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Marcus Rashford attracted by Aston Villa's 'constant ambition'

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AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

Rayyan rally to beat Al Ain; Al Sadd lose on home soil

Mahmoud Trezeguet and Roger Guedes dished out defeat to the two-time Asian champions

the-afc.com
Doha, Al Ain

Al Ain's defence of their continental crown came to an end yesterday as a 2-1 loss to Qatar's Al Rayyan at the Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium in Al Ain saw the side from the United Arab Emirates crashing out of the AFC Champions League Elite 2024/25.

Needing to win to keep any realistic hope of advancing alive, Leonardo Jardim's side went ahead through Alejandro Romero in the 42nd minute but second half goals from Mahmoud Trezeguet and Roger Guedes dished out defeat to the two-time Asian champions.

The result leaves Al Ain two points from seven games while Al Rayyan move onto eight and the Qatar Stars League side will go into their final league phase meeting with Esteghlal on February 18 in contention for a place in the last 16. Al Ain's fate, meanwhile, was sealed after Islamic Republic of Iran's Esteghlal played to a 1-1 against Iraq's Al Shorta in Tehran.

The home side, who have struggled throughout the defence of their Asian title, needed a first win of the campaign to retain hope of qualifying for the last 16 and the pressure showed in the early exchanges.

Al Rayyan's Thiago Mendes wasted an opportunity when Khaled Eisa's poor clearance landed at the feet of Guedes and, after the former Shandong Taishan forward fed his fellow Brazilian, the Al Ain goalkeeper redeemed himself with a solid stop.

Mohammed Awad Alla dragged his attempt across the face of the Al Rayyan goal at the end of a quick break soon after as Al Ain eventually settled while in the 24th minute Soufiane Rahimi had the ball in the net with a volley, but the effort was ruled out for offside.

The action swung from one



Al Rayyan forward Roger Guedes (right) celebrates with teammates after scoring a goal against UAE's Al Ain during their AFC Champions League Elite match in Al Ain yesterday.

end to the other, with Guedes denied on the goal-line by Khaled al-Hashemi's clearance before Al Ain's Matias Palacios shot from distance, only to see his goal-bound attempt shovelled away by Paulo Victor when he dropped to his right.

With a little over three minutes remaining in the half, Al Ain made the breakthrough. Rahimi was released down the left, the Moroccan edging towards the Al Rayyan goal before laying off for Romero to stroke his perfectly placed left-foot strike into the top corner. Eisa had to be at his sharpest

after the restart to keep out David Garcia's attempt but there was little he could do in the 50th minute when Trezeguet converted Murad Haji Hussein's cross from the right, the Egyptian controlling with his left before finishing with his right.

Palacios was inches away from restoring Al Ain's lead in the 69th minute, rattling Victor's crossbar from distance with the goalkeeper well beaten and the home side were to rue that miss six minutes later. A quickly taken throw by Adam Bareiro into the penalty caught out the defence and, after

allowing the ball to run across his body, Guedes smashed a low, left-foot shot into the bottom corner.

Victor gratefully clutched Rahimi's 82nd minute header to his chest after the forward glanced Bandar al-Ahbab's free kick towards goal as Al Ain sought a lifeline in the dying minutes, but it was to prove an impossible mission with Al Rayyan holding on.

AL AHLI 3 AL SADD 1
Al Ahli's excellent AFC Champions League Elite 2024/25 campaign continued after they came from behind to defeat Qatar's Al



Al Sadd captain Akram Afif celebrates with teammate after scoring against Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha yesterday. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

Sadd 3-1 at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.

Both sides had already secured their respective spots in the next stage prior to the game with the victory taking Al Ahli to 19 points which ensures them a top four finish in the League Stage and a home tie in the second leg of the Round of 16.

The home side got off to a dream start, with captain Akram Afif racing onto Youcef Atal's stunning through pass inside the opening minute and spotting Edouard Mendy off his line, proceeding to lob over the former Chelsea keeper to give Al Sadd the lead.

Al Ahli, yet to be beaten in the League Stage, were not behind for long as their forward line combined to great effect in the 10th minute to draw them level.

Feras Albrikan won the ball off Boualem Khoukhi inside Al Sadd's penalty box, his cross was headed back across goal by Riyad Mahrez for Roberto Firmino to produce a spectacular overhead kick that gave Meshaal Barsham no chance.

Even though the furious pace to the match dissipated as the first half went on, it didn't stop Al

Ahli from going ahead in the 39th minute as Roger Ibanez swept home from close range after Al Sadd failed to clear a Mahrez corner kick.

Early in the second half, Firmino had the opportunity to get his second after Mahrez set him up with a cutback, however, the Brazilian dragged his attempt wide from the edge of the box.

The Saudi Arabian side continued to create chances but were denied by an alert Guilherme Torres, who blocked Ziyad Aljohani's effort in the 67th minute before Gabriel Veiga stabbed a shot high over the bar.

Al Ahli made sure of the points in the 81st minute when Ivan Toney managed to hook a pass to Mahrez despite being bundled over by Barsham, giving the Algerian the easiest of tasks of slotting home into an unguarded goal.

Al Ahli will look to cap a near-perfect League Stage campaign when they face Qatar's Al Gharafa SC while Al Sadd will complete their fixtures with an away trip to Pakhtakor of Uzbekistan, both games to be played in a week's time.

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar Academy Stars Programme winners al-Marri, al-Harqan to make debuts at Qatar International Rally

Agencies
Lusail

Young Qatari drivers Mohammed al-Marri and Saad al-Harqan will make their rallying debuts at this weekend's Qatar International Rally.

The two rookies emerged as the winners of recent assessments carried out at Lusail by the Qatar Motorsport Academy and their prize was a drive supported by the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) at the second round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC).

The Qatar Motorsports Academy Stars Programme was established at the end of 2024 in a bid to seek out, train and nurture young motor sporting talent in Qatar. Open to Qatari citizens between the ages of 15 and 25, the first assessments took place at the Lusail International Circuit in mid-January.

The selection process featured an initial short slalom course and the fastest contenders from over 400 registrations received then



Saad al-Harqan (left) and Mohammed al-Marri with QMMF President Abdulrahman al-Mannai.

advanced to longer slalom courses with the leading drivers then progressing to the finals over the following two days. The finalists were then tested in different vehicles on changeable surfaces and evaluated by a panel of experts.

Al-Marri and al-Harqan were declared two of the winners and will compete this weekend in a pair of Peugeot 208 Rally4s, alongside the

likes of Rashid al-Muhannadi, who debuted a similar car backed by the QMMF and the Qatar Motorsports Academy at last week's Oman International Rally. He finished in an excellent fourth overall behind three more powerful Rally2 cars and is chasing honours in a full MERC calendar of events this season.

The Qatar Motorsports Academy Stars Programme was run



with support from Nicolas Bernardi, the QMMF's new Off-Road and Rally Racing Activities Consultant, who is himself a former French champion and star of the FIA World Rally Championship (WRC). The two winners will be co-driven by the French duo of Yannick Roche and Pierre Delorme for their competitive debuts. The rookies will be looking for points

in the recently-introduced Junior category in the MERC.

Roche, 38, has considerable experience in European events since 2003 and tackled four rounds of the WRC last season with Nicolas Ciamin. The pair finished 11th in the Monte-Carlo and Kenyan Safari rallies, 13th in Croatia and down the rankings in Sardinia in a Hyundai i20 N Rally 2. Over the

course of his career, Roche has also partnered the likes of Simon Jean-Joseph, Eric Camilli and ex-F1 racer Erik Comas.

Twenty-seven-year-old Delorme has extensive experience on different surfaces in French rallies and spent much of the 2023 season competing in Peugeot 208 Rally 4s built by Sarrazin Motorsport and PH Sport in the French Championship alongside Tristan Charpentier and Maxence Potard. Last year, he co-drove in a variety of cars for the likes of Louis Constant, Florian Picchioni and Julien Casale.

This weekend's 45th Qatar International Rally is being held under the chairmanship of QMMF President Abdulrahman al-Mannai, senior committee member Abdulrazaq al-Kuwari and the QMMF's Executive Director Amro al-Hamad.

Today, competitors will carry out administration checks at the Lusail International Circuit and begin their preparations for tomorrow's full reconnaissance of the six different gravel special stages in the northern desert.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Alfardan Premier Motors 'official transport' provider for Qatar TotalEnergies Open

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Alfardan Premier Motors Co, the official retailer of Jaguar Land Rover in Qatar has renewed its partnership as the official transport provider for the 2025 edition of Qatar TotalEnergies Open for the 15th consecutive year. The premier tennis tournament, which will take place this year from 9th to 15th of February at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex, is set to witness the participation of the top tennis champions from around the globe.

The partnership stems out of the company's eagerness to support sports tournaments hosted by Qatar and to reinforce Qatar's position as a leading sports hub. For 15 consecutive years, Alfardan Premier Motors has provided a fleet of luxury vehicles to enhance the

level of comfort for the movement of players and teams to and from the stadium. For this year's partnership, Alfardan Premier Motors will be providing a fleet of 35 luxurious Range Rover vehicles for the championship.

The Range Rover brings new levels of well-being, combining advanced technology with modern luxury to provide an exciting experience in every journey, and to establish a confident example of the luxury SUVs.

It introduces more options than ever before to create an effortless driving experience.

Nasr Jairoudi, General Manager for Alfardan Premier Motors, said: "We are delighted to renew our partnership with the Qatar Tennis Federation for the fifteenth consecutive year as the official transport provider for the players of Qatar TotalEnergies Open 2025. By providing a fleet of Range Rover vehicles, we strive to provide

the highest standards of luxury and excellence in one of the most important championships on the agenda of the Women's Tennis Association."

Saad al-Mohannadi, Tournament Director of the Qatar TotalEnergies Open, said: "Today we renew our partnership with Alfardan Premier Motors which, through its brands, adds to the excellence and luxury of this tournament in all its aspects and supports our continued readiness and aspirations to elevate the tournament to the highest level."

"This year's tournament is set to witness the participation of top world class tennis players, which reflects the importance of Qatar TotalEnergies Open on the global sports map."

Alfardan Premier Motors represents the world's leading names in luxury car brands and has been closely associated with major happenings in Qatar.



QATAR EXXONMOBIL OPEN

ExxonMobil Qatar, QTF start promo activities

THE TOURNAMENT SET TO BE HELD FROM FEB 17 TO 22

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Officials from ExxonMobil Qatar and Qatar Tennis Federation (QTF) gathered at West Walk to kick off promotional activities for the Qatar ExxonMobil Open 2025. The tournament will take place from February 17 to 22 at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex.

Rashid al-Hajri, Vice-President and Manager of Public and Government Affairs at ExxonMobil Qatar officially launched the activities alongside Karim Alami, Tournament Director. The activities at West Walk will be open to the public from February 1 to 18, with additional stands at Villaggio Mall and Doha Festival City.

"This year marks a major milestone for the Qatar ExxonMobil Open as it is upgraded to an ATP 500 tournament for the first time. This is a proud moment for the tournament and a true testament to the strength of our partnership with Qatar Tennis Federation. We're thrilled to see it in its new enhanced form as it continues to evolve into a truly world-class event. With its robust infrastructure and commitment to excellence and innovation, Qatar is a premier destination for first-rate events, and we're delighted to showcase this through the tournament," said al-Hajri.

"The promotional activities we launched with Qatar Tennis Federation today mark the countdown to the Qatar ExxonMobil Open. We can't wait for the public to join in the excitement



Rashid al-Hajri, Vice-President and Manager of Public and Government Affairs at ExxonMobil Qatar, officially launched the activities alongside Karim Alami, Tournament Director, at West Walk in Doha.

as the buildup to the tournament begins, enjoying all the fun and engaging activities leading up to the event," he added.

"Our collaboration with ExxonMobil Qatar reflects Qatar Tennis Federation's commitment to enhancing tennis both locally and internationally. We believe the Qatar ExxonMobil Open is the perfect platform to raise awareness about tennis, inspiring younger generations to not only take up the sport but perhaps pursue it at a professional level," said Tareq Zainal, General Secretary of the Qatar Tennis Federation.

"ExxonMobil Qatar's efforts to install stands at several shopping malls leading up to the Qatar ExxonMobil Open are an important way of promoting tennis and encouraging people to engage in the sport. They inspire the public to take part in this thrilling sport and highlight ExxonMobil's commitment to the community," said Alami.

The Qatar ExxonMobil Open is one of two ATP Tour events in the Middle East. It attracts some of the biggest names in tennis and has been named ATP 250 Tournament of the Year six times (2015, '17, '19, '21/22, '24). This year

marks a major milestone for the Qatar ExxonMobil Open as it is upgraded to an ATP 500 tournament for the first time.

Top players like Jannik Sinner, Carlos Alcaraz, Novak Djokovic, Daniil Medvedev, Andrey Rublev, and Karen Khachanov have confirmed their participation at the tournament. ExxonMobil's partnership with the State of Qatar spans over three decades of collaboration. Building on this strong foundation, ExxonMobil remains committed to deepening its contributions through Joint Ventures with QatarEnergy both locally and internationally.

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar 1812 KM Lounge offers premium fan experience at LIC



The Qatar 1812 KM Lounge introduces an elevated hospitality experience for the FIA World Endurance Championship's 2025 season opener at Lusail International Circuit titled Qatar 1812 KM from February 26-28, 2025. Available for QR3,468, this exclusive venue combines premium amenities with unparalleled racing access.

Guests of the Qatar 1812 KM Lounge will enjoy meticulously curated cuisine throughout each day, featuring expertly plated dinner selections, refined afternoon refreshments, and exceptional desserts complemented by premium beverage service. The lounge's prime location overlooking the Main Straight and Pit Lane provides an optimal vantage point for witnessing the intense racing action.

The experience extends beyond hospitality with exclusive motor-sport access, including daily Pit Lane Walks and driver autograph

sessions. These intimate encounters offer guests the opportunity to immerse themselves in the atmosphere of world-class endurance racing while enjoying premium comfort and service.

The 2025 Qatar 1812 KM promises unprecedented excitement with a grid of 36 entries, including an even split between 18 Hypercars and LMGT3 cars from elite manufacturers such as Aston Martin, BMW, Ferrari, and Porsche, as well as the WEC debut of Mercedes-AMG.

The approximately 10-hour race, named in honour of Qatar's National Day, will showcase an extraordinary lineup of motorsport talent, including Valentino Rossi and Kevin Magnussen, alongside the highly anticipated premiere of Aston Martin's Valkyrie programme, as competitors battle from daylight into the dramatic backdrop of Lusail's illuminated circuit.

COMMENT

Team India embracing high-risk approach in T20s, says Gambhir

Reuters
Mumbai

India will look to deploy a high-octane, attacking style in Twenty20 Internationals and are ready to accept the risks that come with it, head coach **Gautam Gambhir** said after his side beat England to clinch a 4-1 series victory.

On Sunday, Abhishek Sharma's magnificent century powered India to a 150-run win over England in the fifth and final T20 international at Wankhede Stadium.

Abhishek's 135 off 54 was the second-fastest T20I hundred for India, while their total of 247 was their fourth-highest total in a T20I.

"That's the kind of T20 cricket we want to play. We don't want to fear losing a game of cricket. We want to play high-risk, high-reward cricket. These guys have adopted that ideology, that policy really well," Gambhir said after the win. "I think the ideology of this T20 team is based on selflessness and fearlessness. In the last six months, these guys have done it day in, day out. We want to try and get to 250-260 regularly."

"In trying to do that, there'll be games where we'll get bundled out for 120-130. That is what T20 cricket is all about. Unless and until you don't play that high-risk



cricket, you won't get those big rewards as well. Come those big tournaments, we want to still continue playing this way and we don't want to fear losing anything."

India will next play three one-day internationals against England from Feb. 6, before beginning their Champions Trophy campaign with a Group A match against Bangladesh in Dubai on Feb. 20.

Meanwhile it was announced that The next edition of the SA20, season four, is set to kick off on Boxing Day 2025. This was announced on Monday, with the league firming up windows for the next three editions ahead of this season's playoffs.

Bringing the start of the league forward to Christmas week - prime time in the South African cricket calendar - was possible because South Africa do not have any home Tests scheduled over the 2025-26 summer.

FOCUS

Sri Lanka sweep would push Australia closer to greatness in Test cricket, says spinner Lyon

Reuters
Melbourne

Australia are not yet a great team but completing a series sweep in Sri Lanka would push them closer, according to spin bowler **Nathan Lyon**.

Australia won the first Test by an innings and 242 runs in Galle and will look to wrap up the series 2-0 with another win at the same venue when the second test starts on Thursday.

The world's top-ranked Test nation and reigning World Test Championship holders, Australia have won 10 out of their last 13 tests since drawing the 2023 Ashes in England.

On their last tour of Sri Lanka, Australia gave up a 1-0 lead to split the two-match series with the hosts, who rebounded with an innings and 39-run win in the second test in Galle.

Lyon said there was plenty of motivation in the Australian camp to avoid a repeat of that let-down.

"It's about us on our journey to becoming a



great team, to make sure we go 2-0 up," he told reporters.

"We're on that journey, we're not there yet but that's our end goal."

"We want to be known as a great team, and part of that journey is when we close a window

making sure we nail it shut, and we don't let anyone back in."

Australia's success has been compared with some of the nation's great test teams led by Steve Waugh and Ricky Ponting.

Asked what would elevate the current group into greatness, Lyon said Australia still needed series wins in India and England.

Australia were held to 2-2 draws on their last two Ashes tours of England and have not beaten India away since Adam Gilchrist's team took a 2-1 series win in 2004.

Australia are likely to retain the same three-prong spin attack of Lyon, Matthew Kuhnemann and Todd Murphy for the second Test after they took a total of 17 wickets in the first.

"I think we all complement each other really well, with three totally different bowlers with three totally different mindsets as well," said 37-year-old Lyon, who took seven wickets in the series-opener.

"I feel like I'm learning off Todd and Matt, and I feel like they're pushing me to try and get better as well."

"Hopefully I'm passing on a bit of knowledge here and there."

FOCUS

New visual identity launched to mark 50 years of Qatar International Rally

Qatar to host the second round of the 2025 Middle East Rally Championship from Feb 6 to 8

Agencies
Doha

The Qatar International Rally is set to take place from February 6 to 8, serving as the second round of the 2025 Middle East Rally Championship. This follows Qatari driver Nasser al-Attiyah's victory in the Oman International Rally season-opening.

The 2025 Qatar International Rally will be particularly special as it celebrates its 50th anniversary with the launch of a brand-new visual identity. This identity pays homage to the rich legacy of the rally, reflecting both Qatar's cultural heritage and its deep-rooted passion for motorsports, which has grown tremendously over the past five decades.

The new logo and visual identity draw inspiration from Qatari culture, with the Arabian oryx symbolising the country's heritage and the endurance required by rally drivers navigating the challenging desert terrain. The fluid lines forming the oryx represent the twists and jumps that make rally racing exhilarating, while the yellow triangles take inspiration from the golden desert sands that characterise Qatar's landscape.

Additionally, traditional Bedouin tent embroidery is incorporated into the design, while the vertical alignment of the triangular shapes and curved angles are inspired by the rock formations of Zekreet, a key rally location. The logo has been designed with versatility, ensuring it can be adapted to highlight rally tracks and cultural landmarks, creating a cohesive visual language that resonates with audiences from diverse backgrounds.

The first edition of the Qatar International Rally took place in 1975, with British driver Peter Austen claiming victory alongside his Qatari co-driver Humaid Abdulrahim. Meanwhile, Qatari duo Arhama al-Kuwari and Gaith al-Kuwari were the only local team to successfully cross



the finish line, securing seventh place.

Although modest in scale compared to today's event, the inaugural rally was a significant milestone, marking one of the first major motorsport competitions in Qatar and the Gulf region. It laid the foundation for the rally to become one of the most prestigious regional motorsport events.

Over the years, the Qatar International Rally has evolved significantly. Initially part of the Middle East Rally Challenge and later the Gulf Rally Championship, the event saw a transformative shift in 1984 with the launch of the FIA-recognised Middle East Rally Championship. Notably, Qatar hosted the opening round of this historic championship, which was the first FIA-sanctioned series in the region.

Throughout its 50-year history, the Qatar International Rally has continually improved, contributing to the growth of motorsports culture in the country. This development has produced world-class Qatari drivers who have excelled in both regional and international competitions.

Saeed al-Hajri claimed victory at the Qatar International Rally in 1983. The following year, with the inception of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship, he secured back-to-back wins, driving a Porsche 911 SC RS prepared by Prodrive Racing. Founded and managed by David Richards, Prodrive played a pivotal role in shaping the Qatar International Rally alongside Rothmans. The 1984 triumph

was Prodrive's first international victory, setting the stage for the team's future success across various motorsport disciplines. Al-Hajri's achievement also marked the start of a dominant career in the Middle East Rally Championship, a title he would successfully defend the following year.

In 1986, the championship welcomed its first-ever World Rally Champion, with the late Björn Waldegård competing in Qatar with Toyota's European factory team. He clinched victory in his Toyota Celica Twin Cam Turbo. A year later, Qatar International Rally had the honour of hosting King Abdullah II of Jordan, who made his first and only rally appearance outside of Jordan.

The Qatar International Rally has been a gateway for many Qatari drivers to reach global motorsport recognition. From Saeed al-Hajri to Nasser al-Attiyah and current Middle East Rally Champion Abdulaziz al-Kuwari, numerous Qatari talents have left their mark not only in Qatar but also on the international stage.

Looking at the rally's past winners, it is evident that the event has attracted some of the biggest names in motorsport. Nasser al-Attiyah holds the record with 13 victories, while FIA President Mohammed Ben Sulayem has won the rally nine times. Saeed al-Hajri has claimed six wins, including five during the Middle East Rally Championship era.

The Qatar International Rally will officially commence on February 6, with an opening ceremony at Lusail Boulevard - Al Sa'ad Plaza, at 6:00pm. The event will be open to the public, offering fans an opportunity to enjoy an exciting lineup of performances and festivities to kick off the rally season in Qatar. Afterwards, the Super Special stage will take place at Lusail Karting Track at 7:00pm.

The rally action will continue until February 8, concluding with the awards ceremony at Lusail Boulevard - Al Sa'ad Plaza at 7:00pm.

FOOTBALL

Rashford attracted by Aston Villa's 'constant ambition'

'I'm excited, can't wait for the first training session and obviously the first game'

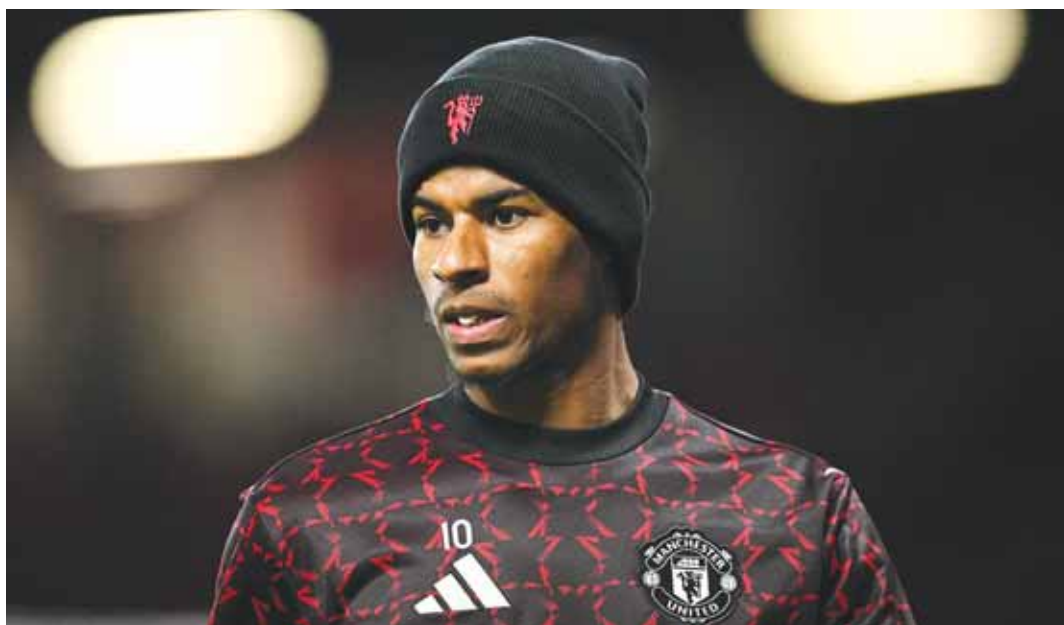
AFP
London

Marcus Rashford says Aston Villa's "constant ambition" attracted him to the club after he arrived from Manchester United on a loan deal until the end of the season.

The 27-year-old has not played for United since mid-December after falling out of favour with manager Ruben Amorim. He was linked with a move to AC Milan and Barcelona before finally making the switch to Villa Park on Sunday. Unai Emery's side, eighth in the Premier League, are eight points ahead of struggling United and have a Champions League last-16 clash to come in March.

Rashford said the club's ambition and the prospect of playing in Europe's top competition persuaded him to make the switch to Birmingham. Villa reportedly have an option to buy the forward for £40mn (\$49mn).

"It's an ambitious time for this club and a great opportunity for me to join this team and help them keep pushing forward," said Rashford, whose signing was announced by Villa late on Sunday. "I'm excited, can't wait for the first training session and obviously



the first game. "(Emery's) a top manager and what he's done for the club since coming in is unbelievable. It's the constant ambition which is attractive and why you want to join such a club. You want to keep improving year on year."

Rashford, who joined United as a seven-year-old, scored the first goal of Amorim's tenure in a 1-1 draw with Ipswich in November

and scored twice against Everton but he was soon frozen out over concerns about his attitude.

He scored just seven goals in 24 appearances for United this season. The England forward could make his debut when Villa meet Tottenham in the FA Cup fourth round on Sunday and is focusing on recovering his best form.

"I've had to choose somewhere where I feel my style of football is

suited and can help them and help me rediscover and improve as a player. Obviously it's only short term I'm here, so I want to make the most of my time here," he said.

He added: "I know I can hurt teams, I know when I'm playing at my best I can decide football games. That'll be my only ambition and only goal, to help the team win more games, more points and hopefully create history."

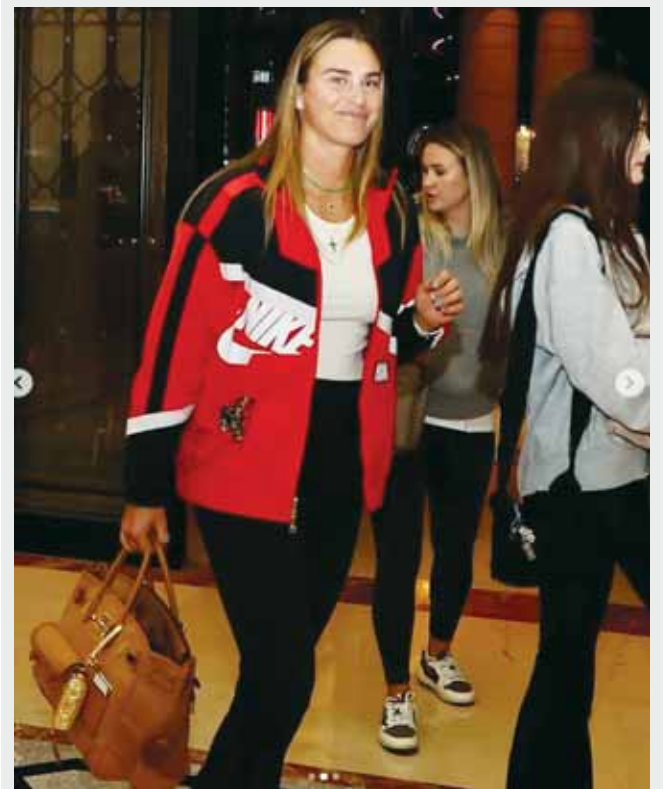
PSG boss Luis Enrique lavishes praise on 'difference-maker' Dembele

Paris St Germain manager Luis Enrique is not surprised by Ousmane Dembele's recent form, saying yesterday that the French forward possess qualities that make him a difference maker in games. Dembele scored successive hat-tricks last week when he helped PSG to a 4-1 away thrashing of German Bundesliga side VfB Stuttgart in the Champions League and a 5-2 Ligue 1 demolition of Brest. The 27-year-old France international has now netted 25 times and provided 19 assists in 68 matches for the

Parisian side since joining from La Liga club Barcelona for a reported fee of around 50mn euros (\$51.35mn) in August 2023. "Dembele? A different player," Enrique told reporters ahead of today's last 16 French Cup game at third-tier French side Le Mans. "Ousmane has always been a different player, whatever his position. He can dribble past two or three players, make decisive passes and score goals. Our objective with him has always been the same. He's a player who makes a difference..."

"To be a PSG player, you have to be prepared for situations like that. That's why we consider it a team sport, and within the team, everything is easier to live with." On the injury front, Luis Enrique said there was no serious concern over Joao Neves after the 20-year-old Portuguese defensive midfielder received a knock to his right foot against Stuttgart. "There's no injury, it's just the calendar and the intensity of the games that's meant he's been a bit tighter, but he doesn't have any major injuries." (Reuters)

Sabalenka arrives in Doha for Qatar TotalEnergies Open



World No. 1 Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus arrives in Doha for Qatar TotalEnergies Open set to be held from February 9 to 15 at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex. Sabalenka, a three-time Grand Slam champion, has already experienced a whirlwind of emotions in just the first few weeks of the 2025 season. The Belarusian powerhouse kicked off her year with a title-winning run at the Brisbane International, setting the stage for what looked like another dominant season. Then at the Australian Open, the defending champion reached the final without dropping a set, but in a thrilling championship match, Sabalenka fell short in a 3-6, 6-2, 5-7 battle against Madison Keys.

Neuer signs new Bayern contract to 2026

Bayern Munich said yesterday they had extended the contract of their long-standing goalkeeper Manuel Neuer to the end of the 2025-26 season.

The announcement puts an end to speculation about Neuer's future at the club, where his contract was set to expire at the end of the current campaign. Neuer, who has made over 500 appearances for the Bavarian giants, was "the best goalkeeper of his generation and a Bayern icon", sporting chief Max Eberl said in a statement. The club were "delighted" that Neuer would stay on for what will be his 15th season with Bayern, after joining from domestic rivals Schalke in 2011. Neuer said in the statement he wanted to keep playing football and "remain a Bayern player" for the upcoming season.

After 11 Bundesliga titles and two Champions League trophies with the club, Neuer said he was "still hungry" for more. Neuer, who retired from international football last year after Germany hosted the Euros, has recently returned from injury. Bayern's stalwart broke a rib in a collision in December during a match against Bayer Leverkusen, which sidelined him through the end of the year. The 38-year-old had previously expressed his desire to keep playing beyond the end of the year, despite growing competition for his spot. Alexander Nuebel, who has a contract with Bayern until 2029 but is currently on loan at Stuttgart until 2026, is widely believed to be in line to replace Neuer in Munich.