Country Club in Honolulu.

Seven players, none of them among the leaders, had yet to complete the round when play was halted due to darkness. Those players will finish the round early before the second round begins at the previously scheduled time.

Ben Griffin, Patrick Fishburn, Sam Ryder, Ben Kohles, Sweden's Henrik Norlander and Canada's Adam Hadwin are tied for seventh place at 65.

Hall logged 10 birdies on Friday, the best single-round total of his PGA Tour career.

He birdied four consecutive holes from No 9 to No 12. However, he also had a double bogey and two bogeys.

"(I) played really nice, really aggressive, putted really good and drove it exactly where I was looking today," said Hall, whose lone PGA Tour victory came last year at the Isco Championship. "If I can clean up a few things that



Tom Hoge of the United States plays his shot from the 17th tee during the first round of the Sony Open in Hawaii 2025 at Waialae Country Club in Honolulu, Hawaii. (AFP)

happened, a couple bogeys and the double, if I can clean that up the next few days, it'll hopefully be a really good week."

Hall added of his strategy at Waialae, "If you have confidence in the driver, then it really makes a big difference. It's quite a tight golf course, so if you can hit a driver straight, then you're obviously gaining a few strokes on the field, and that's exactly what I did."

Hoge's round included a pair

of eagles - at the par-5 ninth hole and the par-4 14th hole - plus two birdies and no bogeys.

It was the fifth time that Hoge registered two eagles in a PGA Tour round. At No 14, he knocked in a 189-yard shot.

"It's funny, my caddie James started with me in Maui last year, and he's been giving me a hard time because I hadn't holed a shot from the fairway with him at all," Hoge said.

"I feel like I'm a pretty good

wedge player, short iron player, so I've certainly had plenty of opportunities and haven't made one.

"He's been on me for that, and for that one to be the one that goes in was pretty funny."

Japan's Hideki Matsuyama, who broke the PGA Tour's scoring record in relation to par last week while winning The Sentry, is tied for 26th place at 67.

Matsuyama won the Sony Open in 2022.

CRICKET

Harmison wants Buttler to be spared Afghanistan decision

AFP
London

Steve Harmison is adamant England captain Jos Buttler must not be "thrown under the bus" amid growing political pressure to boycott next month's Champions Trophy cricket match against Afghanistan.

A group of more than 160 British politicians have called on the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) to refuse to play Afghanistan in protest at the women's sports policy of the Taliban.

Since returning to power in 2021 the Taliban have effectively banned female participation - a move that puts the Afghanistan Cricket Board at odds with International Cricket Council (ICC) rules.

The ICC, however, have allowed the Afghanistan men's team to continue to compete in global competitions, with England due to face them in the one-day international Champions Trophy in Lahore on February 26.

ECB chief executive Richard Gould has resisted calls for a boycott, saying he would "actively advocate" for collective action by the ICC rather than have England forfeit the game - a move that would likely lead to a points deduction.

A spokesman for UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, meanwhile, has urged the ICC to take the lead on the issue but former England fast bowler Harmison fears the spotlight will be turned on Buttler.

Harmison was a member of the England squad urged to boycott a game against co-hosts Zimbabwe at the 2003 ODI World Cup in protest at the government of Robert Mugabe.

England eventually refused to play the game following death threats but only after captain Nasser Hussain led his side through several days of anguished talks in Cape Town.

There are now reports the ECB are concerned about the possible security implications arising from a response to a boycott by Taliban



supporters. "The one thing I will say is just please don't throw Jos Buttler under the bus, like Nasser got thrown under," former England fast bowler Harmison, 46, told Global Player's Sports Agents podcast.

"Nasser, he wasn't just thrown under the bus, he was reversed, backed over. We got our lives threatened. Sportsmen and women should not be involved on the political side.

"Don't put Jos in this position, he really doesn't need that and the England cricket team doesn't need that. If the ICC want to have a go with Afghanistan, that's their fight - it's not the England captain's fight."

South Africa, who are also due to play Afghanistan at the Champions Trophy, have backed the ECB's stance. This is despite veteran anti-apartheid campaigner and British politician Peter Hain, who played a key role in sparking his native South Africa's sporting isolation during the 1970s, calling for a boycott. "We are of the view that a more unified and collective approach from all ICC members will be more impactful," said Cricket South Africa president Rihan Richards.

Harmison is best known for being one of England's greatest ever bowlers, taking over 300 wickets for England and more than 700 in his professional career.

This includes five in the opening Test of England's victorious 2005 Ashes winning campaign. As well as his international career with England, Harmison spent more than 15 years representing Durham in the domestic game.

MOTORSPORT

F1 owner Liberty Media names experienced Chang as its new CEO

Reuters
London

Formula One owner Liberty Media appointed long-time sports executive Derek Chang as its next CEO yesterday.

Chang will officially take over on Feb 1 and will lead Liberty's three-man executive board that will work with F1 CEO Stefano Domenicali. He'll replace John Malone, who has served as Liberty's interim CEO since Greg Maffei stepped down from the role last November.

"I am thrilled to welcome Derek as the CEO of Liberty Media," Malone said.

"His expertise in both operating and investment roles, extensive understanding of our industries and familiarity with Liberty make him the ideal leader for Liberty's next chapter."

Chang will help drive Liberty's push to enhance its investments in motorsports like F1 and MotoGP, a motorbike racing entity that Lib-

erty seized last April but has yet to officially acquire.

Liberty also plans to transfer Liberty Live Group into its own public entity, allowing it to own roughly 70 million shares in Live Nation Entertainment, a US-based concert promoting company.

"Our current focus is clear: optimizing the portfolio structure with the split-off of Liberty Live and supporting the growth of our attractive operating assets, including F1 and MotoGP post-acquisition, to continue their momentum and invest for the future," Chang said.

Upon starting his new role, Chang will step down as executive chairman of EverPass Media, a platform he helped launch with the NFL to provide commercial establishments with premium sports content. Chang has been a director with Liberty since 2021. He was the CEO of NBA China from 2018 to 2020 and previously held top positions working for DIRECTV, Charter Communications and the YES Network.

FOCUS

Cowell named Aston Martin team principal

Reuters
London

Andy Cowell has been named Aston Martin's new team principal in a major management overhaul while Mike Krack will move into the position of chief trackside officer, the Silverstone-based Formula One team said yesterday.

Former Mercedes engine head Cowell joined Aston Martin as chief executive officer last year.

The Briton was managing director of Mercedes AMG GPP (High Performance Powertrains) during a period of dominance for Mercedes who won a record eight successive constructors' championships.

"The Aston Martin Aramco Formula One Team announces a restructuring of its senior management team as it continues its mission of becoming a Championship-winning outfit," the team said in a statement.

"For clarity of leadership and as part of a shift to a flatter structure, Andy Cowell assumes the role of CEO and Team Principal with immediate effect."

Cowell also played a key role in the success



of seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton. "I have spent the last three months understanding and assessing our performance, and I've been incredibly impressed by the dedication, commitment and hard work of this team..." the 55-year-old said.

"These organisational changes are a natural evolution of the multi-year plans that we have scheduled to make and I'm incredibly excited about the future."

Former BMW Motorsport head Krack joined

Aston Martin as team principal in 2022, having worked previously in Formula One with Swiss-based Sauber.

"Leading on the trackside team will be Mike Krack, as Chief Trackside Officer..." Aston Martin added. "Mike - who joined the team in 2022 as Team Principal - will continue to focus on getting the most performance out of the car at the racetrack."

The team added that former Ferrari technical director Enrico Cardile will "oversee the architecture, design and build of new race cars", while performance director Tom McCullough will move to Aston Martin's other racing categories.

Aston Martin, who finished fifth in the 2024 constructors' standings, are switching from Mercedes engines to Honda from 2026 when the sport enters a new era with changed engine and aerodynamic regulations.

Drivers Fernando Alonso and Lance Stroll will remain at Aston Martin in 2025, with the Spaniard having signed a two-year contract last year, while Stroll was also given a contract extension in 2024. Two-times world champion Alonso finished ninth in the driver's standings in 2024 with 70 points. Stroll scored 24 points and was 13th.

West Indies play practice game for Test series in Pakistan



Action from a practice game between visiting West Indies XI and Pakistan Shaheens in Islamabad yesterday. West Indies XI reached 273 for 7 off 74 overs at the end of the first day. (@TheRealPCB_Live)



UCI cracks down on teammates celebrating in bunch sprints

Zurich: The sight of riders celebrating a teammate's victory in bunch finishes could become a thing of the past after governing body the UCI toughened up its rules in a bid to improve safety. Specialist sprinters are usually delivered to the sprint zone by a train of their teammates before battling it out with their rivals to cross the line first. With their job done, teammates usually slow down and often raise their arms in celebration as they watch the action unfold further up the road. New rules that have come in to force will prohibit such displays of team camaraderie with punishments including fines of up to 500 euros (\$515.50), yellow cards, the loss of points and



demotions. The amended rule for the sprint zone states that penalties could apply to riders decelerating during a sprint and endangering other riders, knowingly staying within the line of other riders, celebrating in the bunch, talking on the radio or taking hands off handlebars while in the bunch.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Sinner's doping hearing at CAS fixed for April

'I haven't done anything wrong, that's why I'm still here'

AFP
Paris

World number one Jannik Sinner will have his hearing into allegations of doping at the Court of Arbitration for Sport on April 16-17, the Lausanne-based body said yesterday.

The World Anti-Doping Agency appealed after the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) cleared Sinner after he tested positive twice for the banned steroid clostebol in March last year.

"No parties requested a public hearing and it will be conducted behind closed doors," CAS said in a statement.

The ITIA accepted defending Australian Open champion Sinner's explanation that the drug entered his system when his physio used a spray containing it to treat a cut, then provided massage and sports therapy to the player.

Asked on the eve of the Australian Open if he knew when a verdict was due, the 23-year-old said: "I know exactly as much as you guys know."

"We are in a stage where we don't know many, many things."

Sinner, who faces a stern first-round test at Melbourne Park against big-hitting Chilean Nicolas Jarry, admitted the scandal continued to play on his mind.

"You think about this, of course," he said.

"I would lie if I would tell you I forget."

"It's something what I have with me now already for quite a



Italy's Jannik Sinner during a practice session ahead of the Australian Open at the Melbourne Park yesterday. (Reuters)

long time. But it is what it is. I'm here trying to prepare the Grand Slam. Let's see how it goes."

Sinner said he had always been "very, very careful on every single medicine I take, even what I eat".

"When the bottle is open, I throw it away, I take a new one," he said.

"In my mind I know exactly what happened, and that's how I block it (out)."

"I haven't done anything wrong, that's why I'm still here. That's why I'm still playing."

ATP chairman Andrea Gau-

denzi has insisted Sinner's case was "run by the book".

"I genuinely believe there has been a lot of misinformation out there, which is unfortunate," Gaudenzi told the Australian Associated Press in a recent interview.

"I am 100 percent sure that there has not been any preferential treatment. The process has been run by the book and according to the rules, by the ITIA."

Former world number one Novak Djokovic said he believed Sinner when he said he tested posi-

tive due to contamination, but the 24-time Grand Slam winner asserted that players had been "kept in the dark" throughout the process.

"I've been really frustrated, as have most of the other players, that we've been kept in the dark for five months," Djokovic said.

"He (Sinner) received the news (of the positive tests) in April and the announcement was not until August, just before the US Open."

"The ATP has not really talked in depth about why they kept that case away from the public."

COMMENT

Swiatek considered revealing doping case while awaiting outcome



Reuters
Melbourne

Iga Swiatek said yesterday she considered revealing her positive doping test to the public as she awaited the outcome of her case but eventually decided against it as she thought it would be easier to explain the situation after authorities dealt with it.

The world number two tested positive for the banned substance trimetazidine in August and was provisionally banned the following month. She said her absences from tournaments in Asia were down to personal matters and fatigue.

The five-times Grand Slam champion successfully appealed against her provisional ban and returned to action in October after the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) accepted the explanation that her positive test was caused by contamination of her sleep medication melatonin.

The Pole accepted a one-month ban that ended on Dec 4 after accounting for time already served.

"I think it's easier to tell the whole story when it is complete," Swiatek told Polish media at the Australian Open. "For a long time when I was in Warsaw and couldn't play, I wondered if it would be better to say publicly what happened."

"But the truth is that with no source at the time and no decision from the ITIA yet, we would be only half-informing that I had

a doping case and that would have caused me more stress and problems. People would have judged me negatively."

"So I think that ultimately the system that is in place now, which gives a chance to find an answer and resolve the situation before it is revealed publicly, is reasonable. This information would have come out publicly (if the case lasted longer)."

The handling of Swiatek's doping case and that of men's world number one Jannik Sinner has sparked allegations of double standards from some players, including those who have waited for months or years to clear their names.

Swiatek said she was worried by what people might say.

"I always worked hard to be a good example, to show my integrity, show good behaviour. Having no control over this case really freaked me out a bit," she added.

"But in the locker room, the girls are great... Most of them even approached me. They're like 'Hey, how can we avoid this? Is there any way that we can be more careful?'"

"They're worried this can happen to them, as well. There are many top players that are supportive. I appreciate that, because it made me feel better when I came back and didn't know how it was going to be."

Swiatek faces Katerina Siniakova in the first round of the Australian Open tomorrow.

Results of scan 'not fantastic' but Osaka to play at AO

Melbourne: Two-times Australian Open champion Naomi Osaka is confident she will play her opening match against Caroline Garcia at the Grand Slam even though the results of a scan on her abdominal injury were not "fantastic".

Osaka, the 2019 and 2021 Melbourne Park champion, was in tears on Sunday after the injury forced to quit her first WTA Tour final in almost three years.

The Japanese player was leading Clara Tauson 6-4 in the Auckland final when she decided she could not go on. "The MRI, it wasn't fantastic but it wasn't bad at the same time," Osaka told reporters yesterday.

"So saying all that, I'm pretty optimistic about playing my match. I mean, for sure I'm going to play my match."

"I've been practising pretty well for the two days that I've been here, so it seems to be going good."

Osaka, who began working with new coach Patrick Mouratoglou in September, said she was encouraged by her Auckland display.

"Obviously I did pretty well. I know I lost, debatably lost in the final. In my head I won it,"



she said. "I'm excited to play here. I'm also excited to be here with Patrick because we technically haven't lost yet. So yeah, it's going to be a good run I think."

Osaka meets Caroline Garcia in the opening round of the Australian Open for the second straight year, the Frenchwoman getting the better of her 6-4 7-6(2) in 2024.

Even if she loses to Garcia once again there is no danger of Osaka bearing any ill-will towards her. "I really respect her a lot. I feel the same energy coming from her," Osaka added. "I also like the fact that we were born on the same day, so we have the same birthdays. I can't ever have bad blood with a fellow Libra."

Fritz not looking too far ahead

Melbourne: Taylor Fritz has no plans to deviate from his usual Grand Slam approach when he begins his Australian Open campaign and says he is focused on taking it one game at a time as he chases a first major title.

Fritz arrives ranked a career-high fourth in the world after a stellar year in which he reached his first Grand Slam final on home soil at the US Open, where he was beaten by world number one Jannik Sinner. The 27-year-old was also beaten by the Italian in the ATP Finals decider in Turin in November. "I think it kind of feels the same."

I'm approaching it as I have other Slams," Fritz told reporters yesterday. "Last year I was happy with all my Slam results. I want to treat it the same way." Fritz opens his campaign against compatriot Jensen Brooksby and says it would be a mistake to look at who he could potentially meet in the later rounds.

"The worst thing I can do is be looking super far ahead in the draw and be looking I'm a top-four seed, putting all this pressure on myself," he added. "It's the same mentality I always have: take it one match at a time, don't look too far ahead."

SPOTLIGHT

'High IQ' Murray a natural coach, says Djokovic

Reuters
Melbourne

Novak Djokovic has been pleasantly surprised by the professionalism of new coach Andy Murray in the leadup to the Australian Open but said sharing his deepest thoughts with his former rival had initially been a challenge.

Briton Murray joined Djokovic's team in November to help the Serb's bid for an 11th title at Melbourne Park and a record 25th Grand Slam trophy.

Firm friends, Murray played Djokovic 36 times from 2006-2022, losing 25 including four Australian Open finals.

Though yet to put their partnership to the test in a match, Djokovic was impressed with Murray's dedication and efforts to gel with other members of his team.

"So far has been only positive experience for me, to be honest," Djokovic told reporters yesterday.

"I'm very pleasantly surprised with his dedication and professionalism, considering he's never had the experience of working as a tennis coach."

"It comes natural to him. His IQ generally and tennis IQ is very high."

Djokovic said they had spent 10-12 days with each other in the pre-season before linking up at Melbourne Park where the seventh-seeded Serb will face American wildcard Nishesh Basavareddy in the first round.

Despite their good relations and long playing history, Djokovic said opening up to Murray was a "strange feeling" at first.

"Not just about the game but about how I feel, about life in general," he added.

"Not in a negative way, but just in a way I have never done that with him because he was always one of my greatest rivals."



Serbia's Novak Djokovic (right) speaks to coach Andy Murray during a training session ahead of the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

"We were always kind of hiding things from each other."

"Now all cards are open on the table. That's what he demands."

While forthcoming with Murray, Djokovic was in no mood to elaborate on comments that he had been fed poisoned food while in detention during the 2022 Australian Open visa saga.

The Serb told GQ that he found high levels of mercury and lead in his system when he returned home to Serbia after being deported from Australia.

Asked about the comments on yesterday, Djokovic said he would rather "focus on the tennis."

Veteran Monfils defies age to book spot in Auckland final

Former world number six Gael Monfils clinched a 7-6(5) 6-4 win over Nishesh Basavareddy in the Auckland Classic semi-finals yesterday to become the second-oldest player to reach an ATP Tour

final since 1990. Monfils, 38, saved all five of the breakpoints he faced and sent down seven aces to defeat the 19-year-old American in one hour and 48 minutes.

It was Monfils' second win over Basavareddy in as many weeks after he took three sets to win their round of 32 meeting in Brisbane.

"I am very happy. This kid has a bright future, he is playing really well," Monfils said.

"I played quite well today. Moved great, defended well. He pushed me to the limit. I knew it would be tough and it was tough. I trust my fitness and am pleased to have won in straight sets."

Monfils faces Belgian Zizou Bergs in the final today, where the Frenchman will be looking to win the 13th tour-level title of his career.

He will then meet compatriot Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard in the first round of the Australian Open on Monday.

In the Adelaide International, world number seven Jessica Pegula beat Kazakh Yulia Putintseva 7-6(4) 6-3 in a close-fought semi-final encounter.

In the final, the American will face fellow former US Open finalist Madison Keys, who was on the verge of a comeback win before her Russian opponent Liudmila Samsonova retired with an abdominal injury.

"We're playing some good tennis. The way I would like it is for us to meet in the finals every time," Pegula said.

Fellow American Sebastian Korda reached the final in the men's tournament, beating Miomir Kecmanovic 6-3 7-6(4) later in the day.

Korda faces Canada's Felix Auger Aliassime, who beat Tommy Paul 7-6(3) 3-6 6-4 in the other semi-final, today in a clash of two former Australian Open quarter-finalists.

SPOTLIGHT

Real coach Ancelotti expects 'unpredictable' Super Cup Clasico

Bellingham and Rodrygo score second-half goals as Real beat Mallorca in semis

Reuters
Jeddah

The fans should expect the unexpected when Real Madrid face Barcelona in the Spanish Super Cup final tomorrow, Real coach Carlo Ancelotti said after his team outclassed Mallorca in the semi-finals.

Jude Bellingham and Rodrygo scored second-half goals to help Real to a 3-0 win over Mallorca after Barcelona beat Athletic Bilbao 2-0 in the other last-four clash. "The Clasico has been unpredictable lately," Ancelotti told reporters on Thursday.

"There were games we won easily, like the 4-1 last year in the Super Cup. We also won 4-0 twice in Barcelona while they beat us 4-0 at the Bernabeu. It's hard to think what kind of game the next one will be. It will be entertaining because there is quality on the pitch. And obviously we want to end up being better than Barcelona."

Real took time to open the scoring against last year's Copa del Rey finalists Mallorca, who sit sixth in the La Liga standings 13 points off leaders Real. England midfielder Bellingham broke the deadlock after the hour mark, closing an excellent team move featuring Rodrygo and Kylian Mbappe.

"We started very well, but we could have opened the scoring a little earlier, in the first half," Ancelotti said.

"After the good start it became more difficult for us. It was a demanding game because Mallorca played the game they had to play. They were defending very well, closing spaces, trying to look for opportunities with crosses. A couple of times they created problems for us."

Real finished the game without midfielder Aurelien Tchouameni, who was replaced by Raul Asencio early in the second half following a clash of heads with a Mallorca defender.

Bellingham looked uncomfortable after going down in the final minutes but completed the game while Valverde was sub-



Real Madrid's Jude Bellingham celebrates after scoring against Mallorca in the Spanish Super Cup semi-final in Jeddah. (Reuters)

stituted with 15 minutes remaining by Dani Ceballos.

"The doctor preferred to take him (Tchouameni) off the pitch because it was a blow to the head," Ancelotti said. "Bellingham and (Federico) Valverde were overloads. We were not expecting the heat and it affected the rhythm of the game."

Real Madrid will chase a record-equaling 14th Spanish Super Cup title in the final against Barcelona. Goals by Gavi and Lamine Yamal earned Barca a 2-0 win over Athletic Bilbao on Wednesday. Barcelona and Real will meet in the competition's final

for third consecutive time, with Carlo Ancelotti's side prevailing last year while Barca last lifted the trophy in 2023. Barcelona hold the record of 14 titles with Real on 13.

Last year's Copa del Rey finalists Mallorca defended well against Real and the game was goalless at the break after early attempts by Lucas Vazquez and Bellingham forced Mallorca keeper Dominik Greif into saves. Bellingham found a way past the Slovakian keeper in the 63rd minute, however, following an excellent team move.

Rodrygo hit the post with a header and Kylian Mbappe's follow up shot was bril-

liantly denied by Greif before Bellingham opened the scoring.

Real continued pushing to increase their lead but did not find the net again until Valjent sent the ball into his own net two minutes into stoppage time, attempting to block a shot by Real substitute Brahim Diaz.

Rodrygo made it 3-0 three minutes later, converting a stunning cross into the box by Vazquez to celebrate his 24th birthday in style. The Spanish Super Cup has been a four-team competition since 2020, featuring the winners and runners-up of La Liga and the Copa del Rey.

Neuer returns but Musiala out for Bayern's clash against Gladbach

Berlin: Bayern Munich goalkeeper Manuel Neuer will make his comeback today at Borussia Moenchengladbach after a rib injury, but his replacement Daniel Peretz will be sidelined for several weeks, coach Vincent Kompany said. Jamal Musiala has also been ruled out.

Neuer broke a rib during a rough challenge that also earned him his first career red card in their German Cup loss to Bayer Leverkusen on Dec 3. Israel international Peretz stepped in until the winter break, but he twisted his ankle in training earlier in the week and will now be sidelined for several weeks.

"There is good luck that Manuel is back with us and bad luck that Daniel will be missing for some weeks," Kompany said. "We don't know yet for exactly how long. Hopefully at the end of the month or start of next month, Daniel will be back."

Bayern are in top spot on 36 points as the Bundesliga resumes after the three-week winter break, with a four-point lead over champions Bayer Leverkusen. They also travel to Feyenoord in the Champions League on Jan 22. The Bavarians have lost five of their last nine away games at Gladbach, more than against any other team in the same period.

Kompany will also be missing in-form Jamal Musiala - the attacking midfielder, who has scored nine league goals so far, is out with the flu. "I have said it before that Jamal... cannot be replaced one-for-one," Kompany said. "But we will not change what we have planned for this game on Saturday. We go into the game to win it."

"But Jamal will be back very soon. It is normal not to have all players available at all times, so we need to solve it differently and we have done that season," Kompany said.

Kompany said veteran Thomas Mueller would likely step into Musiala's creative midfield shoes, but added there was "no like-for-like replacement" for the 21-year-old attacker, who has been crucial for Bayern this season.

FA CUP

Arteta impressed by Amorim's Man United

Reuters
London

Arsenal manager **Mikel Arteta** is impressed by the impact new boss Ruben Amorim has had on Manchester United, and expects it to be a beautiful game when the two teams face off in the FA Cup third round tomorrow.

Arsenal handed Amorim his first loss as United manager in a 2-0 Premier League win last month. But United, 13th in the league, have shown sparks of potential in a 2-1 win at Manchester City and last weekend's 2-2 draw at leaders Liverpool. "Look at how they perform against the big teams... and the results they got," Arteta said. "I think every manager, when he gets appointed, it's for a reason. The reasons can be different. Sometimes it's just to improve a football team... sometimes it's to transform a football club. That's a totally different dimension of a job."

FA Cup holders United, however, lost four straight matches before Sunday's draw, and have failed to keep a clean sheet in the last nine matches, while Arsenal had scored 13 goals in five matches before Tuesday's 2-0 loss to Newcastle United in the League Cup. Arteta said it was understandable that Amorim would need some time to get the best out of United. "It's tough because obviously you need time to implement your ideas, especially your way of playing, and explaining that. And when you have that many games, it's tricky," he said.

Arteta, however, said United had changed



as a team since the two sides last clashed over five weeks ago. "I'm expecting a few different things," he added. "It's a beautiful game to play against a massive club and they will bring lots of supporters. The memory of winning something and sharing it with people is the ultimate goal."

RASHFORD BACK IN CONTENTION FOR FA CUP CLASH AT ARSENAL

Manchester United forward Marcus Rashford is available for FA Cup third-round tie at Arsenal after falling ill, manager Ruben Amorim said. The 27-year-old Rashford was left out of the squad for four straight matches before being an unused substitute in United's home defeat

to Newcastle United on Dec. 30. The academy product then fell ill and missed their 2-2 draw at Liverpool last week.

Amorim first dropped Rashford for the 2-1 derby win at Manchester City in mid-December, two days before the England international said he was "ready for a new challenge" after spending his entire career at United since the age of seven. Rashford has scored 138 goals in 426 appearances since making his senior debut for the club in 2016, winning the Europa League, two FA Cups and the League Cup twice. "Rashford and Kobbie Mainoo are available, they are training and we will see the selection for the game," the Portuguese coach told reporters.

Asked whether any academy players will be sold or loaned in the January transfer window, Amorim said: "Our idea is always to keep the best players and to build for this club, but I am really happy and I like our players. My players are always my favourites so I want to keep my players. It is a special moment in this club."

United won their 13th FA Cup last season and only Arsenal (14) have won the trophy more times. "We won some cups, we want to continue. We know at this stage we have a really tough match but we want to win," Amorim said.

United's number two goalkeeper, Altay Bayindir, who replaced Andre Onana in their League Cup quarter-final loss at Tottenham Hotspur last month, will start against the Gunners at the Emirates.

The 26-year-old Turkiye international started all three of United's League Cup ties this season but faced criticism for errors in the 4-3 loss at Tottenham.

English Football League. City host the League Two side in one of Salford's biggest ever games in the FA Cup third round today. Owned by a group of former United stars including David Beckham, Gary and Phil Neville, Paul Scholes, Ryan Giggs and Nicky Butt, Salford have risen through the non-League ranks since their investment began in 2014.

"They won a lot of titles, these generational players. They won a lot of money so they can buy clubs. It's good," said Guardiola. They are in League Two and I'm pretty sure they want to rise like (League One) Stockport. The higher you are, the better your perspective."

As well as the spice of Salford's United connections, there is also a local dimension to the fixture for Guardiola. "I've lived in Salford for the last eight years so I will play against my neighbourhood," added Guardiola. "My home town where I am living!"

SERIE A

Motta urges Juve to hit winning form

Reuters
Turin, Italy

Juventus coach **Thiago Motta** stressed the need for his team to find consistency and put together a run of victories after recording more draws than any other Serie A side so far this season.

Ahead of the 183rd Turin Derby at Torino today, Juve are having a mixed campaign, remaining unbeaten in their first 18 league games for only the third time. However, with 11 draws, they are fifth in the standings, 12 points behind leaders Napoli.

"It's essential for us to find continuity in our results. We need to improve and give our best every day to achieve victory," Motta told reporters. However, Motta insisted that the team had improved under his management. "In these 26 matches, we've only lost twice with a very young squad," he said.

Motta confirmed that Dusan Vlahovic, Francisco Conceicao, and the suspended Manuel Locatelli would be unavailable for the Torino match, with Douglas Luiz potentially getting a chance in midfield. "He (Douglas Luiz) is a high-level midfielder who can play in the three positions we use," said Motta. "He can score goals and provide the final pass, he has creativity, and he knows how to build up. He can do more defensively, like everyone else. He can cover three positions and have freedom in a context."

The 42-year-old coach also hinted at appointing a new captain, with veteran defender Danilo seeking to leave the club, according to reports.

MILAN NEED TO KEEP FEET ON THE GROUND AFTER SUPER CUP WIN: CONCEICAO

AC Milan need to get back to reality when they host lowly Cagliari in Serie A today, coach Sergio Conceicao said after guiding his new team to the Italian



Super Cup earlier this week.

Milan lifted their first trophy under Conceicao as Milan manager on Monday, a week after the Portuguese was appointed, when a stoppage-time goal from Tammy Abraham saw them complete a comeback 3-2 victory over city rivals Inter Milan. "I think that those who think that winning a Super Cup is enough cannot work at Milan," Conceicao told a press conference.

"It's true, we enjoyed it and deserved it, but we are 17 points off the top of the table. A club that has won 19 championships and seven Champions Leagues cannot have their belly full with the Super Cup. So let's focus on tomorrow, we have to win and convince. The Super Cup is over."

The 2022 Serie A champions have equalled Inter on eight Super Cup wins, one fewer than record holders Juventus. But Conceicao remained level-headed about the achievement, seeking further improvement from his team. "One of the things that didn't go well in the derby in my opinion is that we made mistakes in pressing," Conceicao said.

Milan will be without midfielder Ruben Loftus-Cheek against 17th-placed Cagliari. Conceicao also said he had not yet discussed transfer targets with the club's leadership.

The 50-year-old also remained tight-lipped about reports linking Milan with a move for Manchester United forward Marcus Rashford.

Spurs boss Postecoglou says Bentancur 'feeling good' after concussion

London: Tottenham Hotspur manager Ange Postecoglou has said Rodrigo Bentancur is back home and doing fine after his concerning head injury during Wednesday's League Cup semi-final tie with Liverpool.

The Uruguay midfielder stooped to head a corner after seven minutes at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium and stayed on the ground after falling unchallenged, with full-back Pedro Porro the first to go to the aid of his stricken teammate. Bentancur received medical attention for nine minutes before he was replaced by Brennan Johnson in an eventual 1-0 semi-final first leg win over Liverpool, the Premier League leaders. Postecoglou confirmed Bentancur is now going through concussion protocols, with the 27-year-old ruled out of tomorrow's trip to non-league club Tamworth in the third round of the FA Cup as a result.

"Good news, thankfully," Postecoglou said.

"He was in the hospital, obviously, and did all the tests in terms of just checking, making sure that everything was okay. He's back home, and he's fine."

The Australian added: "He's feeling good. We will obviously follow the protocols now. I think it's a couple of weeks where you've just got to make sure that everything's okay, but, thankfully, it looks like a concussion but nothing more than that. It was distressing a situation."

Bentancur had only recently returned to action following a seven-game ban for using a racial slur about team-mate Son Heung-min.

GUARDIOLA RELISHING 'HOMETOWN' FA CUP TIE WITH CLASS OF 92'S Salford

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola said Manchester United's famous "class of 92" group of former players will make "smart" decisions to help Salford City climb further up