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PREMIER LEAGUE

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HORSE RACING

QREC reveals new identity of HH the Amir's Sword Festival

Total prize money for the Festival is \$10mn, with \$2.5mn each allotted for last big races on final day

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC) has unveiled the new identity for the HH the Amir's Sword Festival, which will take place from February 13-15, 2025, at the Al Rayyan racetrack.

The details of the prestigious festival were announced, alongside a significant increase in international participation compared to previous years, reflecting the festival's growing reputation and ongoing development.

This announcement came during a press conference held yesterday, at the club's headquarters, attended by Issa bin Mohammed al-Mohannadi, Chairman of the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club, Bader Mohammed al-Darwish, Acting CEO of the club, Abdullah al-Kubaisi, Director of the club's Racing Department, and representatives of various media outlets.

Al-Mohannadi also revealed the new identity of the festival, which is the 'Bisht', symbolising Qatari heritage and reinforcing the nation's proud legacy, noting that the festival will be a grand carnival for both Qatari and international equestrianism, reflecting the distinguished status that horse racing has achieved in Qatar.

AL-MOHANNADI: \$10MN IN PRIZES FOR WINNERS

Speaking on the occasion, al-Mohannadi, said: "It is my pleasure to welcome you all to this occasion, as we are only a few days away from the start of the His Highness the Amir's Sword Festival, an event that holds great significance for the entire Qatari equestrian community and particularly for the horse racing family. It is an event that we all eagerly await each season with great anticipation."

He added, "today, we are announcing the new identity of the festival, which reflects our desire to express our heritage and culture with pride and to demonstrate



Chairman of the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club Issa bin Mohammed al-Mohannadi, Acting CEO Bader Mohammed al-Darwish, Director of the Racing Department Abdullah al-Kubaisi address a press conference yesterday.

the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's commitment to developing the festival and positioning it on the map of major racing events in the region and worldwide."

The festival will take place at the Al Rayyan racetrack, which has been renovated to ensure top-level facilities for participants, including owners, trainers, and jockeys.

"The festival offers significant financial prizes, as we raised the prize pool in the previous season to unprecedented levels in the history of the festival. The total prize value for the festival is \$10mn. The prize

for the last two races on the final day of the festival will be \$2.5mn each," he said. "Continuing with the strategy set by the club's management years ago to increase international participation, this year's festival will feature a number of owners, trainers, and jockeys from outside Qa-

tar, demonstrating their trust in the high standards of the event, which adheres to the highest global equestrian racing standards.

"Today, we also announce the sponsors partnering with the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club to support the festival. We consider them key partners in our success during this distinguished carnival. We always emphasise the importance of the relationship with our success partners, which helps us meet our ambitions and leads to even greater collaboration. I wish everyone the best of luck, and I expect strong and exciting competition among participants from both within and outside Qatar, ensuring the festival will live up to the great name it carries."

THE IDENTITY REFLECTS OUR HERITAGE AND TRADITIONS, SAYS AL-DARWISH

On his part, al-Darwish, stated: "The new identity of the festival reflects our heritage and the Qatari legacy that we take pride in. The inclusion of the 'bisht' in the identity is significant, as it is a tradition we proudly wear at major international events. This year's festival will witness the participation of many strong horses, contenders for the titles. Attention will be focused on the horse 'Al Ghadir', who is the top contender to win His Highness the Amir's Sword and claim the Triple Crown title for the second consecutive year. We wish good luck to all participants."

Al-Kubaisi, said: "This year's festival will see the participation of 28 horses from outside Qatar, which reflects the growing international involvement of owners, trainers, and jockeys. The Al Rayyan racetrack was tested during the Sheikh Joan Bin Hamad Al Thani's Rifle Race after the maintenance work was completed, confirming its readiness to host the festival. The races will take place over the three days of the festival, with strong and anticipated races each day due to the high level of horses participating in every race."

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

Unbeaten Al Sadd and Al Ahli set for exciting clash

By Sports Reporter
Doha

It will be a meeting between two sides who have already booked their Round of 16 spots when Qatar's Al Sadd welcome Saudi's Al Ahli to Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium for their AFC Champions League Elite 2024/25 tie today.

Al Ahli went into the break tied at top on 16 points with fellow Saudi Arabia side Al Hilal with Al Sadd four adrift in fourth place. Both sides are unbeaten and will target victory as they bid to finish as high as possible in the final standings to ensure a good seeding going into the draw.

AFC Champions League 2011 winners Al Sadd will fancy their chances at home, especially after ending a three-year absence from the knockout stage with several phenomenal performances prior to the break. Sadd coach Felix Sanchez said his is expecting a difficult match against Al Ahli. "We know that we will face a good team and we are playing on our home ground. It is an important match for us despite our qualification. We will play according to our plans and achieve our goal of winning," The Spaniard said.

"Al Ahli have high-level players and we know that they have also added new players to strengthen their ranks. But we know ourselves well and we know our capabilities and we know that we will face a strong and competitive team. This is the right time for us to show our capabilities in front of any team. We will work to provide a good performance and achieve the desired result," Sanchez added.

Al Ahli were even more impressive as a run of five consecutive wins saw them



Al Sadd players train at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha yesterday, on the eve of their AFC Champions League Elite match against Saudi's Al Ahli.

booking their Round of 16 spot with an amazing three matches to spare.

Their winning run was halted by a 2-2 draw with Iran's Esteghal FC on Matchday Six and Al Ahli will be determined to net the three points as they look to keep the pressure on Al Hilal in the race for the West Zone top spot.

Ahli's coach Matthias Jaisle also expected a tough encounter. "We know that it will be a strong match against a strong team. We will face which has a

dangerous attack. studied the Sadd team and it is one of the strongest matches for us," the German said. "Will play our way, and as a team, we are ready for the match, and regardless of the participation of the new players, we are progressing well, and the new players have roles in what is coming to contribute to the development of the team."

RAYYAN FACE UAE'S AL AIN
Meanwhile, It will be a case of fighting



Al Rayyan players train at Al Ain yesterday.

to stay in the competition when UAE's Al Ain welcome Qatar's Al Rayyan to the Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium for their AFC Champions League Elite clash today.

Rayyan in seventh place with five points are very much in the race for a spot in the Round of 16. Victories in their final two matches will confirm Rayyan their spot in the knockout stage, having only achieved the feat once in their 12 appearances in the AFC Champions League era.

Al Rayyan's coach Artur Jorge expressed

confidence in his team's ability to win. During a press conference, he highlighted that the team's current form gave him confidence that they would enhance their chances of qualifying for the next round.

While Jorge is a long-time friend of Al Ain's coach, Leonardo Jardim, he made it clear that he is fully focused on defeating his compatriot in this crucial match. He and his staff have analysed Al Ain thoroughly, identifying their strengths and weaknesses.

Jorge also emphasised that Al Rayyan players are motivated by the opportunity to advance, with their five points putting them in a strong position. A victory will bring them one step closer to the next stage, making this match a key moment in their pursuit of qualification.

Al Ain have an outside chance of advancing to the knockout stage after an underwhelming campaign which has yielded only two points.

Having lifted the AFC Champions League title for a second time in 2023/24, much was expected of Al Ain in the inaugural season of the AFC Champions League Elite. Instead, their dismal run saw the departure of Hernan Crespo with Portuguese Leonardo Jardim brought in to stabilise them.

Jardim, who won the AFC Champions League title with Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal in 2021, didn't have much time to work his magic on Al Ain as his two matches in charge prior to the break only garnered one point.

With just two games remaining, Al Ain need maximum points to stand a chance and Jardim, having had time to work with the squad, will expect a fighting performance against Al Rayyan.

MATCH REPORT

Abhishek's explosive 135 helps India crush England

'It's a special one, coming for the country, always a great feeling. I always try to go from the first ball'

AFP
Mumbai

India's Abhishek Sharma hit a brutal 135 to set up a crushing 150-run win over England in the fifth T20 international and seal the series 4-1 yesterday.

Opener Abhishek's incredible 54-ball knock, laced with 13 sixes, fired India, who clinched the series in the fourth T20, to 247-9 after being invited to bat first at Mumbai's Wankhede Stadium.

The tourists were never in the chase despite Phil Salt's 23-ball 55 as India bowled out the tourists for 97 for their second biggest T20 victory by runs.

Abhishek also took two wickets in the only over he bowled with left-arm spin.

"It's a special one, coming for the country, always a great feeling," said the 24-year-old Abhishek.

"When I see it's my day, I always try to go from the first ball. And the way the coach and the captain have treated me from the first day. They've always wanted this intent, they've always backed me."

England slipped to 68-4 as Jos

Buttler (7), Harry Brook (2) and Liam Livingstone (9) all failed to make an impact.

Shivam Dube, a batting all-rounder who bowls medium pace, removed Salt with the first ball he bowled after he was controversially replaced by fast bowler Harshit Rana as a concussion substitute in the previous match.

The rest of the England batting fell quickly with Jacob Bethell, who made 10, the only batter to reach double figures other than Salt.

Wrist spinner Varun Chakravarthy and Dube also took two each.

Chakravarthy was named player of the series for his 14 wickets in the five matches.

Pace bowler Mohammed Shami finished with three wickets as he wrapped up the England innings in 10.3 overs.

Abhishek dominated a partnership of 115 for the second wicket with Tilak Varma following England's decision to bowl first.

He raced to his fifty in 17 balls with a six and then reached his second T20 century for India in 37 deliveries. Dube was the next highest scorer with 30.

Speedster Mark Wood dismissed



India's Abhishek Sharma celebrates after scoring a century during the fifth and final Twenty20 against England at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday. (AFP)

Hardik Pandya for nine after earlier removing opener Sanju Samson. Leg-spinner Adil Rashid had

Abhishek caught out in the 18th over as India lost four wickets in the final five overs.

"I've seen a lot of cricket, and I thought Abhishek's innings today was one of the best," said England

captain Buttler. Fast bowler Brydon Carse took three wickets including Suryakumar for two, with the Indian captain's batting woes showing no signs of ending - 28 runs in five matches.

"Some of the guys' bowling performances - even today, Brydon Carse and Mark Wood were outstanding," Buttler said of his team's positives.

India won the opening two matches before England came back to keep the series alive in the third game.

India took an unassailable 3-1 lead in the fourth T20 after Rana's inclusion in place of Dube - not a like-for-like replacement - angered England.

The two teams now head into three one-day internationals starting February 6 in Nagpur.

The series is a warm-up for the 50-over Champions Trophy starting February 19 in Pakistan and Dubai.

BRIEF SCORES
India 247 for 9 (Abhishek 135, Carse 3-38) **beat England 97** (Salt 55, Shami 3-25) **by 150 runs**
Man of the Match: Abhishek

INDIA WIN ICC U-19 WOMEN'S T20 WORLD CUP



Indian players celebrate after winning the ICC U-19 Women's T20 World Cup after beating South Africa in the final at the Bayuemas Oval in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. India won by nine wickets.

REVIEW

Smith praises 'near flawless' Australia after Sri Lanka thrashed by an innings and 242 runs

Reuters
Galle

Australia's stand-in captain Steve Smith hailed his side's resounding innings and 242-run victory over Sri Lanka in Galle on Saturday as "near flawless" after the visitors retained the Warne-Muralitharan Trophy.

The Australians were not required to bat again after posting a mammoth 654-6 in the first innings to record the nation's largest ever win in Asia in the first match of the teams' two-test series.

Opener Usman Khawaja hit 232 runs while Smith and Josh Inglis also scored centuries before spins bowlers Matthew Kuhnemann and Nathan Lyon took 16 wickets between them over two innings after the Sri Lankans were forced to follow on.

"I didn't think (Sri Lanka) bowled badly by any stretch," Smith said. "There was certainly some good spells but we just batted really, really well."

"Put them under pressure, particularly the guys that were playing the sweep shot. That was tough to defend."

"Uzzie (Khawaja) played probably 25 per cent of his balls as sweep or reverse sweeps so it was difficult for them to set fields to, and Inglis was similar, and (Alex) Carey was similar."

"And then a couple of us went down the straighter plane and did that well as well."

"To post 650 on what was a wicket that offered a fair amount of spin, was a very good effort."

"It was a near-flawless performance." Australia and Sri Lanka face off again in the second and final Test in Colombo from Thursday with Sri Lankan coach Sanath Jayasuriya ruing his side's performance in the field in the opening innings.

"You can't control the toss but we should



Australia's captain Steve Smith (right) celebrates with teammate Usman Khawaja after their win at the end of the fourth day of the first Test against Sri Lanka at the Galle International Cricket Stadium in Galle on Saturday. Australia won the Test by an innings and 242 runs. (AFP)

have controlled the first session of the game," said the former opener.

"We dropped two or three catches, and we didn't review crucial decisions and I think fielding was the key."

"It would have been a different story altogether if we got some wickets. Then they batted really well, Khawaja and Smith."

"The wicket was a little on the slow side and they adjusted themselves really well, front foot and back foot both and they played both sides of the wicket. They outplayed us, they played positive cricket and got runs on the board. That was the key I think."

McDonald applauds Khawaja and Kuhnemann after big Australia win

Two unlikely heroes stepped up for Australia as they handed hosts Sri Lanka their biggest ever test defeat, and coach Andrew McDonald was impressed by both after a dominant start to the two-test series.

Left-arm spinner Matthew Kuhnemann fractured his thumb last month and McDonald had assumed the bowler would not be available for the match, but the 28-year-old took nine wickets. McDonald also praised opening batter Usman Khawaja who, at 38, scored a personal-highest 232.

"I thought he was gone," McDonald said of Kuhnemann. "But as it progressed and got closer to the Test match, he was pretty much a lock three days out. Not sure where we would have ended up, but there was plenty of conversations... in terms of selecting spinners."

"But Matt solved a lot of those dilemmas, and produced an outstanding performance."

Khawaja's innings of 232 got Australia off to a strong start on a pitch that increasingly favoured bowlers.

"He's an important part to the way that we play in subcontinent conditions," McDonald said of Khawaja. "He's got options, that reverse sweep that he's added over the journey."

"He's been through the ringer here before, and it's great that he's been able to come through that, to have a method that is successful," the coach said. "The unquantifiable benefit is the conversations that he's having with the next generation to get them prepared... we still think he's got plenty of cricket left in him. And I think he's been clear on that also."

COMMENT

India's Rohit, Kohli have 'massive role' in Champions Trophy

Reuters
New Delhi

India coach Gautam Gambhir said Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli have much to offer the team despite their poor run of form in recent matches, stressing the veteran duo will play a key role in this month's Champions Trophy.

Captain Rohit and batter Kohli were both part of the test team that suffered a 3-0 series sweep at home by New Zealand followed by a 3-1 hammering in Australia which ended their decade-long hold on the Border-Gavaskar Trophy.

Following the defeat to Australia, both players returned to domestic cricket in a bid to rediscover their best form.

"I think both Rohit and Virat, they add so much value to the dressing room. They add so much value to Indian cricket as well. They've got to play a massive role (in the Champions Trophy)," Gambhir told reporters yesterday.

"And I've said it before as well,

those guys are so hungry, they want to play for the country. They have the passion to play for the country and deliver for the country."

India are in Group A in the Champions Trophy and meet Bangladesh in Dubai on Feb 20, before taking on defending champions and rivals Pakistan and ending their group campaign against New Zealand.

"The Champions Trophy is a completely different challenge as compared to the 50-over World Cup because literally every game is a make-or-break, so you can't stop anywhere in this tournament," Gambhir said.

"So hopefully we're going to start off really well, because ultimately, if you want to go on and win the competition, you have to win five games..."

"We don't go to the Champions Trophy thinking that Feb. 23 (versus Pakistan) is the most important game for us. I think five games, all the games are important. The mission to go to Dubai is to win the Champions Trophy, not only win one particular game."

England women's chief admits team out-played 'in every facet'

London: The head of England women's cricket said the side had been "out-performed in every facet of the game" after their whitewash by Australia in the Women's Ashes.

Australia completed an unprecedented 16-0 rout in the multi-format contest with a crushing 112-0 win in the one-off Test in Melbourne on Saturday.

That followed clean sweeps of the preceding three one-day internationals and three T20 matches.

During the series, England repeatedly suggested they were getting "close" to an outstanding side, but former England men's captain Alastair Cook insisted they were "at least 20 percent behind Australia in everything".

England spinner Sophie Ecclestone, meanwhile, refused to do a television interview with former England team-mate turned pundit Alex Hartley, who had accused several players of lacking fitness after the current team's shock T20 World Cup exit against the West Indies in Dubai in October.

And England women's coach Jon Lewis, having previously denied Hartley's claims, extraordinarily cited "cultural difference" as the reason why Australia are fitter, for all he is in charge of one of the best-funded teams in women's cricket.

"I walked from Bondi to Coogee (in Sydney)... Pretty much every Australian in the eastern suburbs is in the water, doing Surf Life-saver, playing touch rugby," said Lewis.

"Our talent pool at the moment is small, and I definitely think Australia have an advantage in terms of athleticism."

England's woeful performances in Australia, however, have seen the positions of both Lewis and captain Heather Knight called into question.

Clare Connor, the England and Wales Cricket Board's manager director of women's cricket promised a comprehensive review after a "brutal" series loss to a "ruthless" Australia.

But while Connor would not speculate on the future for Lewis and Knight, she did not require a review to give a scathing initial assessment.

"We've been out-performed in every facet of the game, and we'll need to be very honest about that," said Connor, herself a former England women's captain, during a conference call. "As a team we've been out-skilled and out-played."

England have not won a major women's cricket trophy since lifting the 2017 50-over World Cup on home soil, with their ability to play under pressure a recurring problem.

ARAB SPORTS CULTURE ASSOCIATION AWARD CEREMONY 2024 HELD



The Arab Sports Culture Association Award 2024 ceremony was held with fanfare in Doha yesterday. Mohammed bin Yousef al-Mana, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Arab Union for Sports Culture Association, was awarded the 'Personality of the Year Award' while Aspire Academy won the 'Best Sports Institution'. The Qatar Football Association won the 'Event of the Year' award for organising 'the AFC Asian Cup and the FIFA Club World Cup'. The Arab Sports Culture Association Award for media was awarded to Qatari media figure Abdullah al-Marri, Editor-in-Chief of Al Raya newspaper. A number of prominent Arab and international sports figures attended the ceremony.

GOLF

Straka leads by one after 54 holes at Pebble Beach

'IT'S EXCITING TO TRY TO GET MY FIRST WIN OF THE SEASON'

Reuters
Pebble Beach, California

Austria's Sepp Straka has a slight edge going to the final round of the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am, but others are lurking.

Straka recovered from a rough stretch on the back nine to finish strong for a 2-under-par 70 on a windy, rainy Saturday and hold the lead after three rounds at Pebble Beach Golf Links in Pebble Beach, California.

Straka is at 16 under and will take a one-stroke lead into the final round.

"It would be great, it would be amazing," Straka said of potentially winning the event. "I'm not trying to let my mind wander that far. It's a very packed leaderboard and it's going to take a great round (Sunday)."

Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy and Ireland's Shane Lowry shot matching 65s to sit one shot back.

"(Sunday) would be big for a lot of reasons," McIlroy said. "It's exciting to try to get my first win of the season... Historically, the West Coast hasn't been that good to me."

Lowry and McIlroy were encouraged by being together for the last round.

"Let's hope one of us does the business," Lowry said.

Straka carried a three-stroke lead into third round, but bogeys on the first three holes of the backside were troublesome before he recovered for birdies on four of the last five holes.

So Straka went from a four-stroke lead to trailing the lead-



Sepp Straka of Austria plays a shot from a bunker on the 18th hole during the third round of the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am 2025 at Pebble Beach Golf Links in Pebble Beach, California. (AFP)

ers by two shots. Two weeks ago, Straka won for the third time on the PGA Tour by capturing The American Express.

McIlroy, making his season debut on the PGA Tour, posted birdies on three of the final four holes. "It's really cool to be in contention this early in the season," McIlroy said.

Lowry played the last eight holes in 4 under due to four birdies. He played the first three holes in 4 under, boosted by an eagle 3 on No 2.

Conditions were described as nasty on the course because of wind and rain. Normally, Lowry

said he would "love this place," but he said the conditions provided a unique challenge.

"I don't enjoy it," Lowry said. "I live in Florida for a reason."

McIlroy said he took a different approach when the wind became such a factor.

"Let's just try to chip the ball and run," he said. "It was nice to pick up a few birdies on the way in."

It sets up with the potential for numerous golfers to rise to the top during the final round.

Australia's Cam Davis (69), England's Justin Rose (68) and South Korea's Tom Kim (68) are

tyed for fourth at 14 under. Lucas Glover (68) is seventh at 13 under, followed by Russell Henley (71) at 12 under and Austin Eckroat (71) at 11 under.

"It was nice to kind of stay in it," said Scottie Scheffler, last year's world No. 1 golfer. "It was such a tough day out there, I knew guys would be struggling."

Scheffler (69) said he feels he has an "outside chance" going into the last round.

He's at 10 under in his season debut, but Jordan Spieth's first tournament of the season has gone sour after his third-round 79 put him at 5 over.

TENNIS

Mertens downs Li to win Singapore Open

AFP
Singapore

Elise Mertens clinched her first WTA title in 17 months yesterday as the second-seeded Belgian beat unseeded Ann Li in straight sets to win the Singapore Tennis Open.

Mertens was beaten by McCartney Kessler in the Hobart International final last month but the 29-year-old was in fine form at Kallang Tennis Centre, landing 75 percent of her first serves to overpower the American 6-1, 6-4.

Li did not drop a set during her run to the final but struggled with her serve early in the match as Mertens took full advantage, earning three service breaks to take the opening set in 26 minutes.

The American was broken again in her first service game of the second set but dug deep to break Mertens for the first time in the next game and began to find her groove on her own serve.

However, while serving to stay in the match at 5-4 down, Li made a pair of unforced errors to hand the title to the Belgian after an hour and 22 minutes.

Mertens was delighted with her ninth career singles title on the



WTA Tour and first since the Monastir Open in Tunisia in October 2023.

"It's a really nice title at the beginning of the year - and especially after not getting the title in Hobart three weeks ago. I was very eager to win this one," said the world number 32. "I felt very comfortable on this surface and very comfortable in Singapore this week, so I took advantage of that and it gave me a lot of good energy."

In the doubles final, second seeds Desirae Krawczyk of the United States and Giuliana Olmos of Mexico took the title after defeating the third-seeded Chinese pair of Wang Xinyu and Zheng Saisai 7-5, 6-0.

QATARI DRIVERS SHINE IN HAIL RALLY



Qatari drivers excelled at the Hail Rally in Saudi Arabia, which is a round of the FIA World Cup for Baja and the opening round of the Middle East Championship. Khalifa al-Attiyah secured a remarkable first place in the Challenger category and fourth overall, while Ahmed al-Kuwari came second in the same category. Abdulaziz and Nasser al-Kuwari were fourth in the Challenger category. Abdullah al-Rabban dominated the Stock category with a well-earned victory, and Mohammad al-Attiyah secured eighth place in the SSV category. Qatar Rider Yaghoob Azadi, also put in a solid effort, finishing 15th in the bikes category.



SPOTLIGHT

Qatar Sailing and Rowing Federation set to host International Optimist Regatta, says al-Sulaiti

QNA
Doha

Qatar Sailing and Rowing Federation (QSRF) revealed details of the 2025 Qatar International Optimist Regatta, set to take place from February 3-8 at Rixos Gulf Hotel Beach.

At a press conference, President of QSRF and Chairman of the Local Organising Committee, Rashid Majed al-Sulaiti, said the championship will feature 52 competitors from 12 countries. He expressed confidence in organising an exceptional event, even though this will be the first championship the federation has hosted in several years.

Al-Sulaiti added that the federation aims to deliver a successful and well-rounded event, both in terms of organisation and competition, with a focus on showcasing Qatar's athletes and helping them achieve strong results. He



President of Qatar Sailing and Rowing Federation and Chairman of the Local Organising Committee, Rashid Majed al-Sulaiti, addresses a press conference.

stressed that Qatar's athletes are no strangers to success.

The committee also prioritised the safety and security of all par-

ticipants, especially during the races at sea.

Additionally, the international committee will measure boats

and sails, and daily meetings with coaches will be held to ensure clear communication of rules and regulations.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arsenal thrash Man City to boost title challenge

Man United slump to another meek 2-0 defeat to Crystal Palace



Arsenal's Ethan Nwaneri celebrates with teammates after scoring against Manchester City at the Emirates Stadium in London. (AFP)

AFP
London

Arsenal thrashed Manchester City 5-1 to keep their Premier League title hopes alive yesterday, while Manchester United slumped to another meek 2-0 home defeat to Crystal Palace. In the battle between the sides that have finished in the top for the past two seasons, the Gunners prevailed to move within six points of leaders Liverpool, who have a game in hand.

Arsenal were gifted the perfect start inside two minutes as Manuel Akanji lost possession and Kai Havertz squared for Martin Odegaard to open the scoring. Havertz exposed Arsenal's lack of a clinical goalscorer when he wasted a glorious chance to double the lead. That could have proved costly when Erling Haaland headed in his 250th career club goal early in the second half to bring City level.

But the defending champions are a pale shadow of their former selves this season and conceded within 105 seconds of the restart when Thomas Partey's shot deflected in off John Stones. Myles Lewis-Skelly would have been suspended if his controversial red card in a 1-0 win at Wolves last weekend had not been overturned. The 18-year-old made the most of that reprieve by curling in Arsenal's third for

his first goal for the club. Haaland had told Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta to "stay humble" after a bad-tempered clash between the sides ended 2-2 in September.

And Lewis-Skelly celebrated his big moment by mimicking Haaland's trademark meditation celebration. Havertz fired low and hard into the far corner with City cut open at will by the Arsenal counter-attack.

And another Arsenal teenager rounded off the rout when Ethan Nwaneri curled home in stoppage time. Defeat leaves City still in fourth but now 15 points off the top and realistically dethroned after four consecutive seasons as champions.

Jean Philippe-Mateta was Palace's hero with both goals in the second half as United suffered a fifth defeat in their last six home league games. Victory takes the Eagles above the Red Devils in the table as Oliver Glasner's side climb to 12th. Three consecutive wins for United had lifted the mood around Old Trafford but it was back to square one for Ruben Amorim after another home display lacking in creativity and riddled with defensive lapses.

Kobbie Mainoo, who started as a makeshift centre-forward, hit the post with United's best effort of a bright opening before their attacking threat fizzled out. Palace have lost just one of their last seven league games to recover from a miserable start to the season.

The visitors missed the creative spark offered by Eberechi Eze for the first hour as an injury meant he was only fit enough for a cameo appearance off the bench. But Eze made an instant impact as from his free-kick Maxence Lacroix's header came back off the bar and into Mateta's path to fire home.

Worse was to follow for United as Lisandro Martinez had to be stretchered off with what appeared a serious knee injury.

Palace showed no mercy to secure the three points when Daniel Munoz charged through the middle of the home side's defence and unselfishly squared for Mateta to knock in his sixth goal in five games.

Tottenham eased the pressure on under-fire manager Ange Postecoglou and fears they could be dragged into a relegation battle with a 2-0 win at Brentford. The Bees were left to rue a number of missed chances against an injury-ravaged Tottenham defence.

Brentford also lent the visitors a helping hand with the opening goal as Vitaly Janelt headed Son Heung-min's corner into his own net on 29 minutes. Yoane Wissa's header came off the bar as Brentford pushed for an equaliser. But Spurs picked them off on the counter-attack when Pape Sarr prodded through Valdimarsson's legs from Son's pass. Victory lifts Tottenham to 14th and 10 points clear of the relegation zone.

SPOTLIGHT

Ruotolo to face off against Vigna in lightweight MMA bout at ONE 171: Qatar

ONE Championship, the world's largest martial arts organisation, in partnership with Visit Qatar, yesterday added four explosive matchups to ONE 171: Qatar, which emanates live from Lusail Sports Arena on Thursday, February 20.

ONE Lightweight Submission Grappling World Champion **Kade Ruotolo** will put his unblemished professional MMA record on the line as he squares off against unbeaten debutant **Nicolas Vigna**.

Undefeated middleweight MMA contender **Shamil Erdogan** will face former ONE Light Heavyweight and Middleweight MMA World Champion **Aung La N Sang** in a highly anticipated rematch.

Then, regional stars take to the Circle for the very first time.

Abdullo Khodzhaev and Wilian Poles will square off in a lightweight MMA bout, and IBJJF World Champion **Zayed Alkatheeri** will take on Jarrah Al Hazza in a flyweight submission grappling match.

ONE 171: QATAR FIGHT SCHEDULE

ONE Bantamweight Kickboxing World Championship: (C)

Jonathan Haggerty vs (I) Wei Rui

ONE Strawweight MMA World Championship: (C) Joshua Pacio

vs (I) Jarred Brooks

Welterweight MMA: Roberto Soldic vs Dagi Arslanaliev

Middleweight MMA: Shamil



Erdogan vs Aung La N Sang Bantamweight MMA: Bibiano

Fernandes vs Kevin Bellingon Featherweight MMA: (3) Shamil

Gasanov vs (4) Martin Nguyen Lightweight MMA: Kade Ruotolo

vs Nicolas Vigna Heavyweight MMA: Mauro Cerilli

vs Kirill Grishenko Bantamweight Muay Thai: Jake

Peacock vs Shinji Suzuki Bantamweight Kickboxing: (2)

Ilias Ennahachi vs (3) Petchtanong

Petchfergus Atomweight MMA: (5) Ayaka

Miura vs Ritu Phogat Flyweight Submission Grappling:

Zayed Alkatheeri vs Jarrah Al

Hazza Lightweight MMA: Abdullo

Khodzhaev vs Wilian Poles

***Note: Fights and bout order subject to change.**

SERIE A

De Vrij goal snatches last-gasp Milan derby draw for Inter

AFP
Milan, Italy

Inter Milan snatched a last-gasp 1-1 derby draw with AC Milan yesterday after Stefan de Vrij rammed home a stoppage-time equaliser to save the Serie A champions from an undeserved defeat.

De Vrij forced home Nicola Zalewski's knock-down in the third minute of stoppage time just as it looked like Tijjani Reijnders' opener on the stroke of half-time would be enough for Milan. Inter drawing with Milan however means league leaders Napoli can go five points at rivals Roma in the 'late game if Antonio Conte's in-form team bag an eighth straight win.

On Thursday, Inter will have a chance to regain ground regardless of what happens with Napoli as they will complete their away fixture at Fiorentina which was stopped in December following Viola midfielder Edoardo Bove's on-pitch collapse. Milan meanwhile stay eighth, five points behind fourth-placed Juventus who beat Empoli 4-1 earlier on Sunday, with a game in hand after hanging on for a point in a match dominated by Inter.

Netherlands midfielder Tijjani netted on the rebound at the end of a lightning counter-attack after Yann Sommer palmed out Rafael Leao's low cross. To lose to that goal would have been a sucker-punch for dominant Inter who had three goals chalked off while Yann Bisseck, Marcus Thuram and Denzel Dumfries all hit the post in the second half.

But another Dutchman in De Vrij pounced at the death to silence a packed San Siro which was dominated by Milan fans but which missed some of its colour due to a police ban on pre-match fan displays as part of a crackdown on the hardcore ultra supporters of the two clubs. In September, 19 leading ultras from Milan and Inter were arrested as part of a probe into illegal profits made around matches and the infiltration of mafia gangs into supporters groups.

Randal Kolo Muani struck twice in three minutes in the second half, with Dusan Vlahovic and Francesco Conceicao netting late on with Empoli down to 10 men, as Juve bounced back from going behind early and moved into Italy's Champions League positions. Lazio are a point behind Juve and will reclaim fourth place if they win at struggling Cagliari on tonight.



Inter Milan's Stefan de Vrij (left) celebrates with Nicola Zalewski and Marcus Thuram after scoring against AC Milan at San Siro. (AFP)

LA LIGA

Lewandowski earns Barca win over Alaves

AFP
Barcelona

Robert Lewandowski's second-half strike helped Barcelona beat Alaves 1-0 yesterday to cut the gap on La Liga leaders Real Madrid down to four points. The Catalans, third, capitalised with a narrow victory after the champions slipped up across town at Espanyol on Saturday.

Barcelona trail second place Atletico by three points before the Rojiblancos face Real Madrid in a tasty derby clash next weekend, which could allow Hansi Flick's side to make up more ground. Lewandowski netted from a Lamine Yamal cross to settle a hard-fought match in which Alaves largely frustrated the hosts.

"Before the game we knew we had to win," Lewandowski said. "For us it's a moment in which we have less points than Atletico and Real Madrid, (but) first it's important that we win and later we can think about their points. We have to play well, win and then we can look at the league table and see how many points we have exactly."

Flick's team struggled to get going in the early afternoon sunlight at the Olympic stadium. The Catalans created barely anything of note in



Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski celebrates after scoring against Deportivo Alaves. (AFP)

the first half as Alaves resisted stubbornly. One mazy Lamine Yamal dribble got home fans excited but there was little else to raise the pulse. Gavi and Tomas Conechny were both taken off after an ugly collision of heads.

Flick later confirmed Gavi was healthy. "He's on the way home and everything is good, nothing happened," explained the coach.

Lewandowski scuffed a shot narrowly wide and a low Pedri effort was comfortably fielded by Alaves goalkeeper Jesus Owono. Flick brought on Frenkie de Jong and Eric Garcia at half-time to try and speed up Barcelona's game in possession and the team looked sharper as a result. Lewandowski sent a glancing header agonisingly wide of the far post soon before he broke the deadlock.

The veteran Polish forward produced a poacher's finish from close range after Yamal sent a cross-shot spinning towards him at the back post after 61 minutes. It was Lewandowski's 18th goal of the league campaign, stretching his lead on Real Madrid's Kylian Mbappe as the division's top scorer to three.

Flick hailed the 36-year-old striker after his match-winning contribution. "This is the job of Lewy, he's the best number nine in the box," Flick told reporters. "In this difficult match it was important for us he was there."

Barca substitute Ferran Torres's curling effort was pushed away by Owono at full stretch as the Catalans tried to make the game safe. Flick's team could not produce a second but Alaves, who barely threatened Wojciech Szczesny's goal throughout, were not able to mount a comeback.

Boniface helps dominant Leverkusen cut Bayern lead to six points

Frankfurt: Bayer Leverkusen beat Hoffenheim 3-1 yesterday to move within six points of Bundesliga leaders Bayern Munich, with Victor Boniface scoring a goal just days after his move to Saudi Arabia collapsed.

The 24-year-old was stood down from training last week as he explored a transfer to play alongside Cristiano Ronaldo at Saudi side Al Nassr. The deal fell through on Wednesday and Boniface was given a surprise start by coach Xabi Alonso.

Boniface, who had not played for Leverkusen since injuring his thigh on international duty with Nigeria in November, opened the scoring in the 15th minute. Collecting a ball from Alex Grimaldo to the right of goal, Boniface blasted a powerful left-foot shot through the hands of visiting goalkeeper Luca Philipp.

Just four minutes later, Jeremie Frimpong doubled Leverkusen's lead. The Dutchman flew down the right flank, took one touch and superbly found the far cor-

ner. Leverkusen looked set to stretch their lead in the 24th minute when Nathan Tella was felled in the box, but the decision was overturned by VAR.

The referee explained the decision over stadium speakers, a Bundesliga first, as part of a test programme introduced this weekend. Boniface made way for Patrik Schick at half-time and the Czech striker scored six minutes later, slamming in a rebound after some clever work from Aston Villa loanee Emi Buendia, on his

Leverkusen debut. Schick has 14 goals in his past 10 league games.

Leverkusen, who have given up a league-high 13 points from winning positions this season, were made to sweat when they lost Grimaldo to a second yellow card and conceded a goal to Gift Orban inside two minutes. Alonso's men however held on to stay in touch with Bayern, who visit Leverkusen's BayArena in two weeks.

Can Uzun's 81st-minute goal took Eintracht Frankfurt to a 1-1 home draw with

Wolfsburg, cancelling out an embarrassing Tuta own goal early in the second half. Frankfurt looked tired after Thursday's 2-0 Europa League loss at Roma, lacking the fluency and bite which has propelled them into the top four this season.

The Wolves held on to claim a valuable point, climbing above Borussia Dortmund into 10th but just four points shy of fourth place in a congested mid-table.

The draw takes Frankfurt five points clear of fourth-placed RB Leipzig.