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CRICKET | Page 2

Sri Lanka's
Karunaratne
to retire after
Australia Test



SPOTLIGHT | Page 3

Launch of
Negdar initiative
to promote
healthy lifestyle

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MOTORSPORT

QMMF plans
50th anniversary
celebrations of Qatar
International Rally

Page 4

GOLF

Qatar Masters set to kick off with \$2.5mn prize on offer

'Marking its 28th edition, the tournament has reached a significant milestone, reflecting its enduring legacy'

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The stage is set for the 28th edition of the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters 2025, marking the fourth event of the DP World Tour's 'International Swing'. With a \$2.5 million prize purse on the line, the latest batch of professional golfers is eager for the chance to taste victory.

The tournament, taking place from tomorrow until Sunday at the scenic Doha Golf Club (DGC), is the tour's final stop in the Middle East before returning in November for the DP World Tour playoffs.

This highly anticipated annual event is organised by the Qatar Golf Association (QGA), the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC), DGC, and long-term title sponsor Commercial Bank. The tournament, first held in 1998, is considered Qatar's premier 'must-attend' sporting and social event, widely known for bringing together the world's best golf talent.

Hamad al-Mana, President of the QGA, while addressing the media yesterday took the opportunity to reflect on the tournament's legacy and extend his gratitude to the Qatar Olympic Committee for their continued support.

"As Qatar continues to expand its presence in the sporting world, it is establishing itself as a premier destination for global events. In keeping with the nation's inspiring ambition, the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters has become an essential fixture in our sporting calendar. Marking its 28th edition, this tournament has reached a significant milestone, reflecting its enduring legacy. I would like to thank the Qatar Olympic Committee for their unwavering support over the years, which has contributed to making this tournament a resounding success," said al-Mana.

The tournament boasts an impressive list of former champions, including Sergio Garcia, Paul Lawrie, Adam Scott, Retief Goosen, Henrik Stenson, and Ernie Els. Last year, Japan's Rikuyō Hoshino added his name to this esteemed list with a one-shot victory to claim his first DP World Tour title.

Speaking on the occasion, Hussein al-Abdullah, Executive General Manager of Marketing and CB Real Estate, commented: "For us, golf is more than just a game. It is a beautiful sport that combines pas-



Qatar Golf Association (QGA) President Hamad al-Mana, Executive General Manager of Marketing and CB Real Estate Hussein al-Abdullah, Senior Tournament Director for the DP World Tour Mikael Erickson, Head of Middle East of DP World Tour Tom Phillips and other officials at a press conference at the Doha Golf Club yesterday.

sion, precision, and strategy – all of which are values that Commercial Bank upholds and lives by. As we witness yet another incredible golf tournament, we are reminded of the wise leadership of our State and its inspiring ambition to position Qatar as a prominent figure in the sports world. Commercial Bank is honoured to be part of the journey that drives this vision forward. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Doha Golf Club for hosting the tournament at its picturesque facility."

On the DGC course, Mikael Erickson, Senior Tournament Director for the DP World Tour, said: "The golf course is in immaculate condition. I've been coming here for many years, and this is the best condi-

tion I've seen since we started this tournament. I'm really happy with what Andrew and his team have done. I've received very complimentary comments from all the players, and this could very well be the best-conditioned golf course that the DP World Tour plays on all year."

Commenting on the importance of hosting these GCC events, including the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters, Tom Phillips, Head of Middle East, DP World Tour, said: "This is the 28th edition of the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters, and it has been on our schedule every year since 1998, which is an incredible achievement. There are not many tournaments that last so long on our schedule. I would like to take this opportu-

nity to thank everyone who has made that possible – the Qatar Golf Association, our partners over the years – thank you for making this possible. Of course, equally important are our sponsors. Another landmark we're celebrating this year is the 20th anniversary of Commercial Bank's involvement as title sponsor. That is truly an incredible achievement, so a huge thank you to Hussein and all your team. I know you are also celebrating your 50th anniversary this year, so many congratulations."

"It's really important to be here," he continued. "This is the fourth consecutive event in the Middle East for our tour in 2025. We've already had some great action so far, and we're looking forward to another wonderful week."

Qatar Duty Free (QDF) also announced its sponsorship of the prestigious tournament. "We feel honoured to continue supporting an event that brings together global talent and celebrates the unifying spirit of sport. This year, we are proud to play a role in further enhancing the tournament's legacy alongside our partners, solidifying Qatar's position as a global hub for sports and tourism. Sport has a unique power to bring people together, and it aligns with our commitment to creating unforgettable experiences for all our customers worldwide," said Thabet Musleh, Chief Retail and Hospitality Officer, Qatar Airways Group.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

Sassi helps Gharafa beat Pakhtakor to keep knockout hopes alive

By Sports Reporter
Al Rayyan

Al Gharafa climbed into the qualification slots for the knockout rounds of the AFC Champions League Elite yesterday as Pedro Martins' side handed Pakhtakor a 1-0 defeat in Doha that also confirmed Al Shorta's elimination from the competition.

The Qatar Stars League side moved onto seven points from seven games after Ferjani Sassi's 39th minute goal earned his club their second win of the campaign while Pakhtakor's chances suffered a significant blow.

The club from Uzbekistan remain on four points with one round remaining, when Pakhtakor will face Al Sadd from Qatar in Tashkent on February 17.

The result means Iraq's Al Shorta, who drew 1-1 with Esteghlal on Monday to sit on three points, join defending champions Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates in being unable to advance to the next phase of the competition.

Pakhtakor's scoring struggles in the competition continued despite

the arrival of new coach Pedro Moreira, with the Uzbeks unable to add to the two goals they had claimed in the previous six matches.

The home side, in contrast, made moves to open the scoring from the first whistle, Joselu lofting an attempt over the crossbar inside the first 50 seconds while Nani's fourth minute header from a Yacine Brahimi corner also cleared the Pakhtakor goal.

Pakhtakor were playing in their first game of the new season and the side from Tashkent were slow to find their rhythm with Brahimi, in particular, causing problems.

The 34-year-old winger was denied by Jhonatan Luiz in the 25th minute, the goalkeeper pushing away a shot across goal and, a little over six minutes remaining in the half, the Algeria international unlocked the visiting defence.

Brahimi drove through the heart of the Pakhtakor defence to pick up a return pass from Joselu on the edge of the penalty area, feeding Sassi on his right and he slid his strike past Luiz via the inside of the goalkeeper's left post.

Al Gharafa looked to have doubled their lead in the 64th minute

when Brahimi again forced Pakhtakor onto the back foot, his pass releasing Ahmed Al Ganehi and a deflected cross was nodded in by Joselu. But VAR ruled the goal out on review.

Moreira introduced Ulugbek Khoshimov with 10 minutes remaining but the former Neftchi striker, like his team mates before him, was unable to find a way through and Al Gharafa comfortably held on to take the points.

Gharafa coach Pedro Martins stated that his team played two different halves against Pakhtakor.

"In the first half, we controlled the game, creating many scoring opportunities. However, we didn't capitalise on those chances, scoring only one goal. As a result, the score did not fully reflect the team's performance," he said.

Martins said that in the second half, while there were fewer opportunities, his team remained well-organised defensively.

Martins congratulated the players for their great effort and for following the instructions and plan laid out for them. Martins said the chances of qualifying for the round of last 16 remain open, with many teams still in the competition.



Al Gharafa's Ferjani Sassi (right) and Pakhtakor's Jonatan Lucca vie for the ball during the AFC Champions League Elite match at Thani Bin Jassim Stadium in Doha yesterday. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

PREVIEW

Karunaratne to retire as Sri Lanka prepare for Test

The 36-year-old will become 7th Sri Lankan with 100 Tests or more

Reuters
Galle

Former Sri Lanka Test skipper Dimuth Karunaratne will retire from the format after his 100th match, the final Test of Sri Lanka's two-Test series against Australia in Galle tomorrow.

Karunaratne made his Test debut at the Galle International Stadium in 2012 against New Zealand.

The 36-year-old opener has scored 7,172 runs with 16 centuries and 39 half centuries in 99 appearances.

He has played 50 ODIs but has never featured in a Twenty20 International match.

"It was the right time to go, considering there are three or four younger players who could come in for the next World Test Championship cycle," Karunaratne told ESPNcricinfo yesterday.

"After the first Test against Australia ended, I told Sri Lanka Cricket (Board) that the next Test would be my last.

"Playing 100 Tests is a tough thing to accomplish, especially when you're an opening batter and you're doing the dirty work for the team."

Karunaratne will become Sri



Former Sri Lanka Test skipper Dimuth Karunaratne celebrates his 15th century in this file photo in 2023.

Lanka's seventh cricketer to reach 100 Tests, following Sanath Jayasuriya, Muttiah Muralitharan, Chaminda Vaas, Mahela Jayawardene, Kumar Sangakkara, and Angelo Mathews.

His recent form has dipped, with 182 runs in his last seven Test matches, including a lone half-century against New Zealand in

September last year. "If I have regrets, one of them would be not being able to get to 10,000 Test runs. I thought the way that I was going in 2017, 2018 and 2019, that I'd have the chance to get there. But then Covid hit, and Sri Lanka don't play as many Tests anymore," Karunaratne added.

Karunaratne said he plans to

pursue coaching after his retirement: "I'll take a bit of a break for myself after spending so many years playing cricket.

"But eventually, I'd like to get involved again."

Australia lead after beating Sri Lanka by an innings and 242 runs on day four of the opening Test in Galle on Saturday.

SPOTLIGHT

No plans to own teams in other T20 leagues, says RCB COO

Reuters
Bengaluru

Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB) have no plans to own teams in other international cricket leagues, the Indian Premier League (IPL) franchise's chief operating officer Rajesh Menon said as they eye expansions through other means.

RCB, a subsidiary of United Spirits, were one of the original eight IPL teams that formed the Twenty20 league in 2008 that has since become the highlight of the Indian summer.

But they remain one of only two IPL teams without any ownership stakes in teams from leagues outside India, the other being the Gujarat Titans which made its IPL debut in 2022.

Other IPL teams such as the Mumbai Indians, Delhi Capitals and Kolkata Knight Riders own three or more teams in three different countries.

They include franchises in South Africa (SA20), the West Indies (Caribbean Premier League), the US (Major League Cricket) and the United Arab Emirates (International League T20), but Menon said RCB have different ideas about expansion.

"Expanding the brand globally doesn't mean only by participating in cricket," Menon told Reuters.

"We can expand our merchandise range to Australia, the US, and the UK through our bar and cafe, not just sports.

"Currently, we are not expanding RCB from a sporting point of view but we will expand RCB through other expansions."

RCB did, however, acquire the Bengaluru franchise in the Women's Premier League (WPL) in 2023 at the reported bidding amount of

just over \$100mn. They splurged nearly \$415,000 to sign Indian batter Smriti Mandhana - the most expensive buy in WPL history - and it paid rich dividends as she captained RCB to the WPL title last year.

But the men's team have yet to lift a trophy in the IPL despite reaching the playoffs four times in the last five years.

"The more number of times you reach the playoffs, the probability of winning the championship is quite near," Menon said.

"I don't think it's far that we win because all the signs are there and the WPL team winning (the title) is also one sign."

Despite having heavy hitters such as Virat Kohli, Chris Gayle, AB de Villiers and Faf du Plessis over the years, the title has eluded the Bengaluru franchise, who have been beaten in the final three times - in 2009, 2011 and 2016.

"Icons are critical and that is what we have created in our RCB franchise," Menon said.

"Chris Gayle's 175 not out is still not broken... the most IPL runs record by an individual is still with Kohli (8,004 runs), the highest partnership is with Kohli and De Villiers (229 in 2016), so we have manifested the philosophy.

"When you play bold, there can be negatives too. The lowest score is with RCB (49 v Kolkata in 2017), so that is where we resonate with young India..."

"There are young Indians that want to do multiple things but there is fear of failure."

RCB rejigged their squad in the 2025 auction, retaining only Kohli, Rajat Patidar and Yash Dayal.

But they recruited big English hitters Liam Livingstone and Phil Salt while also bringing in pacers Josh Hazlewood (Australia) and Bhuvneshwar Kumar to freshen up the squad.

COMMENT

Vice-captain Gill says World Cup win, not Australia loss, defines India

AFP
Nagpur

Reigning T20 World Cup champions India have been in top form across all formats, vice-captain **Shubman Gill** said yesterday, dismissing his side's Test defeat in Australia as a one-off.

Rohit Sharma's men clinched the T20 crown in South Africa last year, seven months after they ended the most recent ODI World Cup at home as runners-up.

But a 3-0 Test whitewash at home to New Zealand in October-November, followed by the 3-1 defeat in Australia last month, saw star cricketers including Rohit and Virat Kohli come under scrutiny for their poor batting form.

"One series does not define the form of the whole team," Gill told reporters ahead of the first of three one-day internationals against England starting in Nagpur tomorrow.

"Definitely we did not play as per our expectations in the Australian series, but still we played some good cricket," the top-order batsman said.

"One match and one day doesn't define us... we should keep all those things in mind."

The three ODI matches, which follow India's 4-1 T20 series victory over England, come ahead of the 50-over Champions Trophy starting on



February 19. Rohit and Kohli, who both retired from T20 cricket after the World Cup win, return to the ODI set-up and Gill said the team is upbeat.

However, he also warned the three matches against a "good" England team were not a practice run for the Champions Trophy.

Gill, 25, is seen as a potential future leader for India whenever Rohit, 37, retires from ODI and Test cricket.

He said being deputy to Rohit had been one of the main challenges of his international career since 2019.

"I take it as a challenge to lead my way, firstly with my performance and then definitely in the field if Rohit bhai (brother) would want my opinions," Gill said.

"What are the plans for certain batsmen, certain bowlers, how to take on certain oppositions - just learning that is a big curve for me," he said.

Wrist-spinner Varun Chakravarthy has been added to the ODI squad after he was named player of the series in the T20s with 14 wickets in five matches against England.

AFTER TWO DECADES, SEAN WILLIAMS KEEPS ON RUNNING FOR ZIMBABWE

Harare: At an age when most Test cricketers have retired and only an elite few can maintain their excellence, 38-year-old **Sean Williams** is bucking the trend and soaring to new heights on the cusp of his 20th anniversary representing Zimbabwe.

Upon the retirement of 21-year stalwart Jimmy Anderson last year, Bulawayo-born Williams became world cricket's longest-tenured player and his game has only improved with time. As his side's premier contemporary batsman, over 17 Tests and 162 one-day internationals Williams has averaged 45 and 38 respectively. Since 2020, those numbers skyrocketed to 81 and 51 - and while captaining, 96 and 73.

"I've found that my scoring shot decisions have become way more selective and the percentages have become a lot higher towards me than towards the bowler," the left-hander told Reuters ahead of his Feb. 25 milestone. "I just became a little bit calmer as a batsman."

Promoted to the national team in 2005 after a politically-driven player exodus, facing a merciless South Africa was an eye-opening initiation for the then 18-year-old.

"We were obviously young, we had no idea. We were just trying to survive 50 overs," he reflected, noting that coaches of that era tried hard but could not overhaul a negative culture.

"There was fear instilled elsewhere with the board. It just wasn't good and it wasn't nice cricket. There was no plan."

A two-day Cape Town massacre followed, and despite missing Test selection Williams still finds humour in a 12th-man memory of teammate Brendan Taylor accidentally knocking himself out after making a low score.

"He had his helmet on, but he smashed his head with the bat and then I got a fright," Williams said. "I saw him go dizzy, hit the wall and then slide down the wall and lie down on the floor."



As a hopelessly-outgunned Zimbabwe retreated from the test arena, it would be eight more years before Williams made his red-ball debut. The father-of-two says a positive game plan which reflects modern scoring trends has been welcomed by the playing group over the last decade, as has an off-field culture shift.

After a string of disastrous results against Afghanistan last December, Zimbabwe Cricket managing director Givemore Makoni summoned the senior players to his office.

"I thought, 'jeez, we're going to get fired here', but he actually had a meeting of support," Williams said.

"That's quite a sensitive thing. I mean, it's something that people wouldn't know about the board, supporting a player or supporting the seniors. He's helped me a lot throughout a lot of troubled times," added Williams, who clubbed a career-best 154 in the next Test. Zimbabwe's next challenge comes against Ireland, who tour the African nation for three T20s, three ODIs and one test starting Feb. 6. Williams earmarked 21-year-old Brian Bennett, who collected a century and a five-wicket haul in last year's Boxing Day Test against the Afghans, as his team's most exciting prospect.

FOCUS

From 'rough trot' to top dog: Dashing batsman Head crowned Australia's MVP



Australia's Travis Head celebrates his century during the first One-Day International against England at Trent Bridge Cricket Ground, Nottingham, Britain, on September 19, 2024. (Reuters)

Reuters
Melbourne

Four years after being dumped from the Australian team during a bleak period with the bat, Travis Head has risen to the top of the heap as a devastating power hitter in all three formats.

The popular lefthander was awarded the Allan Border Medal late on Monday as Australia's top men's cricketer in 2024, crushing second-placed paceman Josh Hazlewood in the voting.

The 31-year-old scored 1,427 runs across the three formats in the 12-month polling period starting with the drawn Test series against West Indies last January and ending with the recent 3-1 home series win over India.

Unable to attend the Australian Cricket Awards in Melbourne while on the test squad's tour of Sri Lanka, the no-frills South Australian accepted the medal from coach Andrew McDonald wearing a team polo shirt and shorts.

The low-key ceremony was fitting for a player who often seems a throwback to the 20th century when great Australian players wore moustaches and guzzled post-match beers.

Head has come to make the game look easy wherever thrown in the batting order, mixing middle order centuries in back-to-back tests against India with fast runs as a white-ball opener.

His stocks as a part-time off-spinner have also risen; he contributed a couple of key wickets during the India series.

A few years ago, though, Head's

career was at a cross-roads when he was dropped during the 2020-21 home summer and went to English county team Sussex looking for runs.

"I had a pretty rough trot at it, went to Sussex, didn't get that consistency that I was after, tried to play a certain way, didn't work," he told Australian media in Sri Lanka.

Head averaged 18.30 with the bat during his Sussex stint and returned home thinking he had to "pull (his) finger out" to get back into the Test team in time for the Ashes.

He said he made a conscious choice to go all-out as an attacking batter in Tests, having had mixed results when quashing his natural instincts.

The approach worked as he earned a recall for the 2021-22

Ashes and smashed a match-winning 152 off 148 balls in the series-opener at the Gabba.

It set the tone for Australia's rollicking 4-0 win over England, with Head finishing top of the runs-list with 357 from six innings.

Now an automatic selection for Australia in all formats and a team leader, Head is spoken of as a possible future captain.

Pat Cummins leads the test and ODI teams, while all-rounder Mitchell Marsh is the T20 captain.

Head, who was also named Australia's best player in ODIs at Monday's awards night, said he was happy to "step in" as captain when called upon but was not eyeing the role permanently.

"I probably don't see it as a long-term thing," he added. "Me and Pat (Cummins) are the same age, Pat's doing a wonderful job."

SPOTLIGHT

'Negdar' initiative set to promote healthy lifestyle

The 15-week project represents a significant step in Qatar's commitment to achieving global health goals

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Qatar Stars League (QSL), in co-operation and partnership with Generation Amazing Foundation and Internal Security Force (Lekhwiya), and with the support of Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), yesterday announced the launch of Negdar (We Can) initiative which aims to inspire and motivate children to adopt healthier and more active lifestyles using football as a motivating factor, and contribute to reducing the risks of diseases associated with obesity.

The 15-week initiative represents a significant step in Qatar's commitment to achieving global health goals, aligning with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It targets children aged 10 to 15 years.

Hassan Rabiah al-Kuwari, Executive Director of Sales, Marketing and Communication at QSL, emphasised the importance of encouraging all segments of society, especially children, to embrace the concept of a healthy lifestyle.

"To contribute towards building a stronger, healthier and more

active generation, we've launched the Negdar initiative in collaboration with our partners. This initiative also aims to motivate all participants to adopt a sporty and healthy lifestyle. We seek to leverage the power and influence of football by connecting participants with their favourite stars to encourage and support them. Through this unique experience, we hope to achieve our goals and aspirations," al-Kuwari said.

Nasser al-Khori, Executive Director of Generation Amazing Foundation, said: "This initiative is a clear example of the power of partnerships in achieving tangible impact. Negdar is not just a health initiative; it's a commitment to shaping a generation that values health, teamwork and personal growth. By bringing together the expertise of Generation Amazing, QSL, Lekhwiya and Ministry of Public Health, we aim to present an inspiring model that enables sustainable lifestyle changes, ensuring a new generation with physical and mental well-being."

Lekhwiya reaffirmed its commitment to supporting the community through this initiative. Colonel Nawaf Abdullah al-Maadadi, Commander of Lekhwiya



Hassan Rabiah al-Kuwari (centre), Executive Director of Sales, Marketing and Communication at QSL, Colonel Nawaf Abdullah al-Maadadi, Commander of Lekhwiya Training Institute, and Jassim al-Ali, representative of Generation Amazing, during a press conference in Doha yesterday.

Training Institute, said: "As a key partner, Lekhwiya takes pride in providing the necessary facilities and resources to ensure that participants in Negdar have the best

possible experience. We believe in the value of initiatives that bring together expertise and resources to promote a healthier and happier community."

On his part, Dr Salah Abdullah Alayafi, Acting Director of Health Promotion Department at MoPH, said the initiative aimed to encourage adoption of healthier lifestyles,

explaining that it represents an inspiring model of co-operation between sectors to promote health, and contributes to enhancing efforts to achieve our health initiatives in the National Health Strategy, especially those related to improving the health and well-being of the population, and improving the quality of life.

QSL, Generation Amazing Foundation and Lekhwiya will play a pivotal role in the Negdar initiative by offering football training, organising various sports activities and hosting special events such as swimming, shooting and horse-back riding in line with the designated programme.

Additionally, QSL players will encourage children to engage in physical activity and adopt healthy lifestyles.

The Ministry of Public Health will play a crucial role in monitoring and evaluation to ensure measurable improvements in both physical and mental health of the registered children.

The launch of Negdar reflects a shared commitment among all partners to empower and enhance the country's global leadership in the fields of health and sustainability.

FOOTBALL

Dortmund can turn their season around: Kovac

Reuters
Dortmund

Borussia Dortmund's three-game run under interim coach Mike Tullberg with two wins and a draw across all competitions showed the team had the quality to turn their season around, new coach Niko Kovac said yesterday.

Kovac took over on Sunday, succeeding Nuri Sahin who was sacked on Jan 22 following a four-game losing run.

Interim coach Tullberg had taken over for three matches with the team earning a draw and a win in the Bundesliga as well as a victory in the Champions League over Shakhtar Donetsk to end their losing streak.

"What has been positive is the last three games. You could see that the team has the necessary quality. For me, the team is really good," Kovac told a press conference. "There is a lot that has to do with self-confidence. Yes, there was a phase recently where things did not go well but the last three games were great. Mike really did it well and we all thank him for that."

Dortmund, last season's Champions League finalists, are in 11th spot in the Bundesliga and are at risk of missing out on a place in next season's premier European club competition.

After hosting VfB Stuttgart on Saturday, the Ruhr Valley club face Sporting in the Champions



Borussia Dortmund's new Croatian head coach Niko Kovac (centre) looks on during a presentation press conference with the club's sporting director Sebastian Kehl (left) and managing director Lars Ricken in Dortmund, western Germany, yesterday. (AFP)

League playoff next week for a spot in the last 16.

"The players have seen how sweet it is to win," Kovac said of their matches under Tullberg. "Wins are the ones that lift your confidence. You need that as a player and what was is no longer important. What is and what will be is the most important thing."

"We are in 11th place and we

next have a big game at home against Stuttgart. We want to win it to take that next step forward. To bring Dortmund back where they belong, which is the top," he added.

Kovac, who led Bayern Munich to a league and Cup double in 2018-19, has also managed Eintracht Frankfurt and VfL Wolfsburg in the Bundesliga while the

Berlin native had a stint with Ligue 1 side AS Monaco. "Clearly this is not an ideal situation but you cannot always expect to have a summer pre-season preparation or winter preparation," Kovac said. "We will not invent everything again. The players know a lot of things already. It is about giving them this confidence because every player needs it."

CRICKET

QPL: GWC score a thrilling 3-run win over Wombats Club

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The ongoing Qatar Premier League (QPL) Men's 2025 of the Qatar Cricket Association is witnessing some thrilling games every weekend. Last Friday QWC Cricket Club clinched an exciting 3-run win over Wombats Club at the Lusail Grounds.

GWC posted 141 before being bowled out in their allotted 20 overs. In reply, Wombats Club were kept in check by the GWC bowlers and fell short by 3 runs ending at 138 for 8 in a tense finish.

GWC's all-round Arsalan Khan Raqib Ullah emerged as the Player of the Match scoring a quickfire

31 runs (21 balls; 4x4s) and later claimed two wickets for 18 runs in two overs.

The win saw GWC Cricket Club notch their first 2 points of the league in Pool 3 where Chargers CC are at the top with 4 points while Stallions Sports are second, also on 4 points.

A total of 36 teams split into six pools are competing in the league which began on January 17, 2025 and continues till May 9, 2025. As many as 16 games were played over the last weekend.

Current pool leaders with two wins each are Quantum United CC (4pts) Pool 1; Taprobane CC (4pts) Pool 2; Chargers CC (4pts) Pool 3; Midas XI (4pts) Pool 4; Black Hawks (4pts) Pool 5; and Spartan (4pts) Pool 6.



Action from one of the Qatar Premier League 2025 games last weekend.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Portugal forward Felix joins AC Milan following a loan deal from Chelsea



Joao Felix leaves a clinic after medical tests before signing for AC Milan in Milan, Italy, yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Milan, Italy

AC Milan secured a loan deal for Chelsea forward Joao Felix as the Serie A club made four late signings in the winter transfer window in a bid to revive their season.

In a statement Milan said that Portugal forward Felix, who only scored one league goal for Chelsea since signing from Atletico Madrid in the summer, "has signed a contract with the club lasting until 30 June 2025".

Milan only announced the Felix deal yesterday, but the required paperwork was submitted before Monday's transfer deadline.

Alvaro Morata left Sergio Conceicao's side on loan to Galatasaray at the weekend and the seven-time

European champions moved to bolster their forward line with Felix and Santiago Gimenez.

Mexico striker Gimenez was brought in for a reported 32m euros (\$33.1mn) plus add-ons from Feyenoord, where he scored 65 goals across two and a half seasons.

Milan, who sit eighth in Serie A, also signed attacking midfielder Warren Bondo from Monza for 10 million euros and forward Riccardo Sottil on loan from Fiorentina on deadline day, while Ismael Bennacer left for Marseille and Noah Okafor joined Napoli.

"Monday was a very intense, interesting day. We did a good job, what we wanted to do," said Zlatan Ibrahimovic during Gimenez's presentation yesterday. "We're satisfied, this will be the team which turns things around."

Milan are seven points off the

Serie A top four and 19 behind league leaders Napoli after drawing a dramatic derby with Inter Milan on Sunday.

They also missed the chance to qualify directly for the Champions League last 16 with a loss at Dinamo Zagreb last week, having to settle for a place in the play-off round. Milan host Roma in the Italian Cup quarter-finals today and then travel to Empoli before the first leg of their play-off tie with Feyenoord next week.

Albania and Serbia to co-host Under-21 Euros in 2027

Albania and Serbia will co-host the 2027 Under-21 European Championship, Europe's soccer governing body UEFA said yesterday, after the two Balkan countries set their differences aside and submitted a joint bid. The 16-team tournament

will be played at four stadiums in Albania (Tirana, Shkoder, Elbasan and Krogzhitine) and four stadiums in Serbia (Novi Sad, Loznica, Leskovac and Zajecar). The opening match is set to take place in Serbia while the final will be held in Albania. Both countries will also qualify as hosts, with 14 more slots up for grabs in qualifiers.

Relations between Serbia and Albania have long been hostile and hit their lowest point during a war in the former Serbian province of Kosovo in the late 1990s when Nato, concerned about the "ethnic cleansing" of Albanians, deployed air strikes against Serbian forces. Kosovo declared independence in 2008, but Serbia refuse to recognise it, saying the territory, which has a majority Albanian population, is a heartland of the Serbian nation.

MOTORSPORT

QMMF plans 50th anniversary celebrations of Qatar Rally

Legendary Nasser al-Attiyah will be trying to break his own record of 17 victories on his home rally

By Sports Reporter
Lusail

This weekend's Qatar International Rally is the second round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) but it is also the 50th anniversary of the first ever event to be held in 1975.

From that small acorn, the joint third oldest rally in the Middle East – the Rally of Lebanon and Cyprus ran for the first time in 1968 and 1970 and Kuwait also hosted a rally in 1975 – has become one of the most popular events in the whole of Asia. Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah will be trying to break his own record of 17 victories on his home rally this weekend. The list of previous winners is an impressive one: current FIA President Mohammed Ben Sulayem won on nine occasions, local legend Saeed al-Hajri claimed six wins and the defending MERC champion, Abdulaziz al-Kuwari, prevailed back in 2012.

As far as co-drivers are concerned, Irishman Ronan Morgan holds the record with eight wins, Mathieu Baumel and Chris Patterson partnered al-Attiyah to six and five successes apiece and Giovanni Bernacchini claimed four victories with the Qatari between 2010 and 2014.

Two of the most surprising wins came with victories for Group N/MERC 2 cars. Oman's Nizar al-Shanfari teamed up with the late Tom Steele to stun his rivals with victory in a Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution V in 1999 and Rashid al-Naimi and Hugo Magalhaes secured a shock win in 2017 with a Subaru Impreza WRX STI.

The Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) will be celebrating 50 years this weekend, as 29 teams and competitors from 19 countries make their final preparations for the weekend's action at the service park within the Lusail International Circuit.

Twenty-one of those teams are now registered for 2025 MERC points.

Al-Attiyah began competing in off-road events from 1989 and 1990 and then returned to the sport with a vengeance in 2003. He won his first Qatar International Rally that year with British co-driver Steve Lancaster in a Subaru Impreza WRC and has since celebrated victory in Qatar with four additional car manufacturers and as many new co-drivers.

Speaking at Lusail yesterday, al-Attiyah said: "I remember when Saeed (al-Hajri) and Mohammed (Ben Sulayem), Jaber al-Marri, Mamdouh (Khayat) and many others were competing. We were watching. Then, in 1990, I did the first Qatar International with a Toyota Celica from Mohammed. I was leading all the way until we broke the rear diff. People started to say that this was the new Saeed coming. It was nice memories.

"I stopped for 10 years and came back to



Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah's car undergoes final preparations yesterday at the Lusail International Circuit, ahead of Qatar International Rally.



Three Italian crews are competing in Qatar this weekend.

QATAR INTERNATIONAL RALLY - PREVIOUS WINNERS

1975 Peter Austin (GBR)/Hameed Abdel Rahman (QAT) Mazda 929 Coupe
1976 no rally
1977 John Blackwell (GBR)/John Rollings (GBR) Mazda 808
1978 Harry Kallstrom (SWE)/Claes Billstam (SWE) Datsun 160JSS5
1979 to 1982 no rally
1983 Saeed al-Hajri (QAT)/John Spiller (GBR) Opel Ascona 400
1984 Saeed al-Hajri (QAT)/John Spiller (GBR) Porsche 911 SC RS
1985 Saeed al-Hajri (QAT)/John Spiller (GBR) Porsche 911 SC RS
1986 Bjorn Waldegard (SWE)/Fred Gallagher (GBR) Toyota Celica Twin Turbo
1987 Saeed al-Hajri (QAT)/Ronan Morgan (IRL) Porsche 911 SC RS
1988 Mohammed Ben Sulayem (UAE)/Ronan Morgan (IRL) Toyota Celica Twin Cam Turbo
1989 Saeed al-Hajri (QAT)/Steve Bond (GBR) Ford Sierra RS Cosworth
1990 Mohammed Ben Sulayem (UAE)/

Ronan Morgan (IRL) Toyota Celica GT4
1991 Mohammed Ben Sulayem (UAE)// Ronan Morgan (IRL) Toyota Celica GT4
1992 Saeed al-Hajri (QAT)/Mike Corner (GBR) Toyota Celica GT4
1993 Nasser Khalifa al-Attiyah (QAT)/Mubarak al-Hajri (QAT) Toyota Celica GT4
1994 Suhail Bin Khalifa Al-Maktoum (UAE)/Khaled Malik (UAE) Toyota Celica Turbo
1995 Khalifa al-Mutawei (UAE)/Mubarak al-Hajri (QAT) Toyota Celica Turbo 4WD
1996 Mohammed Ben Sulayem (UAE)/Ronan Morgan (IRL) Ford Escort RS Cosworth
1997 Mohammed Ben Sulayem (UAE)/Ronan Morgan (IRL) Ford Escort RS Cosworth
1998 Mohammed Ben Sulayem (UAE)/Ronan Morgan (IRL) Ford Escort WRC
1999 Nizar al-Shanfari (OMN)/Tom Steele (GBR) Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution V
2000 Mohammed Ben Sulayem (UAE)/Ronan Morgan (IRL) Ford Focus WRC
2001 Mohammed Ben Sulayem (UAE)/Khaled Zakaria (JOR) Ford Focus WRC

2002 Mohammed Ben Sulayem (UAE)/John Spiller (GBR) Ford Focus WRC
2003 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Steve Lancaster (GBR) Subaru Impreza WRC
2004 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Chris Patterson (GBR) Subaru Impreza WRX STI
2005 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Chris Patterson (GBR) Subaru Impreza WRX
2006 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Chris Patterson (GBR) Subaru Impreza WRX STI
2007 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Chris Patterson (GBR) Subaru Impreza WRX
2008 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Chris Patterson (GBR) Subaru Impreza N14
2009 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Tina Thörner (SWE) Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution
2010 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Giovanni Bernacchini (ITA) Ford Fiesta S2000
2011 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Giovanni Bernacchini (ITA) Ford Fiesta S2000
2012 Abdulaziz al-Kuwari (QAT)/Nasser al-Kuwari (QAT) Mini S2000
2013 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Giovanni Bernacchini (ITA) Ford Fiesta RRC

2014 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Giovanni Bernacchini (ITA) Ford Fiesta RRC
2015 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Mathieu Baumel (FRA) Ford Fiesta
2016 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Mathieu Baumel (FRA) Skoda Fabia R5 RRC
2017 Rashed al-Naimi (QAT)/Hugo Magalhaes (PRT) Subaru Impreza WRX STI (MERC 2)
2018 Vojtech Staff (CZE)/Veronika Havelkova (CZE) Skoda Fabia R5
2019 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Mathieu Baumel (FRA) Volkswagen Polo GTI R5
2020 Cancelled - Covid-19
2021 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Mathieu Baumel (FRA) Volkswagen Polo GTI R5
2022 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Mathieu Baumel (FRA) Volkswagen Polo GTI
2023 Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Mathieu Baumel (FRA) Volkswagen Polo GTI
2024 Pierre-Louis Loubet (FRA)/Loris Pascaud (FRA) Skoda Fabia R5 Rally2
*denotes MERC candidate event
+not a round of MERC

win for the first time in 2003. I raced the full championship with a WRC Prodrive Subaru and we won the championship for the first time. Then, we started to make our own history. So many changes over the years, from the cars to safety. Now, when you see the old cars compared to the new ones, you don't want to jump in the older ones. We are happy about the safety of the new cars. We talk about the Rally 2 car. That is faster than even the WRC car from 2015 and 2016."

Bernacchini is working as team co-ordinator for the 1993 event winner Nasser Khalifa al-Atya this weekend. The Italian said: "This rally is one of the best in the

Middle East with typical desert conditions. I won here four times. That was good memories but I didn't just make this rally with Nasser Saleh. I made it with Nasser Khalifa. My first rally here was actually in 2009 with Faisal al-Attiyah, so almost with all the family I made this rally.

"There has been a big improvement. It is very difficult to see the way on desert roads. But the QMMF now marks the stages properly with flags and fences. When I first started it was very difficult with just corners to manage the co-driving. Now, even though it is a desert rally, you can see the roads from afar. The fact we also have Lusail and the QMMF HQ

and the super special stage all very close is now very good."

Nasser bin Talibe al-Marri has been following the Qatar International Rally since he was a young boy and has a regular blog on social media portraying archive of the MERC. Speaking at Lusail, the Qatari said: "I remember my first event was in 1976. The start was at the Khalifa Stadium. I was around six-years-old and I came with my brother. Then I came again in '78 and then in 1983.

"I spectated on all those rallies. Then I was with my brother from 1995 and with the federation (QMMF) in 2004 and 2005 until 2010. The Middle East is not like be-

fore but everything has improved. Before, for many years, everything to do with the rally was at the Ramada in Doha and now we have the circuit and the modern facilities and that has changed everything."

The 50th anniversary 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 a full reconnaissance of the six different gravel special stages in the northern desert. Vehicles will also pass technical scrutineering checks at the Lusail International Circuit.

FOOTBALL

Manager Arteta 'disappointed' by Arsenal's failure to sign a new striker

AFP
London

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta has admitted he is "disappointed" by the club's failure to sign a new striker before the transfer window closed on Monday. Arsenal were unable to lure England forward Ollie Watkins away from Aston Villa after their £60m bid was rejected last week.

Having failed to pivot to another deal after the Watkins snub, the Gunners ended the January window with questions about a forward line weakened by long-term injuries to Gabriel Jesus and Bukayo Saka.

Ahead of today's League Cup semi-final second leg at Newcastle, Arteta conceded the lack of transfer activity was frustrating.

"We talked very openly about the intention to improve the squad if we had the capacity. With players with injuries, we've been impacted and we haven't achieved it," Arteta told reporters. "We are disappointed in that sense but as well we are very aware that we only want to bring certain kinds of players. We couldn't do it for certain reasons and we have to accept it. It was a combination of things. We have to be very disciplined with that as well."

Arsenal operated in the window without their former sporting director Edu, who resigned in November after playing a key role in their transfer policy. Edu was a close ally of Arteta but the Spaniard insisted he had no complaints about Arsenal's recruitment process despite their unsuccessful striker hunt. "When you try your best and do things with the right process, and after you don't achieve it, OK. For sure there are things to learn from it but now we have to move on," he said.

While Arsenal have to cope with an under-strength attack for now, they showed no signs of being affected in Sunday's 5-1 demolition of



Arsenal have a mountain to climb against Newcastle at St James' Park today after losing the first leg of the League Cup 2-0 at home in January

Manchester City. German forward Kai Havertz and teenage attacking midfielder Ethan Nwaneri both netted against City and Arteta remains confident in the players at his disposal.

"From now there is no discussion on it and we focus on improving the group we have. It is remarkable what the team has done. I have full faith in them," he said. "We are going to have to be flexible in the front line. We have to make sure they stay fit, contributing, and can play that position. At some point we will have to try something different."

Arsenal have a mountain to climb at St James' Park on Wednesday after losing the first leg 2-0 at home in January. Newcastle also beat

the Gunners 1-0 in the Premier League in November. "They are a very difficult team to play against. Obviously this season two very different games," Arteta said.

He hopes the rout of City will be a confidence boost for his team as they chase a first League Cup final appearance since 2018. "When you compare the emotional state of the team after the first leg and now after Man City it is very different. Next stop is the final. We know how big that is," said Arteta, whose club have not won the League Cup since 1993.

"The buzz the City game gave us and the manner we did it. It is momentum. It is time for full gas and go for it."

SPOTLIGHT

Mbappe out for Real Madrid cup game

AFP
Madrid

Carlo Ancelotti said Kylian Mbappe would miss Real Madrid's upcoming Copa del Rey quarter-final against Leganes with a bruised calf and backed his club's complaints about Spanish refereeing yesterday.

French striker Mbappe was hacked down by Espanyol's Carlos Romero during their 1-0 La Liga defeat on Saturday with the defender avoiding a red card and going on to score the winning goal against the league leaders. On Monday, Madrid sent a letter to the Spanish football federation blasting refereeing in Spain as "rigged" and "completely discredited".

"Mbappe started to train today, yesterday we gave him an extra day of recovery," Ancelotti told reporters. "He has a bruised calf, he trained normally but tomorrow he will not be available for the game."

Ancelotti said the decision not to send off Romero was "inexplicable" after the game and reiterated his point ahead of the Leganes clash. "We're talking about something that's inexplicable, we're talking above all about the welfare of the players, and what Madrid's message asks for is an explanation, and that seems right to me," said Ancelotti. "We want an explanation about what happened and why nothing was

done to look after the welfare of the player."

Ancelotti also said Jude Bellingham was set to miss the Leganes game with a knock, along with David Alaba, who was ruled out with a thigh injury earlier. The Austrian defender will miss between two and three weeks, according to Ancelotti.

Alaba, only recently back from a year-long knee injury absence, will be unavailable for the derby clash in La Liga against Atletico Madrid on Saturday and is unlikely to feature in the Champions League play-off tie against Manchester City.

Los Blancos travel to face the Premier League side in Manchester on February 11 and then host the second leg on February 19. Antonio Rudiger is a major doubt for the game with another thigh injury, leaving youngster Raul Asencio and midfielder Aurelien Tchouameni as Madrid's likely centre-back pairing.

Eder Militao and Dani Carvajal are long-term injury absentees for Madrid in defence. "Unfortunately in the last two days we've lost two important players, that's something we did not contemplate... Alaba was ready to play tomorrow, as he had good feelings," said Ancelotti.

"It's a moment of emergency which we have to bear out, because these are small problems, Alaba will be out for 15-20 days, Rudiger the same, so we have to deal with it with (the players) we have."