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CRICKET | Page 2

Sri Lanka lose quick three after Australia declare on 654-6



CHAMPIONS LEAGUE | Page 4

Real ready for any opponent in play-offs, says Bellingham

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SPORT



SPOTLIGHT

IOC presidential contenders deliver their vision for sport in post-Bach era

Page 3

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Mujica nets brace as Sadd get back to winning ways

Abdelkader's late stoppage-time penalty ensures Qatar SC a 2-1 victory over Al Shamal

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Sadd came back from a goal down to beat Al Arabi 3-1 while Qatar SC scored a much-needed 2-1 win over Al Shamal in the Qatar Stars League yesterday.

At the Al Thumama Stadium, all of Wolves' three goals came in the second half after Al Arabi had opened the scoring in the 18th minute through Ahmed Alaaeldin. Rafa Mujica fired home a brace (54th minute and 88th minute), and Akram Afif scored from the spot (76th minute, penalty) as Al Sadd bounced back to winning ways — moving their points tally to 28 to go second in the table while The Dream Team remained on 13 points and in 11th place.

Coming from a painful 0-1 defeat to Qatar SC in the previous week, Al Sadd made their intentions known right from the start. Al Sadd talisman, Afif, was caught offside in the seventh minute while attempting to pull off what would have been the opening goal of the encounter before Boualem Khoukhi's right-footed shot from a direct free kick in the 11th minute went inches high.

Things suddenly went Al Arabi's way in the 18th minute when Al Sadd's backline was caught napping, allowing Isaac Lihadji to send a defence-splitting pass to Alaaeldin, who successfully put to bed the brilliant sitter.

Things almost went further awry for Al Sadd in the 39th minute when Ahmed Suhail conceded a penalty for a foul on Al Arabi's Youssef Msakni, but goalkeeper Meshaal Barsham pulled off an excellent save of Abdou Diallo subsequent spot kick to ensure that their lone goal remained going into halftime.

Al Sadd came out for the second half determined to avert a second successive



Al Sadd's Rafa Mujica celebrates after scoring against Al Arabi at the Al Thumama Stadium yesterday. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil

loss in a league that has proved to be more competitive than ever.

After nine minutes of relentless pressure into the second half, Mujica gave the coach Felix Sanchez's team something to cheer about when he nodded home Romain Saiss' overhead cross from the centre of the box to restore parity for the away team.

Al Sadd continued to up their game, and won a penalty in the 75th minute for a push on Pedro Miguel in the final third, ironi-

cally by Diallo, who missed his own spot kick earlier on. The subsequent kick was tucked in by Afif, who sent goalkeeper Jassem al-Hail in the opposite direction with his right-footed shot a minute later.

By the 88th minute, Al Sadd had made it 3-1 with Mujica hitting the bull's eye again with a left-footed shot from a difficult angle on the left, from an assist by Afif, to complete a total turnaround in an highly entertaining encounter.



Action from the Qatar Stars League match between Qatar SC and Al Shamal.

Earlier at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium, a late stoppage-time penalty ensured a 2-1 win for Qatar SC over Al Shamal. Al Shamal were reduced to 10-man earlier in the 38th minute after their goalkeeper Babacar Seck was given the marching orders after he landed his head on Qatar SC's Ahmed Abdelkader's neck while going for a high ball. While Abdelkader (90+10 minute-penalty) and Ataa Jaber (45+3 minute) scored the goals for Qatar SC, Baghdad Boundedjah scored from the spot for Al Shamal's only goal in the 82nd minute of the match. Al Shamal then also conceded a penalty after Abdelkader was brought down from behind by substitute Omar Ali while the former was charging from left inside the danger area.

The result saw Qatar SC leapfrog from being 11th in the rankings to 9th place

with a tally to 16 points, while Al Shamal remained in 5th spot with 19 points. Both teams played attacking football and had several attempts at the rival dens but couldn't find the target early enough.

In the added time of the opening half, Jaber produced a spectacular goal to put his team ahead. Jaber first took an Abdelkader lob on to his chest then volleyed a kick to turn around and fire into the right corner. The second session saw Al Shamal trying hard but rued misses. Al Shamal's chance to equalise eventually came when Boundedjah was brought down in the box. The referee called for a penalty and Boundedjah made no mistake (1-1). Al Shamal, however, soon paid for their own mistake as Abdelkader was tackled from behind and he stepped up to beat the rival goalkeeper with ease and rush into celebrations.

FOCUS

FIBA Basketball World Cup LOC and Schools Olympic Program forge strategic partnership

The Organising Committee of the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027 has signed a co-operation agreement with the Schools Olympic Program Organising Committee, marking a significant step toward leveraging sports as a tool for social and community development.

The collaboration will focus on supporting the "Basketball for Good" initiative, launched by the International Basketball Federation (FIBA), to encourage greater participation in the sport and promote key developmental values.

The signing ceremony was attended by Mohammed Saad al-Meghaiseeb, President of the Qatar Basketball Federation and Director General of the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027 Local Organising Committee and Sheikh Khalifa bin Khalid al-Thani, President of the Qatar School Sports Association and Chairman of the Schools Olympic Program Organising Committee.

This agreement reinforces a shared commitment to sustainability and social impact by fostering knowledge exchange and launching joint projects aligned with sustainable development goals (SDGs). The collaboration will particularly emphasise education, health, and community well-being.

Additionally, the initiative seeks to enhance youth participation in basketball by integrating specialised educational and awareness programmes within Qatari schools. These programmes aim to promote healthy lifestyles and encourage students to adopt basketball as a sport that contributes to their personal growth and well-being.

Al-Meghaiseeb highlighted the significance of this collaboration, stating: "This agreement underscores our commitment to making the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027 more than just a tournament — it is a platform for driving social development and fostering community engagement. Through the 'Basketball



Mohammed Saad al-Meghaiseeb, President of the Qatar Basketball Federation and Director General of the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027 Local Organising Committee and Sheikh Khalifa bin Khalid al-Thani, President of the Qatar School Sports Association and Chairman of the Schools Olympic Program Organising Committee after the signing ceremony yesterday

for Good' initiative, we aim to widen the sport's reach among youth, encouraging them to embrace an active and healthy lifestyle, in alignment with Qatar's Vision 2030."

"By working alongside the Schools Olympic Program, we are creating a sustainable sports model that blends competition with meaningful social impact. The FIBA Basketball World Cup 2027 will not only showcase elite basketball talent but also serve as a landmark event that promotes sustainability, education, and a lasting sports legacy," He added.

For his part, Sheikh Khalifa emphasised the importance of the partnership, said: "Basketball

has always been an integral part of the Schools Olympic Program, and this agreement further strengthens our efforts to maximise its impact on students. By collaborating with the FIBA Basketball World Cup Organising Committee, we are committed to making basketball more than just a game — it becomes an educational and developmental tool. This initiative will offer students expanded opportunities to play in a structured and engaging environment while instilling fundamental values such as teamwork, discipline, and leadership. Ultimately, we aim to inspire a new generation of athletes prepared for a sustainable and active future."

SPOTLIGHT

Morocco's Ziyech joins Al Duhail

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Duhail have made waves in the transfer market by roping in Moroccan star Hakim Ziyech. The seasoned playmaker, 31, renowned for his creativity and lethal left foot, chose Al Duhail over multiple professional offers, marking a significant chapter in the club's ambitions.

Ziyech, who represented the Netherlands at youth level, will play under former Paris Saint-Germain manager Christophe Galtier. Ziyech's arrival is seen as a major boost to Al Duhail's attacking firepower. With a career spanning some of Europe's elite clubs, including Chelsea, Ajax, Twente and Heerenveen, the Moroccan maestro brings a wealth of experience to the Qatari side.

He most recently showcased his skills with Galatasaray, further solidifying his reputation as a game-changer on the field. Since making his international debut in 2015, Ziyech has been a key figure for the Moroccan national team, earning accolades for his performances in major tournaments.

Welcoming the "Moroccan Lion" into their ranks, Al Duhail hailed the signing as a pivotal moment for the team. "We are delighted to have Hakim Ziyech join the family. His vast experience and winning mentality will undoubtedly elevate our squad to new heights," the club management said in a statement.

Al Duhail have been in superb form this season, already sealing a silverware with the QSL Cup triumph. They are leading the Qatar Stars League, and will meet Umm Salal in the top flight today.



CRICKET

Sri Lanka lose 3 wickets after Khawaja and Inglis specials

AUSTRALIA POST 654 FOR 6 WICKETS AFTER KHAWAJA HIT CAREER-BEST 232 AND INGLIS 102 ON DEBUT



Australia's Usman Khawaja acknowledges the crowd as he walks back to the pavilion upon his dismissal after scoring 232 runs during the second day play of the first Test at the Galle International Cricket Stadium in Galle yesterday. **Right:** Australia's Josh Inglis celebrates after scoring a century yesterday. (AFP)



AFP
Galle, Sri Lanka

Australia had Sri Lanka three down after opener Usman Khawaja's first double century and a ton on debut by Josh Inglis helped the tourists to 654-6 declared in the first match yesterday.

Sri Lanka were 44-3 by stumps on day two at Galle with senior batsmen Dinesh Chandimal, on nine, and Kamindu Mendis, on 13, on guard until rain stopped play.

Left-arm spinner Matthew Kuhnemann struck first to have Oshada Fernando lbw and soon

pace spearhead Mitchell Starc got Dimuth Karunaratne caught at gully. Both batsmen made seven.

Veteran spinner Nathan Lyon then sent back former skipper Angelo Mathews out for eight with Travis Head taking a diving catch at short leg.

Khawaja's 266-run third-wicket partnership with Steve Smith, who hit 141 in a landmark innings that got the stand-in skipper to 10,000 Test runs, stood out after Australia elected to bat first at the start of the two-match series.

It was the first time the tourists had breached the 600-run mark in Sri Lanka, surpassing their previous Asian high of 617, posted in

Pakistan in 1980. Wicketkeeper-batsman Alex Carey was unbeaten on 46 with Starc on 19 when Smith declared the first innings in the final session.

Inglis made it count when he walked in after Smith departed on 141 in a landmark innings that got the stand-in skipper to 10,000 Test runs.

He made 102 and with Khawaja kept up the batting surge in a 146-run stand to tire out the opposition attack.

"Hasn't sunk in yet," Inglis told reporters. "Nice to get the team into a very strong position."

"Obviously having played in the sub-continent helps. The train-

ing camp in Dubai was really key. We were able to work out our individual plans. If you see all our guys had clear plans."

Khawaja answers critics
Spinner Prabath Jayasuriya broke the partnership to get Khawaja caught behind as the opener walked back after 352 balls that included 16 fours and one six.

Inglis reached his ton off 90 balls as he jumped in delight and punched the air.

But he got out in the next over as he gave away a catch to short cover off Jayasuriya.

Jayasuriya and fellow spinner Jeffrey Vandersay took three wick-

ets each as Sri Lanka toiled for 154 overs.

"The surface didn't change much. They were bowling better lines and a bit quicker and that was the difference," said Vandersay.

"Australia has a mammoth total on the board. We just need to bat long as possible and keep focusing on building partnerships and take one session at a time."

The tourists resumed on 330-2 as overnight batsmen Khawaja and Smith frustrated the opposition attack on a sunny morning.

Khawaja took a single off Jayasuriya to reach 200 as he removed his helmet, raised his bat and dropped down to kiss the turf

while teammates and fans stood up to applaud. His previous best was an unbeaten 195 against South Africa in 2023 at Sydney and he is now the first Australian batsman to make a double ton in Sri Lanka.

He silenced his critics who questioned his future after his recent lean patch with just one fifty in the last 15 innings coming into this week's Test.

BRIEF SCORES (First Test, Day 2)

Sri Lanka 44 for 3 (Kamindu 13*, Chandimal 9*, Lyon 1-7) **trail Australia 654 for 6 dec** (Khawaja 232, Smith 141, Inglis 102, Head 57, Vandersay 3-182, Jayasuriya 3-193) **by 610 runs**

beIN MEDIA GROUP extends ATP Tour rights deal across Mena until 2028

DOHA: beIN MEDIA GROUP ('beIN'), the global sports, entertainment and media group, has renewed its exclusive agreement with ATP Media, the broadcast arm of the ATP Tour, for its ATP Tour broadcast rights in 24 countries across the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) until 2028. The renewed agreement, which started in 2014, ensures that the company's flagship sports channels, beIN SPORTS, continue to deliver unparalleled coverage of the ATP Tour, including all ATP Masters 1000 events, all ATP 500 events, certain ATP 250 events and the season-ending Nitto ATP Finals.

The ATP Tour features the world's best players competing across more than 60 events in 30-plus countries every season. beIN SPORTS will bring all the top ATP Tour action to the Mena region, as well as to subscribers in Australia and Southeast Asia, where the



network also holds exclusive broadcast rights. Mohammad al-Subaie, CEO of beIN Mena, said: "We are proud of our decade long partnership with ATP Media that has brought millions of viewers across the Mena region some of the best tennis action in the world. As the undisputed home of tennis in the region, beIN SPORTS has long been committed to providing

unrivalled coverage of both men's and women's tennis across our network of channels to nurture the growing passion for the sport in the region. We look forward to continuing working with ATP Media and the ATP and other major sporting organisations to inspire the next generation of fans for years to come." Mark Webster, CEO of ATP Media, said: "It was a very easy decision

for us to renew our long-standing partnership with beIN SPORTS in the Mena region. beIN SPORTS has continually demonstrated many of the same values ATP Media strives for in terms of a pursuit of excellence and innovation to ensure that the ATP Tour is seen in the best possible light by its millions of fans around the world. We look forward to continuing to work with beIN SPORTS over the coming years."

With the ATP Tour remaining a part of beIN SPORTS' extensive sports portfolio, this agreement solidifies its position as the leading destination for tennis fans in the region. beIN SPORTS is the only broadcaster in Mena with exclusive rights to both the ATP and WTA Tours, alongside all the other Grand Slams. Earlier this month, beIN also announced the extension of its exclusive rights to the Australian Open in Mena through to 2029.

RUGBY

Sydney to host World Cup final in 2027

Reuters
Sydney

Sydney will host the 2027 Rugby World Cup final, 24 years after England upset the Wallabies at the harbour city's Stadium Australia in the 2003 decider, World Rugby confirmed yesterday.

Stadium Australia, the 82,000-seat venue which hosted the 2000 Olympics' athletics and opening and closing ceremonies, is slated to host the 2027 final and both semi-finals.

Sydney will also stage the bronze medal match, two quarter-finals, two round-of-16 matches and five pool matches as the big winner among Australia's

bidding cities. Melbourne, home of the 100,000-seat Melbourne Cricket Ground, was reported to have expressed interest in the final but was awarded only two round-of-16 matches and seven pool matches.

Brisbane will instead host the other two quarter-finals along with two round-of-16 matches and six pool matches.

Perth will have two round-of-16 matches and five pool matches including the tournament-opener which is likely to feature the Wallabies.

The draw is yet to be confirmed.

Adelaide, Newcastle and Townsville round out Australia's seven host cities and will each hold group matches.

SPOTLIGHT

Afghan women players thrilled, reunite for first game in more than 3 years

AFP
Melbourne

Afghanistan's women cricketers yesterday played their first game since fleeing the Taliban three years ago, a charity match in Australia that captain Nahida Sapan hoped would spark "a movement for change".

Hundreds of women athletes fled Afghanistan as the Taliban took over in August 2021, escaping a hardline stance that essentially banned women's sport and education.

Most of the national women's cricket side settled as refugees in Australia, where they reunited for the first time yesterday to play a charity match in Melbourne.

"Together, we're building not just a team, we're building a movement for change and promise," Sapan said in the run-up to the game.

"We have big hopes for this match because this match can open doors for Afghan women, for education, sport and in the future."

The Afghanistan Cricket Board made a significant stride in November 2020 when it handed 25 promising women cricketers professional contracts.

But before the fledgling squad

had a chance to play together, the Taliban captured capital Kabul and declared an end to women's cricket.

"We have sacrificed a lot to be here today," said cricketer Firooza Amiri after the match.

"The situation in Afghanistan is very terrible. Women don't have their rights."

"I can live freely in Australia and live my life the way I want."

"But back home in Afghanistan... I can only say it is very heartbreaking and very hard to live in that situation."

Profound sadness

Diana Barakzai, who helped found Afghanistan's first women's cricket programme almost 20 years ago, said yesterday's match was an "amazing moment".

"I'm sure it's a big message for the world, that the world will do something for Afghan women," she told AFP.

"Especially for opening the school doors, opening up work for women."

Of the 25 women once contracted by the Afghanistan Cricket Board, 22 are now settled in the Australian cities of Melbourne and Canberra.

Some of these players have lobbied the governing International



Afghanistan Women's XI players pose for a team photo during the cricket match between Afghanistan Women's XI and Cricket Without Borders XI at Junction Oval in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

Cricket Council in the hopes of forming a refugee team with some kind of official status.

"A profound sadness remains

that we, as women, cannot represent our country like the male cricketers," some players wrote in a joint letter last year.

"The creation of this team will allow all Afghan women who want to represent their country to come together under one banner."

The council has so far ignored these calls.

Yesterday's game was played at Melbourne's Junction Oval, a storied ground where a young Shane Warne once plied his trade.

The Afghan side played an invitational outfit representing Cricket Without Borders, a charity which aims to draw young women into the game.

Clad in cricket pads, helmets and blue shirts of a similar shade to the national men's side, the Afghan XI gathered for a brief team prayer before batting first.

After setting a target of 103 runs from 20 overs, they were pipped with just four balls to spare.

Shazia Zazai, the former Afghan national captain, top scored with 40 runs from 45 balls.

Governing body Cricket Australia threw its weight behind the match, pledging to "advocate" for the Afghan women's side at the highest levels.

"I'm just so proud of everyone across Australian cricket who's worked to support the players since they've been in Australia," chief executive Nick Hockley said earlier this week. Citing human rights concerns, Australia has in recent years boycotted a series of non-tournament fixtures against the Afghanistan men's side.

OLYMPICS

IOC's top job: The contenders deliver their vision for world sport in post-Bach era

A GROUP OF SEVEN ARE VYING TO CONVINCING A MAJORITY OF THE 100-PLUS MEMBERS TO ELECT THEM

AFP
Lausanne

Hope, experience, integrity and engaging with the youth of today were some of the messages the seven candidates bidding to become the next president of the International Olympic Committee delivered to their fellow members yesterday.

The seven are vying to convince a majority of the 100-plus members to elect them and succeed Thomas Bach as arguably the most powerful person in global sport, in a vote slated for March 20 in Costa Navarino, Greece.

The candidates all have impressive CVs; two of them, Briton Sebastian Coe and Zimbabwe's Kirsty Coventry, are Olympic gold medalists and successful administrators since they retired from competition.

Bach steps down after a tumultuous 12-year tenure which has encompassed the Covid pandemic, the Russian doping scandal at the Sochi Winter Games in 2014 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

While Coventry would be the first woman and African to lead the Olympic movement, Juan Antonio Samaranch Junior is also seeking to make history by emulating his father of the same name who was president from 1980 to 2001.

"I hope it is neither a help nor a hindrance," Samaranch said of his father, who transformed the IOC into a commercial powerhouse during his tenure.

"He left office years ago and his legacy to me personally I appreciate very much.

"However, his recipes are not relevant now."

Samaranch, though, has built up a wealth of experience within the movement.

It was something the 65-year-old Spaniard was keen to emphasise to the media after making his presentation behind closed doors to the members and where



International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach holds a sheet of paper that reads 'Dolomiti Valtellina 2028' after Italy's Dolomiti Valtellina was confirmed as host of the 2028 Winter Youth Olympic Games (YOG), in a vote by the 143rd IOC Session, in Lausanne yesterday. (AFP)

no questions were permitted. "I have more than 25 years inside the organisation, experience on the revenues side and helped organise the Beijing Winter Games during Covid," he said.

"So I have experience to deliver results under real pressure.

"I know the job and know how the administration works."

Coventry swatted aside suggestions she was the favoured candidate of Bach, saying he respected all of them and he would not vote.

The two-time Olympic swimming gold medalist recalled how she had seen the impact her gold medal had on her compatriots in 2004.

"I got back to Zimbabwe which was then very divisive and divided, but it sparked four days of peace," said the 41-year-old.

"I got to see the power of sport and that was why I was standing before (the members) today"

Coventry faced questions over how she and her fellow members on the IOC Executive Board dealt with the controversy in the wom-

en's boxing competition at the Paris Olympics last year when Algerian Imane Khelif and Taiwanese Lin Yu Ting won golds despite previously failing gender tests.

"As a female athlete you want to be able to walk onto a level playing field, always," the Zimbabwean sports minister said.

"It is our job as the IOC to ensure we are going to create that environment and not just create a level playing field but an environment that allows for every athlete to feel safe. That is our job."

Coe for his part said he "felt very privileged and very honoured to be a small part of (the Olympic Movement)." The ever-youthful looking 68-year-old two-time 1500 metres gold medalist said engaging with young people was of primary importance.

"The biggest challenge is for all of us to excite and engage with young people" he said.

"That will be critical as it is that cohort that is ultimately going to be future sponsors, thought leaders and politicians.

"We need to create among that group of people a lifelong bond with sport."

Frenchman David Lappartient, the head of the international cycling federation, has been touted as a dark horse.

With both the 2028 Olympics and the 2034 Winter Games taking part in the United States, the 51-year-old was keen to emphasise he would be firm with US President Donald Trump over the IOC's status.

"Our autonomy is non-negotiable will be my message," he said.

"Autonomy and political neutrality."

The United States is presently withholding funding from the World Anti-Doping Authority (WADA), but Prince Feisal al-Husseini defended them vigorously.

"It is not for me to comment on US policies," said the Jordanian.

"We (the IOC) are the institution who helped establish WADA and I think they have been doing a terrific job."

Whilst the prince focused on in-



Morinari Watanabe



David Lappartient



Prince Feisal al-Husseini of Jordan



Juan Antonio Samaranch Junior



Kirsty Coventry



Johan Eliasch

tegrity, for ski boss Johan Eliasch the message was one of hope.

"I bring hope that anything is possible," said the 62-year-old Anglo-Swedish environmentalist.

"In a world of division and disruption we have never needed hope more."

Gymnastics federation president Morinari Watanabe of Japan, bidding like the prince to become the first Asian president of the IOC, stuck to his idea of an Olympics held across the five continents, which even he has said is "crazy."

IOC candidate Coe says he should have handled prize money issue differently

Berlin: World Athletics chief Sebastian Coe, a candidate for president of the International Olympic Committee, said yesterday his decision to offer prize money to Paris 2024 Olympic champions of his sport should have been handled differently.

World Athletics announced its prize money decision unilaterally ahead of last year's Paris Games without consulting either the IOC, of which Coe is a member, or other international sports federations.

The decision angered the IOC and some federations which opposed such a move, saying not all athletes were benefiting from it.

World Athletics has said it will offer prize money to all medalists in the sport at the Los Angeles 2028 Ol-



ympics. "We made the judgement about prize money because we felt it was in the best interest of our sport," Coe told an online media

round table. "In hindsight I should have done it differently and I am ready to hold my hands up. I did apologise (to other Olympic sports

federations). Not about the prize money ... but in hindsight I would have done it a different way."

The Briton was speaking hours ahead of yesterday's 15-minute presentation of each presidential candidate to IOC members in Lausanne. The Olympic body will elect its new president - the most powerful job in world sport - on March 20 in Greece.

Coe is up against multiple Olympic swimming champion Kirsty Coventry, who is Zimbabwe's sports minister, as well as Spaniard Juan Antonio Samaranch, son of the late former IOC president.

International cycling chief David Lappartient, Prince Feisal al-Husseini of Jordan, International Gymnastics Federation head Morinari

Watanabe and Olympic newcomer and multimillionaire Johan Eliasch, who heads the International Ski Federation, complete the candidates' lineup.

To involve members more

Coe said if elected he would involve members more and not just within the powerful executive board. Under current president Thomas Bach it is the executive board which takes most key decisions, with the members all but rubber-stamping them.

Under Bach's 12-year rule all but one of the decisions were unanimous. "Everywhere. Absolutely everywhere," Coe said on where he would involve members.

"At the moment we don't have the structures to get the best out of some very smart people.

"There is not a global board that would not take some people sitting beside me in that room. People that are far smarter than me."

Coe said that of the 100-plus members, which include entrepreneurs, billionaires, athletes and royalty amongst others, his own research showed 38% were Olympians, 33% had solid business careers, while 11% had held top government jobs in their countries.

"We are sitting there with an asset that I think is at best untapped, at worst neglected. No organisation can sit with that kind of talent on the backbenches," Coe said.

US Open to expand main draw to 15 days in 2025

The U.S. Open will expand its main draw to 15 days, the United States Tennis Association (USTA) said on Wednesday, kicking off a day earlier than the usual Monday opener for the tournament's first weekend start in the Open Era. The schedule change will see the men's and women's singles first rounds play out over three days from Sunday, August 24. The added day will allow main draw access for another 70,000 attendees or more, after a third straight year of record-breaking attendance in 2024. The Sunday opener will include six new ticketed sessions, with day and night sessions for the famed Arthur Ashe Stadium and Louis Armstrong Stadium.

Ranking rise costs Keys place in Austin event

Newly-crowned Australian Open champion Madison Keys would have expected to receive invitations to more tournaments in the coming months but the ATX Open in Austin was forced to drop the American after she climbed into the top 10 in the rankings. Keys beat the top two seeds, Iga Swiatek and defending champion Aryna Sabalenka, in Melbourne to win her first Grand Slam title, catapulting the 29-year-old into the top 10 and a career-high seventh in the rankings. But since the February 22-March 2 ATX Open is a WTA 250 event, only one top 10 player is allowed in the draw unless the defending champion also returns as a top-10 player. Keys had agreed to play when her ranking was 21st but so did American world number six Jessica Pegula, who will be participating in the tournament for the first time. "We love Madison and have been anticipating for months the excitement of her playing here in Austin for the first time," tournament director Christo van Rensburg said in a statement. "While we wish the Top 10 rule didn't apply to our tournament, we respect the rules of the WTA. That said, Madison's Grand Slam title and subsequent Top 10 world ranking are both something to celebrate. We can't wait to invite Madison again to future ATX Opens." Keys has reached only one other Grand Slam final - at the US Open in 2017.

GOLF

Spieth feels ready after return from a wrist injury

Reuters
Pebble Beach

Jordan Spieth said he's excited to be back playing golf and that it's "all systems go" on his surgically repaired wrist as he prepares to make his season debut at Pebble Beach.

Spieth made the comments on Wednesday ahead of the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am.

Spieth underwent surgery on his left wrist in August after first sustaining the injury in 2023. Teeing off will mark his first competitive round of golf since competing in the FedEx St. Jude Classic at TPC Southwind in Memphis on Aug. 15-18.

"Yeah, things feel really good. I'm very pleased with how everything's gone. I wake up, it's a little tight still after putting it to use a lot the last couple weeks to try to get ready, but it's nothing



Jordan Spieth of the United States warms up on the putting green prior to the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am 2025 at at Spyglass Hill Golf Course in Pebble Beach, California. (AFP)

that can do any damage anymore. I just loosen it up and it feels really good," Spieth told reporters.

Spieth said he originally planned to return before this week but hadn't gotten in the

reps he felt necessary to pull it off. Pebble Beach "was always going to be a good place to start, and I got a couple great pieces of advice before and during recovery and one of them was that no one's

ever come back too late from a surgery," Spieth told reporters. "So I kind of took that to heart. As much as I wanted to just start getting out there, I'm glad that I've waited till here." He added that "ideally" he won't "think about" the wrist at all this week.

"It might take a little while, I'm not sure, but it's all systems go now and I'm excited to be back. I don't feel like I missed much because I think I only missed - I maybe missed one or two events that I would have played in anyways. It kind of just feels like the start to a new season, which I think is a good thing," Spieth said.

Spieth has three major wins and 13 overall victories on the PGA Tour, but none since the RBC Heritage in April 2022. He began the 2024 season with a third-place showing at The Sentry and tied for sixth at the WM Phoenix Open, but he had only one more top-10 the rest of the year while missing seven cuts.

HORSE RACING

Al Warkah claims Ras Rokn Island Cup with late burst

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Sheikh Faisal bin Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani-owned and bred Al Warkah showcased a brilliant late burst in final 100m of the 2000m Local Thoroughbred Handicap (50-70) to snatch victory and the Ras Rokn Island Cup in the final strides on sand at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

The Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki-trained six-year-old mare unleashed a storming finish to edge out long-time leader Suheal Qatar by a neck under Arnaud De Lepine, who completed a double on the day.

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

Earlier, Nasser Saeed MS al-Eida's Mystical Music, trained by Jassim Ghazali and saddled by Youssef Lachhab, galloped to win in the Thoroughbred Handicap (85-110), 4YO+, 2000m.

Lachhab also steered Toward The Sun to win in the Thoroughbred Handicap (0-85), 3YOs.

In other races, Taymoor Al Shahania was victorious in the Purebred Arabian Handicap under Fayos Martin Borja while Tomas Lukasek and Wonder Smile teamed up to win the Thoroughbred Handicap.



Arnaud De Lepine pilots Al Warkah to Ras Rokn Island Cup victory at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim

The meeting got underway with Arnaud De Lepine guiding Julian Smart-trained Alnood to Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate title followed by a Local Thoroughbred Handicap win for Duphor Bu Thaila under Marco Casamento.

RESULTS 12TH AL UQDA RACE MEETING - RAS ROKN ISLAND CUP

WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

1. Local Thoroughbred Handicap (50-70), 4YO+
Al Warkah, Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, Arnaud De Lepine
2. Thoroughbred Handicap (85-110), 4YO+
Mystical Music, Jassim Ghazali, Youssef Lachhab
3. Thoroughbred Handicap (0-85), 3YOs



Connections of Al Warkah celebrate after the six-year-old mare's win.

- Toward The Sun, Hadi al-Ramzani, Youssef Lachhab
4: Purebred Arabian Handicap (60-80), 4YO+
Taymoor Al Shahania, Trainer, Mohamed Khaled Elahmed, Fayos Martin Borja
5: Thoroughbred Handicap (55-75), 3YO+
Wonder Smile, Rashid al-Jehani, Tomas

- Lukasek
6: Local Thoroughbred Handicap (0-50), 3YO+
Duphor Bu Thaila, Fahad Rashid al-Khayarin, Marco Casamento
7 Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate (Filles and Mares), 4-6YOs
Alnood, Julian Smart, Arnaud De Lepine

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Real Madrid ready for any opponent, says Bellingham

Real face either Manchester City or Celtic in the play-offs in Feb

AFP
Guingamp, France

Jude Bellingham insisted Real Madrid would be ready for whoever they have to face in the Champions League play-offs and that the reigning champions are "starting to click" after their 3-0 win in Brest on Wednesday.

Bellingham scored Real's second goal in between a double strike from Rodrygo as the Spanish giants proved too strong for the French upstarts in Guingamp. It was a third straight win to finish the league phase of the Champions League for Real after they started with three defeats in their first five outings, and that poor start is what led to them coming 11th in the standings.

They finished a point outside the top eight places which offered direct qualification for the last 16, and therefore enter today's draw for the extra play-off round. They already know that they will face either Manchester City or Celtic in the play-offs in February, with the winners over two legs advancing to the last 16 in March.

"It was important to get the win and finish the group stage strong. I think we probably let ourselves down in a few of the games and that is the reason why we have ended up" in the play-offs," Bellingham said. "No problem, we'll try and face whatever obstacle comes with a better face and you can see that we are definitely starting to click as a team in the last few weeks."

Carlo Ancelotti's side have won their last five matches in all competitions since a 5-2 pasting at the hands of Barcelona in the Spanish Super Cup final in Saudi Arabia on January 12. Rodrygo opened the scoring against Brest just before the half-hour mark for Real with a low shot across goalkeeper Marco Bizot and in off the far post, moments after the Brazilian had a header expertly saved.

The visitors were missing Vinicius Junior through suspension and Kylian Mbappe was not on scoring form, having previously netted eight times in the last five games. But that didn't matter, as Real survived seeing Brest's Ludovic Ajorque have a goal disallowed for a tight offside just after half-time before they went 2-0 ahead on 56 minutes.

Bellingham, the player of the match, sparked a breakaway and then arrived in the box to finish off Lucas Vazquez's low centre. Rodrygo



Real Madrid's Jude Bellingham heads the ball during the UEFA Champions League match against Brestin Guingamp, north-western France. (AFP)

then scored again on 78 minutes, claiming a brace in a second straight Champions League game, after Mbappe's shot was saved.

"I think we overlook who scores the goals and that kind of thing because we know that each game it will be someone else, whether it's Rodrygo's two and me one tonight, whether it's Kylian with three the other day," Bellingham added. "Someone will always step up with a bit of individual brilliance and the rest of us will focus on the organisation of the team. That is maybe what we lacked in a few of the early group games but it seems to be getting better over the last few weeks."

Real qualified from the league phase despite defeats against Lille, AC Milan and Liverpool, and Bellingham gave the new format a thumbs up overall. "It has been nice playing more teams of a higher quality and a real mixed group of teams from all over Europe. It's nice to have a bit more jeopardy," he said.

Brest are also through to the play-off round after a memorable first ever European cam-

paign which has seen them finish 18th in the table, above the likes of Juventus and Manchester City, despite losing their last two games. They will play either French rivals Paris Saint-Germain or Benfica in the next round. "We want to keep going, make even more history than we have already, and if we can continue to get results, why not," said Bizot.

PLAY-OFFS DRAW LINE-UP

Atalanta (ITA)/Borussia Dortmund (GER) v Sporting (POR)/Club Brugge (BEL)
Real Madrid (ESP)/Bayern Munich (GER) v Celtic (SCO)/Manchester City (ENG)
AC Milan (ITA)/PSV Eindhoven (NED) v Feyenoord (NED)/Juventus (ITA)
Paris Saint-Germain (FRA)/Benfica (POR) v Monaco (FRA)/Brest (FRA)
Already through to the last 16: Liverpool (ENG), Barcelona (ESP), Arsenal (ENG), Inter Milan (ITA), Atletico Madrid (ESP), Bayer Leverkusen (GER), Lille (FRA), Aston Villa (ENG)

SPOTLIGHT

Enrique praises PSG for making knockouts despite 'worst draw'

AFP
Stuttgart, Germany

Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique on Wednesday praised his side for making the Champions League knockout stages despite having the "worst draw of the 36 teams involved".

PSG were dominant in a 4-1 win at Stuttgart on Wednesday, having come into the game needing victory to guarantee they made the top 24 and avoid an early exit from the competition. Ousmane Dembele scored a hat-trick after Bradley Barcola's opener as the French champions climbed to 15th in the table. PSG will meet Ligue 1 rivals Brest or Monaco in a two-legged knockout tie in February.

"Our objective of qualifying has been achieved. We had the worst draw of the 36 teams involved, which was frustrating at the start, but we managed to clearly achieve our objective, and the performances were there," Luis Enrique said in a press conference.

PSG lost to Arsenal, Bayern Munich and Atletico Madrid, while drawing at home against PSV Eindhoven. Under the new competition structure - introduced for the 2024-25 season - all teams are put in pots and drawn to face

eight teams at random, as opposed to the previous system of playing three sides home and away. The coach, who won the Champions League as Barcelona boss in 2015, said PSG's final ranking of 15th, with 13 points, "was a bit unfair, we deserved five more points at least."

"Our team showed personality and ambition and defended well," Luis Enrique said. "Our team is one of the youngest, (but) we have the capacity to bounce back when the going gets tough."

PSG SWEAT ON ZAIRE-EMERY FITNESS

Meanwhile, Warren Zaire-Emery is an injury doubt for PSG's two-legged Champions League last 16 play-off tie next month after picking up an injury in at Stuttgart.

The French champions announced yesterday that Zaire-Emery, 18, sprained his left ankle during the 4-1 win in the league phase, which booked PSG's spot in the play-off round, and is set to be out for several weeks. "The length of (Zaire-Emery's) absence will depend on how the injury progresses over the coming days," PSG said in a statement.

Several media sources reported that the French international midfielder could be out for at least three weeks.



Paris Saint-Germain's head coach Luis Enrique speaks with forward Bradley Barcola during match against Stuttgart. (AFP)

Rashford 'must be ashamed' of Man United exile, says Keane

London: Former Manchester United captain Roy Keane says Marcus Rashford "must be ashamed" at his exile under Ruben Amorim. The 27-year-old has not played for United for seven weeks and manager Amorim has told him starkly that he "has to change" if he is to have a future at Old Trafford.

The England forward has not been included in the squad for Romanian side FCSB in the Europa League despite training with the group during the build-up after a period working by himself. Rashford has been linked with a loan move to Barcelona but time is tight, with the transfer window closing on Monday.

Keane voiced his frustration over the situation. "I can't get involved in the conversation, I still can't understand at any level," he said. "Whatever's going on with players leaving, months left on contracts, a

player who doesn't train properly... I don't understand it. You might as well leave me out of this conversation. Especially if you think he wants to move, which is more of a reason to train properly so when you go to a new club you're up to speed and when you leave the club at least you showed a decent attitude. He must be ashamed."

Another United great, Wayne Rooney, revealed that he had seen Rashford working alone with a fitness coach in front of parents when he took his children to the club's Carrington training headquarters. "I went into Carrington to take my kids to game day and Rashford was out on the training pitch with the fitness coach, but he was right over towards where the parents were walking past for the kids' games," he said. "I looked at him thinking how embarrassing it must be for him as parents walk past."

FOCUS

'City will pose problems for Madrid or Bayern'

AFP
Manchester

Pep Guardiola said he cannot see Manchester City winning the Champions League on current form, but believes his side will be better when they face the might of either Real Madrid or Bayern Munich next month.

City needed a second-half fightback from 1-0 down to beat Club Brugge 3-1 on Wednesday to avoid crashing out before the knockout stages for the first time since 2012. Their reward could be just a stay of execution against either the

defending champions or Guardiola's former club Bayern.

City have also been a diminished force in the Premier League this season, where they sit fourth - 12 points behind leaders Liverpool. But Guardiola is hopeful they will be strengthened by the return of key players from injury and new signings Omar Marmoush, Abdou Diallo, Khusanov and Vitor Reis in the coming weeks.

"Right now no. I'm so realistic," said Guardiola when asked if the 2023 champions could win the competition again. "Madrid is back in terms of results, Bayern played an incredible season so far with (coach) Vinny (Kompany). If we have to play tomorrow it will

be difficult but in two weeks we don't know. We are going to prepare well, be fit and try it and see what happens."

Despite their struggles, City have won six and drawn one of their last eight games. "At least lately we are getting results," added Guardiola. "We are fourth in Premier League, not in the title race, no way, but still we are there. FA Cup we are there. Sometimes it is impossible today but tomorrow the mindset, the vibes change and I'm pretty sure we will try and create problems for Madrid or Bayern."

City's narrow escape played a central role on a dramatic final night for the first season of the Champions League's new Swiss model format.