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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Al Duhail fight back to beat Umm Salal, extend lead

Al-Ahrak scores the winner in the 89th minute as the Red Knights stay ahead arch of rivals Al Sadd

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Duhail consolidated their lead in the Qatar Stars League after defeating Umm Salal 2-1 at the Grand Hamad Stadium yesterday. The Red Knights scored on either side of half-time, with Ismail Mohammed (39th minute) and Abdullah al-Ahrak (89th minute) scoring for the winners after Oussama Tannane had given The Orange Fortress the lead in the 36th minute.

Al Duhail now have to 32 points, four more than defending champions Al Sadd, Al Gharafa and Al Ahli, who are all on 28 points. Umm Salal remained 10th on 14 points. Al Duhail had the first clear-cut chance of the encounter in the seventh minute with Almoez Ali connecting perfectly with a cross from Edmilson Junior following a corner kick, but the forward's header from the centre of the box went a bit high and wide to the left. Four minutes later, the Qatar international again rattled the bar with a right-footed shot from the right side of the six-yard box from an inch-perfect cross by Homam al-Ameen.

Umm Salal continued to soak up the pressure from the away team while breaking forward occasionally, and they could have gotten the opener in the 31st minute had Marouan Louadni been more precise with his header that came from an assist by Tannane following a corner kick.

Five minutes later, it was Tannane's name that came on the lips of every Umm Salal fan as the Moroccan international opened the scoring in the exciting match after firing home a thunderbolt of a shot from 25 yards out that stunned not just the goalkeeper Salah Zakaria but the entire field.

Jolted by the turn of events, Al Duhail

went in search of an immediate remedy and they got their desires three minutes later when an unmarked Ismail Mohammed connected well with a diagonal cross by Homam to tap into an almost empty net to make things even between the two sides going into the dugout.

A more determined Al Duhail came out of the dugout for the concluding half of the match and their pressure on Umm Salal went a notch up. Still, despite their several voyages into the opponent box, the resistance from Umm Salal's defence stood rock-solid. At the same time, goalkeeper Louay Ashour was also outstanding, making several commendable saves to the frustration of their opponents.

Just while the match was heading for a stalemate, al-Ahrak stepped up one minute into stoppage time with his right-footed shot from the centre of the box that sailed straight into the top right-hand corner of Umm Salal's goal to ensure maximum points for the league leaders.

KOROMA STRIKES AS SHAHANIA EDGE WAKRAH

Al Shahania beat Al Wakrah 1-0 in a highly-entertaining match at the Stadium 974. The winning strike for Al Shahania came through Alhassan Koroma in 45+1 minute and who struck after being provided with a beautiful cross by Under-21 player Moaz Tawhed Elwadia.

While Al Wakrah tried hard to match up to the rivals and made frantic efforts towards the end, they could not find the equalizer.

The win saw Al Shahania gain the three valuable points to be on 17 points, while Al Wakrah stayed on 17 points. The match began on a fast note and in the 10th minute, Al Shahania thought that they had gained lead when a Koroma through ball had Lotfi

Madjer sprinting down the left to strike into the far corner of the net. The joy was however short lived as the flag was up signalling off-side.

In the 16th minute, Al Wakrah almost made the breakthrough as Almahdi Ali leapt to head a corner kick, but the ball just missed the left post.

The exchanges continued at both ends for long before Al Shahania forced their way with Elwadia weaving his way past three Al Wakrah defenders from the right, just outside the box, to set up an unmarked Koroma with a superb parallel cross. Koroma ran in and connected with his left foot and shot into the right corner.

Soon after resumption of play in the second half, Elwadia again made a dash from the right and sent the ball across for Majder, who connected but the ball went wide off the right post.

Just on the hour mark, an Al Wakrah free-kick taken by Abdelkarim Hassan saw Al Shahania survive a scare as Andreas van Beek headed the ball just over his own goal.

Minutes later, Hassan was back in the act and this time from a set piece. The burly player broke past Al Shahania wall but his rasping shot was brilliantly blocked by goalkeeper Shehab Mamdouh Ellethy, who dived to his right. There was another chance on the rebound but Hamdy Fathy overshot.

Towards the end, Al Wakrah put a lot of pressure on their rivals launching repeated and quick attacks, with Ellethy having to do more work under the bar.

In the first minute of added time, Al Shahania hit back winning the ball from Al Wakrah and Pelle van Amersfoort beat Hassan inside the box to score. The wild celebrations of the players and the fans alike were soon muted as the referee ruled out the goal after VAR.



Action from the Qatar Stars League match between Al Duhail and Umm Salal at the Grand Hamad Stadium yesterday.

10-days countdown begins for the QOC Half Marathon

Doha: With just 10 days remaining until the inaugural QOC Half Marathon, excitement is building as the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) finalises preparations for the highly anticipated race. Set to take place on February 11 at Lusail Boulevard as part of Qatar National Sport Day, the event aims to encourage sports participation across all demographics while in alignment with Qatar National Vision 2023. The race offers four main categories, ensuring inclusivity for participants of all ages, genders, and fitness levels. Runners can choose from the 21-kilometer Half Marathon, the 10-kilometer race, the 5-kilometer race, or the 1-kilometer Fun Run, which is open to youngsters aged 6-14 years old.

Amna al-Ansari, Head of the Volunteers and Sustainability Committee, highlighted the overwhelming response from individuals eager to be part of the event. "The enthusiasm for volunteering at the QOC Half Marathon 2025 has been remarkable, reflecting the community's passion for engaging in major sporting events," she said. "Although we received a large number of applications, only 230 volunteers will be selected based on specific criteria to ensure a smooth and professional event. Additionally, we are committed to maintaining a sustainable volunteer database, allowing us to engage registered volunteers in future events hosted by QOC."

Al-Ansari emphasised the crucial role volunteers play in ensuring the success of sporting events in Qatar. For this race, they will be responsible for logistical support, guiding participants, and managing crowds, all of which contribute to the seamless execution of the event. To ensure full preparedness, a dedicated training session will be held at QOC headquarters before the race day. Volunteers will receive detailed role briefings, official permits, and race uniforms, followed by an on-site visit to Lusail Boulevard for a trial run of their duties ahead of the big day.

She also confirmed that the QOC has partnered with universities across Qatar to encourage student participation, fostering a strong culture of volunteerism among young people. Abdullah al-Marri, Head of Communication Committee, highlighted the growing enthusiasm surrounding the event, from individuals and families looking to take part in the race. "The impressive registration numbers are a testament to the increasing importance of sports in our community," he said. "We are seeing a strong turnout, not only from individual runners but also from families eager to experience this unique sporting celebration together."

MOTORSPORT

Rodriguez, al-Khelaifi take pole positions

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Spanish rider David Rodriguez took pole position for Qatar Superstock 600, while Qatari driver Abdullah al-Khelaifi will start from front in the Qatar Touring Car Championship today. In the QSTK qualifying at the Lusail International Circuit yesterday, Rodriguez recorded the fastest lap time of 2:03.227 minutes, 0.183 seconds ahead of his closest competitor Abdullah al-Qubaisi of Qatar. Mishaal al-Naimi will start third on the grid after he clocked 2:03.876 minutes, 0.649 seconds behind the leader.

In the Trophy category, Qatari rider Issa al-Mutawa secured the top spot in qualifying with a lap time of 2:07.989 minutes. Indian rider Emmanuel Jeffrey was second with a time of 2:08.099 minutes, while Kuwaiti rider Alexander Qabazard placed third with a time of 2:08.345 minutes.

In the 300cc category, India's Johan Reeves will start from pole after qualifying first with a time of 2:22.711 minutes. Hungary's Marton Belleli took second with 2:24.011 minutes, while Spaniard Nicolas de la Cuesta was third with 2:24.017 minutes.

Today, the competitions will continue with two main races in the 300cc category. The first race is at 11:50am for 8 laps, and the second race is at 3:25pm. Simultaneously, the 600cc and Trophy category races will take place. The first race will be at 2:10pm for 12 laps, with the second race at 5:45pm for 12 laps.

In the QTCC, al-Khelaifi secured the first starting position after topping the qualifying with a lap time of 2:23.362 minutes, 0.434 seconds ahead of Ibrahim Abdulghani (2:23.796 minutes) in second, and Ali al-Emadi (2:25.373 minutes) in third.

The QTCC races are scheduled for today with the first race at 12:50pm for 10 laps and the second at 4:30pm, also for 10 laps.

AL-YAFEI SHINES IN TOYOTA GR YARIS CUP QATAR 2025

Faisal al-Yafei starred in the first round of the Toyota GR Yaris Cup Qatar 2025, winning both the races at the Lusail International Circuit yesterday. The second and third places

MATCH REPORT

India clinch T20 series amid substitute drama

India have grabbed an unassailable 3-1 lead in the five-match series

Reuters
Pune

Harshit Rana claimed three wickets in his debatable appearance as a concussion substitute to help India to a series-clinching 15-run victory against England in the fourth T20 International yesterday.

Put into bat, India overcame Saqib Mahmood's three-wicket burst to post a competitive 181-9 following half-centuries by Hardik Pandya and Shivam Dube.

England were 166 all out with two deliveries left in their innings as India grabbed an unassailable 3-1 lead in the five-match series.

All-rounder Dube was hit on the helmet by a Jamie Overton bouncer and seamer Rana replaced him despite it not being a like-for-like replacement as concussion substitute rules mandate.

"When Dube came back, two overs into the chase, I was told (about being the concussion substitute)," Rana told the broadcasters.

"I have been waiting for this moment to prove myself," he said of his "dream debut".

England captain Jos Buttler was not happy with India being allowed to field primarily a seamer for a batting all-rounder, who rarely bowls.

"It's not a like-for-like replacement," Buttler told reporters.

"Either Shivam Dube has put on about 25mph with the ball, or Harshit has really improved his batting.

"It's part of the game. I still think we should have gone on to win the match but yes, we disagree with the (substitute) decision."



India's Hardik Pandya plays a shot during the fourth Twenty20 international against England at the Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium in Pune yesterday. (AFP)

Earlier, England fast bowler Saqib impressed on debut as he began with a three-wicket maiden over to rattle India at the Maharashtra Cricket Association (MCA) Stadium.

India opener Sanju Samson fluffed his pull shot, number three Tilak Varma perished at deep third leg and captain Suryakumar Yadav was caught at short mid-on prolonging his lean patch in the series.

Abhishek Sharma (29) and Rinku Singh (30) propped up India before the left-right combination of Dube and Pandya counter-attacked during their 87-run partnership.

Pandya and Dube smashed

identical 53s but India managed only three runs from the eventful last over from Overton losing three wickets in the process.

Phil Salt (23) and Ben Duckett (39) milked 32 runs from the first three overs of India's seam bowling prompting Suryakumar to employ spin from both ends.

Thanks to their unbridled aggression, England were 62-1 after the first six powerplay overs compared to India's 47-3.

India struck back through spin as Ravi Bishnoi (3-28) dismissed Duckett and Buttler in his successive overs, while Axar Patel removed Salt.

Harry Brook (51) hit Rana for back-to-back sixes en route to a

25-ball fifty but Varun Chakravarthy turned the match on its head claiming two wickets in his final over.

Brook fell attempting a scoop shot against the spinner and, two balls later, Brydon Carse was snared at deep square leg as India tightened their grip on the contest.

Mumbai hosts the fifth and final T20 Internationals tomorrow, which will be followed by three one-dayers between the sides.

BRIEF SCORES
India 181 for 9 (Hardik 53, Dube 53, Mahmood 3-53) **beat England 166** (Brook 51, Bishnoi 3-28) **by 15 runs**

FOCUS

Rain halts Sri Lanka Test match as Australia tighten grip on day 3



Sri Lanka's Dinesh Chandimal (left) and Kusal Mendis walk off the field after rain halts play during the third day of the first Test against Australia at the Galle International Cricket Stadium in Galle yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Galle

Necessant afternoon rain forced an early end to day three of the first Test between Australia and Sri Lanka yesterday, with the visitors leading by 518 and former home skipper Dinesh Chandimal waging a lone battle on 63.

Sri Lanka were 136-5 by lunch in Galle, with wicketkeeper Kusal Mendis also at the crease on 10, after losing two more wickets from their overnight 44-3.

The break was called early and players were kept off the pitch through the afternoon, with officials calling an end 90 minutes before the scheduled finish.

Kamindu Mendis departed for 15 after an edge to the keeper off Mitchell Starc, further denting the Bradman-like average he maintained at the start of his Test comeback last year.

Captain Dhananjaya de Silva looked comfortable before rushing down the track to Matthew Kuhnemann and missing the ball com-

pletely, gifting Alex Carey a regulation stumping and leaving for 22. Left-arm speedster Starc expertly created rough patches outside the off stump, while Nathan Lyon relentlessly probed away from the other end.

Chandimal, who was promoted to the crucial number three position last year and has since averaged over 50, stood firm despite the uphill battle to avoid the follow-on.

Australia declared on 654-6 late on the second day after opener Usman Khawaja's career-best 232.

The opening day saw stand-in skipper Steve Smith join the elite club of 10,000 career Test run-makers, the fifteenth player and fourth Australian to reach the milestone.

Picturesque Galle will also host the second and final match of the series next week before a two-match ODI series in Colombo.

BRIEF SCORES (First Test, Day 2)
Sri Lanka 136 for 5 (Chandimal 63*, de Silva 22, Starc 2-13, Kuhnemann 2-48) **trail Australia 654 for 6 dec by 518 runs**

SPOTLIGHT

Wicketkeeper-batsman Inglis gives Australia another selection headache

Reuters
Galle

It was a debut three years in the making but Josh Inglis made it one to remember with a thrilling century against Sri Lanka to give Australia another selection headache in the lead-up to the World Test Championship.

While Usman Khawaja's epic 232 at the age of 38 dominated day one on Thursday in Galle, Inglis's blazing 102 off 94 balls put him in rare company in Australian cricket as the nation's third player to score a century on debut in the subcontinent.

The wicketkeeper-batsman follows former captain Michael Clarke, who scored 151 against India in Bengaluru in 2004, and Shaun Marsh, who made 141 - also

against Sri Lanka - in Pallekele in 2011.

Inglis, who turns 30 in March, has been involved in Australia's white-ball set-up since early 2022 and was part of the triumphant 50-overs World Cup team in India the following year.

However, he has had to bide his time for a chance in Tests, carrying the drinks during tours of Pakistan and Sri Lanka in 2022.

Incumbent wicketkeeper Alex Carey has been impossible to budge, leaving Inglis with the task of proving his batting alone is enough to justify selection.

With Australia's place in the World Test Championship final secure after their 3-1 series win over India, selectors had the luxury of shaking things up against Sri Lanka and took a punt on Inglis, who slotted in at number five.

In front of his thrilled parents in the stands, Inglis repaid the selectors by racing to his century in 90 balls, the fastest Test ton by an Australian on debut and the second-fastest by a debutant from any nation.

Only India's Shikhar Dhawan has been quicker, reaching the milestone in 85 balls against Australia in Mohali on the way to an incredible 187 off 174 balls on his debut in 2013.

Inglis's innings will give coach Andrew McDonald and Australia's other selectors plenty to ponder as they try to nail down their best 11 for the WTC final against South Africa at Lord's in June, as well as the Ashes in the next home summer.

Inglis adds to a logjam of players hoping to cement a place, including all-rounder Beau Webster and

teenage opener Sam Konstas, who was dropped for Galle.

All-rounder Cameron Green's return is also on the horizon as he recovers from spinal surgery.

England may wonder what they have missed out on, with Leeds-born Inglis having grown up in Yorkshire before moving to Western Australia in 2010 with his family.

Inglis said on Thursday that his heritage was always a talking point in matches against England.

"Whenever we play England everyone asks me what anthem I'm going to sing," he said of his teammates.

"You can't choose where you're born and it's just one of those things.

"It's part of my story and I think the gags will always hang around," he said.



RANJI TROPHY

Superstar Kohli flops on return to domestic cricket on home ground

AFP
New Delhi

Superstar Indian cricketer Virat Kohli flopped on his first domestic cricket match in more than a decade yesterday to the dismay of thousands who turned out to see him play in the Ranji Trophy.

International stars were ordered by India's cricket board to return to domestic matches in a bid to lift their form following a soul-searching 3-1 series defeat in Australia.

Kohli, 36, and other team titans have made regular appearances in the lucrative Indian Premier League (IPL), but this week marked his return to the Ranji Trophy - the country's premier red-ball tournament - after a 12-year absence.

He strode in to bat for home

team Delhi on day two of their match against Railways to roars and chants of his name from the stands.

After a circumspect start and a few play-and-misses on the off-side, Kohli drove fast bowler Himanshu Sangwan for a rasping straight drive to bring the crowd to its feet.

But the joy was shortlived as the next ball went straight through his defence and the off-stump went cartwheeling with him on six.

Dejected fans began making their way to the exit even as Kohli was walking back to the pavilion, and the stadium numbers soon dwindled from thousands to less than a few hundred.

Ayush Badoni, the Delhi captain, scored a 77-ball 99 to help his side open up a 93-run lead against Railways, with three first-innings wickets remaining.

India skipper Rohit Sharma had also faltered on his return to Ranji cricket last week when he scored just three off 19 balls for Mumbai.

Rohit and fellow opener Yashasvi Jaiswal opted out of this week's match.

Both Kohli and Rohit have faced severe scrutiny over their recent batting struggles in Australia, with questions raised on their future in Test cricket.

Kohli scored an unbeaten century in the first Test but his other eight innings in the series produced just 90 runs in total.

Rohit, 37, who missed the only India win of the series in the first Test because of the birth of his second child, managed 31 runs in three matches.

India's next Test assignment will be their away tour to England for five matches starting in June this year.

DASHER FAKHAR RETURNS TO PAKISTAN SQUAD FOR 2025 CHAMPIONS TROPHY

Lahore: Dashing batsman Fakhar Zaman has returned to Pakistan's 15-man squad for next month's Champions Trophy but rising fellow-opener Saim Ayub is out injured, selectors said yesterday. Zaman, 34, last played for Pakistan in the Twenty20 World Cup in the United States and West Indies last year but has since been out with a knee injury.

"Zaman's return is a significant boost for our top-order," selector Asad Shafiq said in a Pakistan Cricket Board release.

"His aggressive approach and match-winning capabilities are vital to our plans," he said.

Ayub was ruled out after the 22-year-old smashed a century in Zimbabwe and two more in the 3-0 white-wash of South Africa in November and December.

Shafiq said Ayub would be missed.

"We recognise how devastating it must be for Ayub to miss a global event, especially when he is in such exceptional batting form but his recovery is important," Shafiq said.



Pakistan face New Zealand in the opening match of the tournament in Karachi on February 19, before playing India in Dubai on February 23 and then Bangladesh in Rawalpindi four days later.

The same 15-man squad will also play in a three-way series involving South Africa and New Zealand before the Champions Trophy.

Squad: Mohammad Rizwan (captain), Fakhar Zaman, Usman Khan, Saud Shakeel, Babar Azam, Kamran Ghulam, Salman Agha, Tayyab Tahir, Faheem Ashraf, Khushdil Shah, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Naseem Shah, Haris Rauf, Mohammad Hasnain, Abrar Ahmed

FOOTBALL

Neymar to play for Santos, eyes 2026 FIFA World Cup

Santos' X account replied to Neymar's post, saying: "Your home awaits you. Your people await you"

AFP
Sao Paulo

Neymar announced yesterday he was returning to Brazilian club Santos, where he started his career, after ending his injury-plagued spell with Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal.

"I will sign a contract with Santos Futebol Clube," Neymar wrote on social media in a post accompanied by images of his past with the Sao Paulo-based team, where football icon Pele spent most of his career.

"My feelings for the club and fans have never changed."

Santos' X account replied to Neymar's post, saying: "Your home awaits you. Your people await you."

Neymar will be presented to fans in a ceremony at the club's Estadio Urbano Caldeira, featuring concerts by several local music stars, today.

The 32-year-old former Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain forward played just seven times for Al Hilal despite a reported salary of around \$104mn a year.

Neymar, Brazil's all-time top scorer, joined Al Hilal in August 2023, following fellow superstars

Cristiano Ronaldo and Karim Benzema to the Gulf.

But two months after his arrival in Riyadh, he ruptured a cruciate ligament in his left knee while playing for Brazil in a 2026 World Cup qualifier, which kept him on the sidelines for a year.

He then suffered a series of hamstring and knee injuries as he tried to return to action.

The club's coach Jorge Jesus said recently: "He can no longer play at the level we are used to. Things have become difficult for him, unfortunately."

Neymar's return to Brazil is likely the last chance of his faltering career.

Neymar has scored 79 goals in 128 matches for his country.

Neymar had been courted by MLS teams in the United States but has chosen to return home with the goal of earning selection for the Brazil squad for the 2026 World Cup in Mexico, the United States and Canada.

"Now I need to play again," said Neymar. "And only a club like Santos can provide the love I need to prepare for the coming challenges of the next years."

He faces a huge challenge at Santos, who only returned to the elite division in 2024 after a year in the second tier.



A fan of Brazilian side Santos holds a flag with pictures of Brazilian football star Neymar near the Urbano Caldeira stadium in Santos, Brazil, yesterday. Neymar announced his return to Brazilian side Santos, the club that trained him, three days after ending his disappointing adventure in Arab football. (AFP)

Neymar will face a busy schedule punctuated by long flights across Brazil, with the Sao Paulo State tournament, the Brazilian

Cup and the national championship which begins at the end of March on the program. The presence of such a big name will attract

huge interest from Santos fans, but Neymar's best days are almost certainly behind him.

At the start of his career he was

cast as the heir to Pele. After scoring 136 goals in 225 appearances for Santos, he joined Barcelona in 2013, becoming the young star of a team that also featured Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez, which swept to the Champions League title in 2015 by beating Juventus 3-1 in the final in Berlin.

In 2014 his participation in the World Cup in Brazil was cut short by injury in the quarter-finals and Brazil crashed out after a humiliating 7-1 defeat by Germany in the semi-finals. Neymar gained some redemption in 2016 when he scored the winning penalty in a shootout as Brazil won the men's football gold medal at the Rio Olympics.

In 2017, Qatar-owned Paris Saint-Germain prised him away from Barcelona with what is still a world-record transfer fee of €220mn (\$230mn).

He won five Ligue 1 titles and he and prolific French forward Kylian Mbappe led PSG to the final of the Champions League in the Covid-blighted 2019-2020 season, but they lost to Bayern Munich.

PSG reunited Neymar with Messi in the French capital, but the trio with Mbappe failed to gel as personal rivalries got in the way and he was pushed to the exit, and to Saudi Arabia, by the Parisian management in 2023.

GOLF

Henley leads as McIlroy hits ace at Pebble Beach

Reuters
Pebble Beach, California

Rory McIlroy made a hole-in-one in his PGA Tour season debut, but Russell Henley sat alone atop the leaderboard after a low-scoring first day at the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am on Thursday in Pebble Beach, California.

Henley fired an 8-under-par 64 with nine birdies at Spyglass Hill Golf Course. That included back-to-back birdies at Nos. 17 and 18 to tie the lead and then eke in front of the pack.

"I had a nice wedge shot on 17 to 8 or 10 feet and feel like I hit my line on my putt and went in the middle," Henley said. "Then 18 kind of did the same thing, good tee shot, good iron shot to 15, 16 feet and read it right."

"So nice way to finish and definitely excited about how I'm playing."

The 80-man field at the second signature event of the season is playing one round apiece at Pebble Beach Golf Links and Spyglass Hill before spending Saturday and Sunday at Pebble Beach.

Six players are tied at 7-under 65: Viktor Hovland of Norway, Justin Rose of England, Cam Davis of Australia and Jake Knapp, who played Pebble Beach on Thursday, and Austria's Sepp Straka and Denmark's Rasmus Hojgaard, who began the tournament at Spyglass.

Hovland made a push late in the day with four birdies on each nine.

He missed birdie putts at Nos. 17 and 18 that would have tied him for the lead.

Though a top-10 player in the world rankings, Hovland was



Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland acknowledges the crowd during the first round of the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am 2025 at Spyglass Hill golf course in Pebble Beach, California. (AFP)

transparent entering the tournament that he wasn't confident with where his game stood.

"I'm still not happy with my game, how it looks, but that doesn't mean that I can have great individual days or great individual tournaments," Hovland said. "So I'm still really pumped to shoot 65, but I know that I'm not going to just let that overlook the problems or the issues that I have in my game."

McIlroy also opened the week at Spyglass and turned in a bogey-free, 6-under 66, buoyed by his ace at the par-3 15th hole. Playing downhill and just 119 yards, the four-time major champ from Northern Ireland flew a wedge shot into the green and his ball could be heard hitting the flag-

stick before disappearing into the hole without a bounce.

"Honestly, it was lucky. I don't see many balls nowadays go straight in the hole and stay in the hole," McIlroy said. "Pretty fortunate because it could have come out and went back in the water or do anything."

It was McIlroy's second career hole-in-one on the PGA Tour. He added birdies on three of his final four holes to get to 6 under.

Also carding a hole-in-one Thursday: Ireland's Shane Lowry, who aced the famed seventh hole at Pebble Beach. His tee shot took two hops on the green before rolling directly in the cup.

"Hopefully Rory's (at the clubhouse), as well, I get to split the bill with him," Lowry said of his

friend. Lowry joined McIlroy at 6 under, part of a seven-way tie that also featured Justin Thomas (Spyglass) and Patrick Cantlay (Pebble). World No. 1 Scottie Scheffler opened his 2025 season with a 5-under 67 at Spyglass Hill. He was sidelined for about four weeks after injuring his hand while cooking over the holidays.

"I liked what I saw (Thursday)," Scheffler said. "I hit a few errant shots out there, but overall kept the course in front of me for the most part, so I was able to make a decent amount of birdies."

Last year's champion, Wyndham Clark, opened with a 2-over 74 at Pebble Beach.

Sweden's Ludvig Aberg, last year's runner-up, is in dead last at 5-over 77 (Spyglass).

SPOTLIGHT

Coe is hopeful with IOC vote finishing line in sight

AFP
Paris

Sebastian Coe said yesterday he feels he has a fighting chance of becoming the next leader of the Olympic movement after he and his rivals faced an intense day of presentations.

In an interview at AFP's headquarters in Paris, the president of World Athletics spoke about trying to convey his vision of the Olympic future in a short speech to his fellow IOC members in Lausanne 24 hours earlier, with the candidates not allowed to face questions.

"You can't do a great deal in 15 minutes, once you've sort of had a few words of pleasantries and got your other eye on a countdown clock," Coe said. "I hope I was able to convey a serious approach to the role, that this isn't a one-off. You know, the presentation is important, but content is important."

Coe is not the only one of the seven hopefuls to argue for an IOC in which the members have a greater voice - "I think it's critical," he said - but he argues that he has already put his money where his mouth is.

"One of the things that I think I have achieved at World Athletics is I had a very top-down organisation," the Briton said. "I'm not remotely comparing what I inherited at World Athletics with the International Olympic Committee, but the general proposition is that my style is very clear."

"If you've got really smart people around you and your ambition as a leader is to have people that are smarter than you around you, then use them. Don't micromanage."

Coe undoubtedly ruffled feathers within the Olympic Movement by deciding to pay prize money to gold medal winners in athletics, starting at last year's Paris Olympics.

It was a move that he argues was "aligned to what we felt were the interests of the sport" but which he made without consulting his fellow federations.

One of Coe's leading rivals for the IOC job, Zimbabwean sports minister Kirsty Coventry, said on Thursday she would prefer to give athletes financial assistance early in their careers.

"I did say to the ASOIF (Association of Summer Olympic International Federations), on reflection, I would have announced it and done it in a different way," Coe said.

Prize money, though, should be just one way of helping Olympic competitors, he argues.

"Actually yesterday I didn't talk about prize money. I did, however, talk about my thinking around freeing up and giving the athletes their data, their assets, content and access that allow them to be more generative in income outside of the field of play. And that's an important thing. I think there's a lot more that we can do."

Some seasoned Olympic observers believe Coe has had obstacles thrown in the way of his bid.

For example, at 68, he would only be eligible to serve two years as president, according to the IOC's current rules. Another rival for the post, Juan Antonio Samaranch Junior, is 65.

Coe said it was not an issue that bothered him.

"Look, I was deemed eligible to stand and even fighting my way through a cold, I still managed to get a 40-minute run in yesterday morning and I work out every day for an hour."

It was, he argued, "quite analogue" to be talking about people's ages.

"In any other business or any other organisation, there are some pretty clear rules and codes about talking about people's age in interviews and stuff. Anyway, it is what it is."

Pidcock extends Al-Ula Tour lead after second stage win



Team Q36.5 Pro Cycling's British rider Tom Pidcock rides to win the fourth stage of the Al-Ula Tour cycling race, from Maraya to skyviews of Hattat Uwayrid, yesterday. (AFP)

Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia: Tom Pidcock took a big step towards winning the Al-Ula Tour when he claimed his second win of the week in yesterday's fourth 'queen stage' in Saudi Arabia. The 25-year-old Briton, who also won Wednesday's second stage where he dropped his rivals impressively on the Bir Jaydah mountain, again went solo on a steep climb up to the desert high plateau of Harrat Uwayrid. Pidcock finish 12 seconds ahead of the South African Alan Hatherly with the Austrian Rainer Kepplinger in third. "On such a steep climb, I just went

at my own pace. Attack is the best defence. I'm very happy to be able to extend my lead overall," commented Pidcock who has switched this season from Ineos to Swiss team Q36.5. He now has a 29sec lead over Kepplinger with Hatherly a further 3sec behind with the final stage promised to the sprinters. "I had already looked at tomorrow's stage a bit, perhaps I shouldn't have," said double Olympic mountain bike champion Pidcock. "It promises to be very windy and it will be stressful to keep the (leader's) jersey. I have a little head start but this is not finished."



Candidate to the presidency of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Sebastian Coe poses during a photo session in Paris. (AFP)

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

City face Real Madrid in pick of play-off ties

‘It feels like a derby already, Four years in a row facing Real Madrid’

AFP
Paris

Reigning champions Real Madrid will face 2023 winners Manchester City in the plum tie of the play-off round of this season's Champions League, following today's draw.

It is the fourth year running in which the sides have been drawn against each other in a knockout tie, with Real emerging victorious in a penalty shoot-out in the quarter-finals last season. City, who scraped through after finishing 22nd in the league phase in this first season of the new format for Europe's elite club competition, knew they faced a tough draw with Bayern Munich their other possible opponents.

Pep Guardiola's team will be at home in the first leg on February 11 before going to Spain for the return on February 19. "It feels like a derby already," Guardiola said at a press conference. "Four years in a row facing Real Madrid. But Bayern or Madrid – both was really tough. Hopefully we can arrive in the first leg here, and then at Madrid, as best as possible."

Real won a dramatic semi-final tie on the way to lifting the trophy in 2022, but City gained revenge at the same stage in 2023 as they went on to become champions. Carlo Ancelotti's side then came out on top last season, while Real won a semi-final tie between the sides in 2016 and City won in the last 16 in 2020.

Elsewhere, Celtic will face six-time European champions Bayern, after the Scottish champions reached the knockout stage for the first time in 12 years – Celtic will be at home in the first leg on February 12 and go to Germany six days later.

Paris Saint-Germain will play surprise package Brest in an all-French tie, while Juventus play PSV Eindhoven and Feyenoord take on AC Milan in two ties between former winners of the competition. Last season's Europa League winners Atalanta, who finished one place outside the top eight which offered a direct path to the last 16, will face Club Brugge of Belgium.

Sporting of Portugal were drawn against last season's runners-up Borussia Dortmund, while Monaco will take on Benfica having lost at home to the Portuguese club in the league phase. The play-off ties will take place next month, with the eight winners going through to the last 16 along with the eight highest-placed sides from the league phase.

Liverpool, Barcelona, Arsenal, Inter Milan, Atletico Madrid, Bayer Leverkusen, Lille and Aston Villa are the sides already through to the last 16. Those teams finished in the top eight in the standings in the 36-



Pep Guardiola's Manchester City will be at home to Real Madrid in the first leg of the Champions League play-offs on February 11 before going to Spain for the return on February 19. (Reuters)

team league phase – the first season of the new format for the competition saw all competing clubs placed together in one giant pool, each playing eight games against eight different opponents.

The draw for the remainder of the competition is partly pre-determined, meaning that whoever emerges triumphant in the tie between City and Real knows they will play either Atletico Madrid or Bayer Leverkusen in the last 16.

The draw for the last 16 onwards will take place on February 21, and it remains to be seen if Liverpool derive any advantage from having come first in the league phase.

Arne Slot's team will play either PSG or Brest, or Monaco or Benfica, in the last 16 in March. This season's Champions League final will be played at the Allianz Arena in Munich on Saturday, May 31.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE KNOCKOUT PHASE PLAY-OFFS DRAW
Tuesday February 11 (2000 GMT unless stated): Brest (FRA) v Paris Saint-Germain (FRA) (1745 GMT); Juventus (ITA) v PSV Eindhoven (NED); Manchester City (ENG)

v Real Madrid (ESP); Sporting (POR) v Borussia Dortmund (GER) - return legs February 19
Wednesday February 12 (2000 GMT unless stated): Club Brugge (BEL) v Atalanta (ITA) (1745 GMT); Monaco (FRA) v Benfica (POR); Celtic (SCO) v Bayern Munich (GER); Feyenoord (NED) v AC Milan (ITA) - return legs February 18
Draw for the last 16, quarter-finals and semi-finals will take place on February 21

Draw for the last 16 is based on a pre-determined bracket: Brest or PSG v Liverpool (ENG) or Barcelona (ESP); Club Brugge or Atalanta v Lille (FRA) or Aston Villa (ENG); Man City or Real Madrid v Atletico Madrid (ESP) or Bayer Leverkusen (GER); Juventus or PSV v Arsenal (ENG) or Inter Milan (ITA); Monaco or Benfica v Barcelona (ESP) or Liverpool (ENG); Sporting or Dortmund v Aston Villa (ENG) or Lille (FRA); Celtic or Bayern Munich v Bayer Leverkusen (GER) or Atletico Madrid (ESP); Feyenoord or AC Milan v Inter Milan (ITA) or Arsenal (ENG)

EUROPA LEAGUE KNOCKOUT PHASE PLAY-OFFS DRAW

Ferencváros (HUN) v Viktoria Plzeň (CZE); FC Twente (NED) v Bodo/Glimt (NOR); Union Saint-Gilloise (BEL) v Ajax (NED); AZ Alkmaar (NED) v Galatasaray (TUR); FC Porto (POR) v Roma (ITA); Fenerbahçe (TUR) v Anderlecht (BEL); PAOK (GRE) v FCSB (ROM); Midtjylland (DEN) v Real Sociedad (ESP) - **first legs February 13, second legs February 20**

Pre-determined bracket for last 16 – draw to take place on February 21

Ferencváros or Viktoria Plzeň v Lazio (ITA) or Athletic Bilbao (ESP); Twente or Bodo/Glimt v Olympiakos (GRE) or Rangers (SCO); Union Saint-Gilloise or Ajax v Eintracht Frankfurt (GER) or Lyon (FRA); AZ Alkmaar or Galatasaray v Manchester United (ENG) or Tottenham Hotspur (ENG); Porto or Roma v Athletic Bilbao (ESP) or Lazio (ITA); Fenerbahçe or Anderlecht v Rangers (SCO) or Olympiakos (GRE); PAOK or FCSB v Lyon (FRA) or Eintracht Frankfurt (GER); Midtjylland or Real Sociedad v Tottenham (ENG) or Manchester United

Aston Villa's Duran joins Saudi club Al Nassr for reported £64mn

London: Aston Villa striker Jhon Duran joined Saudi Pro League side Al Nassr in a deal worth a reported £64mn (\$79mn). Duran was unable to break into Villa's team on a regular basis despite a series of impressive substitute appearances.

The 21-year-old Colombian scored Villa's winner in their memorable Champions League victory against Bayern Munich earlier this season. "Aston Villa can confirm that Jhon Duran has joined Al Nassr for an undisclosed fee," the Premier League club said in a statement. "The striker moves to Saudi Arabia having scored 12 goals for Villa this term, including the winner against Bayern Munich in the Champions League. Everyone at Aston Villa would like to wish Jhon all the best in the next step of his professional career."

Duran will link up with Cristiano Ronaldo and Sadio Mané in the Al Nassr attack after completing his move on the Saudi transfer deadline day. It is the second biggest transfer fee Villa have received behind the £100mn Manchester City paid for Jack Grealish.

Duran joined Villa from Chicago Fire for £18mn in January 2023, scoring 20 goals in 78 appearances, but making just seven league starts. Duran's exit means Villa are almost certain to keep England striker Ollie Watkins, who had been the subject of a reported £60 million bid from Arsenal. Villa boss Unai Emery said earlier on Friday that Watkins had told him he wanted to stay with the club.

GAVI EXTENDS BARCELONA CONTRACT UNTIL 2030

Spanish international midfielder Pablo Paez Gavira, known as Gavi, has extended his contract with La Liga giants Barcelona until June 2030, the club announced. "I'm very happy to continue with the club of my life and I hope that we will give you a lot of joy this season," the 20-year-old said on social media.

Gavi arrived at Barcelona a decade ago making his first team debut in August 2021 when he was only 17.

But the 27-times capped player suffered a severe knee injury playing for Spain in November 2023, missing his country's Euro 2024 triumph.

He has scored nine goals for the team but was unavailable for almost a year before returning in October 2024.

Barcelona are third in the Spanish league, seven points behind leaders Real Madrid, and are through to the Champions League knock-out rounds.

PREMIER LEAGUE

No Guardiola rift despite City rivalry, says Arsenal boss Arteta

AFP
London

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta insists there is no rift with his old friend Pep Guardiola ahead of the Gunners' latest high-stakes battle against Manchester City tomorrow.

Guardiola's players accused Arsenal of using "dark arts" during a fractious 2-2 draw between the Premier League title rivals in September. City midfielder Rodri suffered a serious knee injury in the clash, while Arsenal played over half the game with 10 men following Leandro Trossard's dismissal in a separate incident.

In a heated finale, John Stones scored a stoppage-time equaliser for City, whose striker Erling Haaland celebrated by throwing the ball at Arsenal defender Gabriel Magalhães. Arteta, who worked as Guardiola's assistant before taking charge of Arsenal in 2019, responded to City's aggression by hinting the Premier League champions were no angels.

"I have been there before, I was there for four years. I have all the information. So I know. Believe me," he said at the time. Guardiola was believed to have been frustrated "be more clear" about what he was insinuating.

With second-placed Arsenal and fourth-placed City meeting in a crunch encounter in north London this weekend, there could be more strain on Arteta's relationship with Guardiola. But Arteta is adamant he is still on good terms with his fellow Spaniard.

"I was there for four years, so I



know how competitive they are. They win and win again. That is what I meant," he said of the terse exchanges in September. "If there was a problem, we wouldn't have been talking on the phone and messaging each other. If not, it wouldn't happen."

City have pipped Arsenal to the Premier League title for the past two seasons, adding to the intensity of the rivalry. But just an hour before Arteta faced the media on Friday, Guardiola had played down talk of a feud between the pair, describing their relationship as "exceptional".

Arteta echoed Guardiola's desire to bury the hatchet, saying of the rivalry: "Normal. Two teams trying to win. 'I don't take anything personally that happens on the pitch. It's been that way since I was a player. It is full of emotions. We just move on.'"

Arsenal cannot afford to slip up against City as they try to close the gap on leaders Liverpool, who are six points ahead of them with a game in hand. Although Arsenal are unbeaten in six games in all competitions, injuries to Gabri-

el Jesus and Bukayo Saka have threatened to derail their bid for a first title since 2004.

Arteta is keen to sign a new striker before Monday's transfer deadline, but he would not be drawn on reports that Arsenal have made a bid for Aston Villa striker Ollie Watkins.

"I'm very confident with the work the club is doing and exploring every opportunity that can have an impact on the team," he said. "I don't want to give any assurances. It doesn't only depend on us, the possibilities are affected by three parties."

FIXTURES
Today (1500 GMT unless stated): Nottingham Forest v Brighton (1230), Bournemouth v Liverpool, Everton v Leicester, Ipswich v Southampton, Newcastle v Fulham, Wolves v Aston Villa (1730)
Tomorrow (1400 unless stated): Brentford v Tottenham, Manchester United v Crystal Palace, Arsenal v Manchester City (1630)
Monday: Chelsea v West Ham (2000)

SPOTLIGHT

Slot urges Salah to sign new Liverpool deal after Saudi links

AFP
London

Arne Slot has urged Mohamed Salah to sign a new contract with Liverpool, advising the Egypt star against a lucrative move to Saudi Arabia. Salah has been in sensational form this season but is out of contract in June, with speculation persisting that the Saudi Pro League could be a possible destination for the Egyptian superstar.

Saudi sports minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki al-Faisal was asked whether the forward was the "big prize" for the Middle East nation in an interview on Thursday. "Definitely, because if he ticks all the right boxes, even for us, we'd love to have him," the sports minister said. "We feel like we are one with the Egyptians, from our culture and our history and so on."

The 32-year-old Salah, who tops the Premier League goals-



coring charts with 19 goals this season, said at the end of December he was still "far away" from reaching an agreement over a new deal at Anfield.

Liverpool manager Slot reiterated at his pre-match press conference yesterday that the club want to keep hold of their talismanic striker, who joined the club in 2017. "We want him to extend, of course, as well," he

said. "That is clear, but I'm not surprised that Saudi wants him, I'm also not surprised if other countries want him as well. He's old and wise enough, he's done so many smart things in his career that he will make the right decision for himself and hopefully for us as well."

Referring to the Saudi links, the Dutchman added: "He's done so well without my advice for a long time, so he can probably keep doing what is best for his career, even without my advice. But my advice to him would be different from the one you just mentioned."

Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk and England defender Trent Alexander-Arnold are also out of contract at the end of the season, giving the Premier League leaders a headache.

Slot, whose team face in-form Bournemouth on Saturday, said it "would be ridiculous" if he did not speak to his players about the future, but he refused to be drawn on the progress of contract talks.

PSG's Enrique hails Ligue 1 quality ahead of Brest clash

Paris: Paris St Germain manager Luis Enrique praised the strength of Ligue 1 as his side prepare to face Brest today before their all-French Champions League playoff against the same side in February.

PSG will meet Brest three times in February – twice in the two-legged knockout play-off tie on Feb 11 and 18, and once in Ligue 1. Four Ligue 1 clubs made the Champions League knockouts, with AS Monaco facing Portuguese side Benfica in the play-offs, while Lille have already booked their place in the last-16 after securing a top-eight finish in the league phase. "The French league is not valued enough, yet there are four French teams in the

Champions League now. There will be at least two in the last-16. This is very important for Ligue 1, and I think it is an achievement worth talking about," the Spaniard told reporters.

PSG beat Brest 3-1 in their home fixture in September and Luis Enrique's side are unbeaten in Ligue 1 this season. "Brest are a great team that work very well together and had an exceptional level last year. This team executes its game plan very well," the Spaniard added. "We are facing them away twice first and the Champions League is different – every mistake is costly there. Tomorrow will be another scenario, we want to keep our momentum going."