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Gill and Iyer lead the way as India beat England in first ODI



HORSE RACING | Page 3

Ginkeau claims Al Arish Cup in a thrilling finish

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SPORT



GOLF

Robinson-Thompson, Neergaard-Petersen share early lead at Qatar Masters

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Sheikh Joaan meets China's Sport Minister and Qatar delegation at Asian Winter Games





The Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) President HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, met yesterday with China's Minister of Sport and President of the Chinese Olympic Committee Gao Zhidan, on the sidelines of the 9th Asian Winter Games – Harbin 2025. The discussion focused on strengthening sports co-operation and exploring various areas of mutual interest, including knowledge exchange in the coming phase. The meeting was also attended by the QOC Second Vice-President Dr Thani bin Abdulrahman al-Kuwari and the QOC Secretary-General Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain. Later, HE Sheikh Joaan also met Qatar's delegation competing at the Asian Winter Games – Harbin 2025, which will officially begin today. During the meeting, HE Sheikh Joaan urged team Qatar athletes to give their best and showcase performances that reflect Qatar's sporting excellence. The meeting was also attended by President of the Qatar Winter Sports Committee Rashid Majed al-Sulaiti and members of the Qatar's administrative delegation at the Games.

MIDDLE EAST RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

Al-Attiyah fastest on opening SSS at Qatar International Rally

QMMF President al-Mannai joined by legends of Qatar Rally for presentation of 50 years of the event

By Sports Reporter
Lusail



Minister of Sports and Youth HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, QMMF's President Abdulrahman al-Mannai, Qatar's rally ace Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah, rally legend Saeed al-Hajri, veteran drivers Sadoon al-Kuwari and Jaber al-Marri pose during the start ceremony of the Qatar International Rally at Lusail Boulevard yesterday.

Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and Candido Carrera carded a time of 4min 46.9sec to edge into a 4.1-second lead after the opening 4.36km super special stage of the Qatar International Rally last night.

The timed test at the LCSC Karting Academy followed the official start ceremony for the second round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) at Lusail Boulevard, north of Doha.

Shortly after the pre-event press conference for 10 of the leading drivers that was chaired by Amro al-Hamed, Executive Director of the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF), the QMMF's President Abdulrahman al-Mannai was joined on the podium by several legends of former Qatar rallies.

To mark the 50-year history since its inauguration in 1975, al-Mannai presented a framed photograph to six-time winner and Qatari rallying legend Saeed al-Hajri, Sadoon al-Kuwari (a former local driver, organiser and father of Abdulaziz and Nasser al-Kuwari) and regular former competitor Jaber al-Marri.

The 1993 winner, current competitor and former QMMF president Nasser Khalifa al-Atya and Prodrive's Chairman David Richards – the brainchild behind the formation of the Rothmans Rally Team in the early 1980s, the first Gulf Championship and the very start of the MERC – also received framed photographs on the start podium.

Twenty-eight teams and competitors from 19 countries then took the start and headed to Lusail for the opening stage. Abdullah al-Rawahi and Ata al-Hmoud finished second and Abdulaziz al-Kuwari and Lorcan Moore were third. Mads Østberg and Sergiu Itu were the quickest crew in the stage but were docked 10 seconds for clipping a couple of cones and slipped to fourth.

Speaking about the two days of desert action ahead, al-Attiyah said: "The stages are the same as last year with just a few kilometres changed and the same starts and same finishes. The team have done a good job. There have been big steps forward. There are some rough places, of course, this is Qatar. The rally is always like this. That is part of the challenge. The weekend will be very interesting. It is nice we have the 50th anniversary of the event. I did the rally in 1990, 1991 and 1993 and then every time since 2003. This is my 25th Qatar Rally!"

Saudi driver Rakan al-Rashed is competing in Qatar for the first time with the 2017 event-winning co-driver Hugo Magalhaes.

He finished fifth on the opening test in his Toyota GR Yaris Rally 2. Ahmad Khaled is chasing MERC2 honours this season and is keen to bounce back after retiring his Mitsubishi in Oman two weeks ago. The Lebanese finished ninth on the opening stage.

Qatar Motorsport Academy Stars Programme winners, Mohammed al-Marri and Saad al-Harqan, both safely negotiated their first ever competitive stage in their Peugeot 208 Rally4s. Today crews head north of Lusail to tackle two loops of three special stages. Action begins at 8.53km with a run through the Waab Al-Mashrab stage and passes through Al Waab (9.20am) and Al Khor (10am) complete a rapid-fire morning loop before the return to Lusail for a late morning regroup and service.

The re-run of Waab Al-Mashrab gets the afternoon action underway at 12:43pm and the other two stages are repeated at 13:10pm and 13:50pm.

TOP 10 POSITIONS AFTER SS1

1. Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Candido Carrera (ESP) Skoda Fabia RS Rally 2; Time: 4min 46.9sec
2. Abdullah al-Rawahi (OMA)/Ata al-Hmoud (JOR) Skoda Fabia RS Rally 2; 4min 51.0sec
3. Abdulaziz al-Kuwari (QAT)/Lorcan Moore (IRL) Citroen C3 Rally 2; 4min 51.7sec
4. Mads Ostberg (NOR)/Sergiu Itu (ROU) Škoda Fabia RS Rally 2; 4min 51.8sec*
5. Rakan al-Rashed (KSA)/Hugo Magalhaes (POR) Toyota GR Yaris Rally 2; 5min 3.7sec
6. Nasser Khalifa al-Attiyah (QAT)/Ziad Chehab (LBN) Ford Fiesta Mk II Rally 2; 5min 04.7sec
7. Christiano Gabbarrini (ITA)/Alessandro Forni (ITA) Subaru Impreza WRX STi; 5min 07.7sec*
8. Simone Temeroli (SMR)/Davide Simoncini (SMR) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX; 5min 07.7sec*
9. Ahmad Khaled (LBN)/Samer Sfeir (LBN) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 5min 09.3sec
10. Zakariya al-Aamri (OMA)/Mohammed al-Mazroui (OMA) Subaru Impreza N14; 5min 13.7sec

***denotes not registered for the MERC**



Amro al-Hamed, Executive Director of the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF), speaks at the pre-event press conference with the 10 leading drivers.

CRICKET

MATCH REPORT

Gill and Iyer lead the way as India beat England

INDIAN CAPTAIN ROHIT SHARMA FAILS WITH THE BAT AGAIN

Reuters
Nagpur

Shubman Gill, Shreyas Iyer and Axar Patel smashed half-centuries as India defeated England by four wickets in the opening one-day international yesterday and took a 1-0 lead in the three-match series that is a warmup for the Champions Trophy.

Chasing 249 for victory after Jos Buttler had scored 52 and Jacob Bethell contributed 51 to boost England's total following a wobble midway through the innings, India reached their target with 68 balls to spare.

Gill overcame cramp to make 87 and take India close to the finish line on a two-paced, turning wicket at Nagpur's Vidarbha Cricket Association Stadium after Patel scored 52 in a 108-run stand for the fourth wicket.

Yashasvi Jaiswal came into the eleven after Virat Kohli was ruled out due to a sore right knee but was out for 15 following a probing early spell by Jofra Archer while out-of-form captain Rohit Sharma fell for two to Saqib Mahmood.

Iyer blasted two consecutive sixes off Archer in the seventh over en route to an entertaining fifty and after he departed for 59, Gill played a controlled knock with exquisite shots on both sides but holed out to Mahmood while looking to accelerate.

Ravindra Jadeja (12 not out) and Hardik Pandya (nine not out) then took the hosts home.

"We're pretty happy because we knew we were coming back after a long time to this format," Rohit said of his team's first match in 50-over cricket since August.



India's Shubman Gill plays a shot during the first one-day international against England at the Vidarbha Cricket Association Stadium in Nagpur yesterday. *(AFP)*

"We wanted to quickly regroup and understand what is to be done. We didn't start well with their openers putting pressure on us, but the way we came back was superb.

"This is a slightly longer format where you have time to come back. When things start to go away from you, it doesn't mean it will keep going away."

England elected to bat after winning the toss and went into attack mode early when Phil Salt plundered 26 runs in the sixth over bowled by Harshit Rana, before the tourists cruised to 71 for no loss after eight overs.

India struck against the run of play when a mix-up led to Salt being run out for 43 while opening partner Ben Duckett was out for 32 after Jaiswal produced a brilliant running catch to hand fellow ODI debutant Rana his first wicket.

Rana then dismissed Harry Brook for a duck three balls later before Joe Root, who returned to the ODI fold for the first time since England's ill-fated World Cup title defence in 2023, was trapped lbw by Jadeja for 19.

Skipper Buttler and Bethell revived England's innings with battling half-centuries but the hosts kept taking timely wickets to ensure their opponents were bowled out for 248, with Jadeja picking up 3-26 and Rana finishing on 3-53.

"Obviously disappointed not to win," Buttler said.

"We got off to a fantastic start, the two guys (Salt and Duckett) were very aggressive in the powerplay. Losing four wickets so close together put us back.

"When you see the way the wicket played, another 40 or 50 runs could have been crucial."

The second ODI takes place in Cuttack on Sunday before the finale in Ahmedabad on February 12. It will be followed by the eight-team Champions Trophy beginning February 19 in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

BRIEF SCORES
India 251 for 6 (Gill 87, Shreyas 59, Axar 52, Rashid 2-49) **beat England 248** (Buttler 52, Bethell 51, Jadeja 3-26) **by four wickets.**

ANNOUNCEMENT

Stoinis retires from ODIs; Cummins, Hazlewood to miss Champions Trophy

Reuters
Melbourne

Australia all-rounder **Marcus Stoinis** has retired from one-day internationals with immediate effect to focus on T20 cricket, pulling out of the country's Champions Trophy squad.

Australia will need to make four changes to their preliminary Champions Trophy squad after skipper Pat Cummins and fellow fast bowler Josh Hazlewood were ruled out of the eight-team tournament which begins later this month.

All-rounder Mitchell Marsh had already been ruled out of the tournament with a lower back problem while Cummins (ankle) and Hazlewood (hip) are nursing injuries.

"Playing ODI cricket for Australia has been an incredible journey, and I'm grateful for every moment I've had in the green and gold," Stoinis, 35, said in a Cricket Australia media release yesterday.

"Representing my country at the highest level is something I'll always cherish.

"This wasn't an easy decision, but I believe it's the right time for me to step away from ODIs and fully focus on the next chapter of my career."

Stoinis was a member of Australia's World Cup-winning squad at the 2023 tournament in India but was dropped in favour of Marnus Labuschagne for the semi-final and the decider against the hosts.

He was later dropped from the ODI squad entirely before earning a recall last October for the white-ball series against Pakistan.

Although featuring only once in the Pakistan series in Perth in November, his first ODI in a year, Stoinis earned a spot in the Champions Trophy squad for the tournament co-hosted by Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

Australia also have to find replacements for Cummins, Hazlewood and Marsh who have all failed to recover in time.

"Unfortunately Pat, Josh and Mitch are managing some ongoing injuries and haven't come up in time for the Champions Trophy," national selection panel chair George Bailey said.

"While disappointing, it does present a great opportunity for other players to perform for Australia in a world event," Bailey, a former Australia skipper, added.

Coach and selector Andrew McDonald was effusive in his praise for Stoinis.

"Stoinis has been such a pivotal part of our ODI setup for the past decade," he said in the Cricket Australia release.

"Not only has he been an invaluable player but also an incredible person to have in the group. He is a natural leader, an exceptionally popular player and a great person.

"He should be congratulated on his ODI career and all of his achievements."



SPOTLIGHT

Australia bowlers shine as Sri Lanka struggle to reach 229-9



Sri Lanka's Dinesh Chandimal watches the ball after playing a shot during the first day of second Test against Australia at the Galle International Cricket Stadium in Galle yesterday. *(AFP)*

AFP
Galle, Sri Lanka

Australia were firmly in the driving seat despite a spirited Sri Lankan fightback to reach 229-9 at stumps on day one of the second Test in Galle yesterday.

Mitchell Starc and Nathan Lyon took three wickets apiece.

Sri Lanka, who won the toss and opted to bat, had looked to be in control at 93-1 – putting behind them the loss of the first Test by an innings and 242 runs last week.

But Dimuth Karunaratne – in his 100th and final Test – was slow to bring his bat down, dragging a ball from Lyon on to his stumps for 36 and handing Australia a crucial breakthrough.

The hosts soon nosedived to 127-5 during a chaotic hour that left Sri Lanka reeling.

Amidst the ruins, Dinesh Chandimal stood tall. Sri Lanka's standout performer in the first Test amid the wreckage, Chandimal waged a lone battle with a defiant, back-to-the-wall 74, peppered with six boundaries and a towering six.

Just as he looked set to take Sri Lanka to safer shores, Alex Carey produced a moment of brilliance – stumping Chandimal off left-arm spinner Matthew Kuhnemann to send alarm bells ringing.

Australia spin bowling coach Daniel Vettori paid tribute to Chandimal, who he said played "exceptionally well", but said that Sri Lanka had been "a lot more aggressive in the first Test".

The only remaining recognised batter, Kusal Mendis, found a willing ally in off-spinner Ramesh Mendis.

Recalled to the side for this crucial clash, Ramesh played the perfect supporting act, adding a vital 65-run stand for the seventh wicket with his namesake.

The Australians threw everything at them, but the duo held firm, negotiating the sharp turn and extra bounce with aplomb.

While Ramesh was rock-solid in defence, Kusal took a more aggressive route.

The tourists, frustrated by their inability to break the stand, eventually turned to the second new ball - and Starc delivered with immediate effect.

Speeds north of 145 kph

Steaming in at speeds north of 145 kph, Starc was relentless, with Ramesh edging one behind.

The left-arm quick struck again off the very next delivery, with Prabath Jayasuriya feathering one to the slip cordon, leaving the Australians sniffing a collapse.

With Starc on a hat-trick, Nishan Peiris walked in under immense pressure – and was bowled by Kuhnemann.

Meanwhile, Kusal Mendis kept the scoreboard ticking and reached his well-earned half-century with a single to long-off.

Sri Lanka batting coach Thilina Kandamby said the second session had been "disappointing" and that Australia had taken "a firm grip on the game".

"Given the scenario of the game, we will be happy if Kusal Mendis is able to help us to get to 275", he said.

Hundreds of Australian supporters have travelled to Galle, with former players Geoff Marsh and Merv Hughes leading large touring contingents.

Sri Lanka made three changes to the side that slumped to their heaviest Test defeat in the series opener, bringing in opener Pathum Nissanka, fast bowler Lahiru Kumara and Ramesh Mendis.

Australia handed a debut to 21-year-old all-rounder Cooper Connolly in place of Todd Murphy.

BRIEF SCORES (Second Test, Day 1)
Sri Lanka 229 for 9 (Chandimal 74, K Mendis 59*, Starc 3-37, Lyon 3-78) **vs Australia** (yet to bat)

Sunrisers to buy Yorkshire Hundred franchise for reported £100mn

London: Indian Premier League side Sunrisers Hyderabad are set to become the first 100 percent owners of an English cricket Hundred franchise after agreeing to buy Yorkshire's Northern Superchargers for a reported £100mn ($125mn).

The Sun Group are the third investors into the eight-team Hundred from the lucrative IPL, following the Ambani family, whose Reliance Industries are behind the Mumbai Indians, and RPSG, in charge of the Lucknow Super Giants.

But the BBC reported Wednesday they would be the first organisation to buy an entire Hundred team.

"We are delighted to be entering into an exclusivity period with the Sun Group, and will be continuing our conversations with them in the coming weeks with a view to setting the Northern Superchargers up for long-term and sustained success," Yorkshire chief executive Sanjay Patel said.

Patel, previously the managing director of the Hundred, added: "It is clear that they are aligned to the values and future direction of the club and will play a huge part in ensuring we can go on to achieve great success in the coming years."

Selling the Superchargers could help Yorkshire, one of the cornerstones of English cricket, clear a £15mn debt the club owes to a trust established by chairman Colin Graves.

All deals now enter an eight-week exclusivity period in order to finalise the partnerships.

The Superchargers have yet to enjoy much success in the Hundred, a 100 balls per side competition where teams field both men's and women's sides. But they do have high-profile figures in men's head coach Andrew Flintoff and star players such as Harry Brook and Adil Rashid.

The Ambanis have negotiated a reported £60mn fee with Surrey for a 49 percent stake in the Oval Invincibles, while Manchester Originals have joined forces with RPSG.

If GMR, who already own both IPL side Delhi Capitals and English county Hampshire, acquire a 49 percent share in Southern Brave it will mean four of the eight Hundred teams are bankrolled by Indian finance.

The England and Wales Cricket Board, who have so far declined to comment, are seeking partners for 49 percent stakes in each Hundred team, with the host clubs gifted the other 51 percent.

Last week, a Silicon Valley consortium led by Nikesh Arora, an Indian-American who heads up US cyber-security company Palo Alto Networks, agreed to buy 49 percent of the Lord's-based London Spirit franchise for a reported £145mn.

Warwickshire and Glamorgan, meanwhile, have also agreed 49 percent deals for the Birmingham Phoenix and Welsh Fire respectively, with a stake in Trent Rockets up for grabs as well.

The six sales so far come to an estimated total of £466mn, the majority of which will be split among the 18 first-class counties, Lord's owners Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) and the recreational game.

The Hundred is controversial as it deprives established teams of key players at the height of the season. But the ECB insist funds raised from sales of Hundred stakes will support the 18 traditional counties.

FOCUS

McBrine lifts Ireland after Muzarabani firestorm

AFP
Bulawayo

Andy McBrine struck a Test best 90 not out as Ireland recovered from a dismal start to post 260 all out yesterday on the first day of a one-off match against Zimbabwe in Bulawayo.

Zimbabwe were 72 for one in reply at the close – 188 runs behind – with debutant Nick Welch (33) and Takudzwanashe Kaitano (26) both unbeaten. With Zimbabwe fast bowler Blessing Muzarabani in superb form, the tourists, who won the toss and chose to bat first at Queens Sports Club, were reeling at 31 for five when McBrine joined Lorcan Tucker.

After seeing off Muzarabani, who took four of the first five including captain Andy Balbirnie (9) and star batsman Paul Stirling (10) and finished with 7-58, they stabilised the innings with a sixth-wicket partnership of 51.

When Tucker was bowled off an inside edge by Trevor Gwandu for 33, McBrine knuckled down again with Mark Adair to add 127 for the seventh wicket. Adair took the fight to the Zimbabwe bowlers, reaching his 50 from 48 balls.

BRIEF SCORES
Ireland 260 all out in 56.4 overs (A. McBrine 90 not out, M. Adair 78; B. Muzarabani 7-58, R. Ngarava 2-65) **v Zimbabwe 72-1 in 21 overs** (N. Welch 33 not out, T. Kaitano 26 not out) **Toss:** Ireland

HORSE RACING

Ginkeau gallops to Al Arish Cup glory

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Osama Omer E al-Dafea-owned and trained Ginkeau showcased his fighting spirit once again as he claimed the Al Arish Cup in a thrilling finish at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

The nine-year-old veteran warrior dug deep in a thrilling finish to edged out Taymoor Al Shahania by a head to land the 1300m Purebred Arabian Conditions for four-year-old+ and secured a second consecutive win under Soufiane Saadi. Ginkeau won the Purebred Arabian Handicap 75-95 (class 3) on the Al Waab Cup day on January 29.

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

In the penultimate race of the day, Hamad Nasser al-Naimi's Saqr emerged winner. In the 1400m contest, Jockey Jefferson Smith guided the Ahmed Kobeissi-trained horse to a neck's margin victory in the Purebred Arabian Handicap (65-85) for four-year-olds+. Faleh Suwayed BS AL Ajami's Veverka Py came second.

Khalid Abdulaziz AA al-Kuwari-owned and trained Selous, under jockey Alberto Sanna, won the 1400m race for the thoroughbred Handicap (70-90) for the four-year-old+ by a length to give the jockey a double on the day. In the day's opener, Sanna rode Injaaz Stud's Ensyaaby to two-length victory in the 2300m race for the Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate for the four-year-olds. Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki-owned and trained, Funny Bunny registered victory in the second race of the day when Youssef Lachhab guided the four-year-old brown gelding to victory in the Thoroughbred Handicap (45-65), for-three-year-old+ in the 2100m contest.

Results
15th Al Uqda Race Meeting - Al Arish Cup



Soufiane Saadi guides Ginkeau to a thrilling win at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. **PICTURES**: *Juhaim*



Connections of Ginkeau celebrate after the nine-year-old won the Al Arish Cup at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

Al Arish Cup, Purebred Arabian Conditions, 4YO+, 1300m
Ginkeau, Osama Omer E al-Dafea, Soufiane Saadi
Purebred Arabian Handicap (65-85), 4YO+, 1400m
Saq, Ahmed Kobeissi, Jefferson Smith
Thoroughbred Handicap (70-90), 4YO+, 1400m
Selous, Khalid Abdulaziz AA al-Kuwari, Alberto Sanna
Thoroughbred Handicap (70-90), 4YO+, 2100m
Yardan, Mohammed Hassan al-Matwi, Abdulla Rashid al-Hajri
Local Thoroughbred Handicap (40-65), 3YO+, 1400m
Al Harqah, Alanoud Khalifa AA al-Malki, Youssef Lachhab
Thoroughbred Handicap (45-65), 3YO+, 2100m
Funny Bunny, Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, Youssef Lachhab
Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate, 4-6YOs, 2300m
Ensyaaby, Julian Smartm Alberto Sanna

FOCUS

Bach says Italy 'ready' to host Winter Olympics

'Italy is ready to write the next chapter of its great Olympic history'

AFP
Milan, Italy

Thomas Bach said Italy is ready to host next year's Winter Olympics as the one-year countdown to the sprawling Milan-Cortina Games began at an event in Italy's economic capital yesterday.

International Olympic Committee (IOC) chief Bach asked representatives from Italy and five other national committees including the USA to join him on stage at Milan's Strehler Theatre to receive invitations to the 2026 Olympics, which will be his last as arguably the most powerful person in global sport.

"Italy is ready to write the next chapter of its great Olympic history," said Bach during the ceremony for the 25th Winter Olympics, the third in Italy after Cortina d'Ampezzo in 1956 and Turin in 2006.

Bach later insisted that the much-contested bobsleigh track for the Games in Cortina d'Ampezzo, on which construction work only began a year ago, will be completed in time for an approval deadline next month.

Asked if all venues would be ready on schedule, Bach simply said "yes", and was equally monosyllabic on whether there were any chance the sliding events could be moved to the back-up venue of Lake Placid, some 6,000 kilometres (3,728 miles) away in the United States.

"No," said 71-year-old Bach, who also praised the head of Italy's hard-right government Giorgia Meloni for her "great leadership" after meeting with her in Rome on Wednesday.

Bach will step down as IOC chief in June after 12 years in charge, with a gaggle of contenders vying to replace the German former Olympic fencing champion in a vote on March 20 in Costa Navarino, Greece. Those candidates include World Athletics president Sebastian Coe, former swimmer Kirsty Coventry and IOC veteran Juan Antonio Samaranch Junior, the latter of whom who is seeking to emulate his father who was president from 1980 to 2001.



The President of the International Olympic Committee Thomas Bach attends a ceremony to mark one year until the start of Milano Cortina Olympics in Strehler Theatre, in Milan, ahead of the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games. *(AFP)*

Bach was coy in his assessment of the fight put up by the seven candidates for the votes of the 100-plus members of the IOC.

"You have to ask the candidates. I am an observer there," Bach told reporters.

"I see them running around, making contacts with the IOC members. I can feel with them because I had to do the same 12 years ago. So they have all my support and sometimes also my compassion." Bach said next year's Games will be the first to fully embody his agenda to make events less reliant on the building of new venues and in general have a smaller impact on the environment.

Eleven of the 13 venues already exist, but the event is spread over a vast area that extends from Milan in north-western Italy to the upmarket ski resort of Cortina d'Ampezzo, hundreds of kilometres away in the Dolomite mountains.

Bormio and Cortina will host alpine skiing, Anterselva the biathlon, Val di Fiemme the Nordic skiing and Livigno the snowboarding and freestyle skiing, all familiar ground for the athletes as they host World Cup events every winter.

The one black mark was the bobsleigh track, which Bach and organisers are now publicly claiming will be completed in record time after political interference from Meloni's government stopped the sliding events being held outside Italy.

Organisers had to roll back on an unprecedented decision to move those events outside the host nation after no initial bidders were found to renovate the existing Eugenio Monti track, which was immortalised in the 1981 James Bond film *For Your Eyes Only*. Work eventually began in February last year to deliver a new, winding 1,650-metre (5,413-foot) track with 16 bends and complex refrigeration systems for next month.

SPOTLIGHT

Red Bull Dune Rush is landing in Qatar for an off-road showdown

The off-road showdown, Red Bull Dune Rush, is landing in the golden sands of Qatar. This high-intensity event sees 4x4 drivers push their limits in an adrenaline-fuelled, multi-stage competition through the breathtaking dunes of Sealine, Mesaieed.

Amateur racers and seasoned off-roaders alike are invited to battle it out in a test of speed, precision, and raw skill, all in hopes of dominating the dunes, mastering the terrain, and becoming a desert legend.

Set against the stunning backdrop of the QMMF Survival Track, Red Bull Dune Rush is a true test of off-road capability. The competition consists of three intense stages: During the first stage, drivers must find the fastest route from Point A to Point B.

In the second stage, drivers will need to carefully manoeuvre their vehicles over the crest of the dunes while passing through designated gates. Finally, in stage three, competitors must skilfully navigate their way out by weaving through an "S"-shaped course of gates from a stationary position. This final stage separates the great from the good, demanding patience, technique, and masterful vehicle handling to secure a place on the podium.

The event begins early Friday morning, February 21, with a practice lap at 7:00am., and by 8:00am, the race is officially underway.

Each competitor's position on the starting line will be determined upon arrival, and every race begins with a dead-engine start, where drivers must fire up their vehicles and launch into action the moment the signal is given.

Fans and spectators can expect heart-stopping moments, dramatic upsets, and unforgettable performances as the desert becomes the ultimate battleground.

Red Bull Dune Rush is held in partnership with QMMF (Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation), Maverix, Promomedia, ILoveQatar, and Al Meera. To stay up to date on the event, fans can visit *www.redbull.com/dunerush*

TENNIS

Tsitsipas battles past valiant Griekspoor

AFP
Rotterdam, Netherlands



Stefanos Tsitsipas saved a match point and battled from a set down to advance into the quarter-finals of the Rotterdam Open yesterday with a gruelling win over local hope Tallon Griekspoor.

The world number 12 eventually overcame spirited resistance from the Dutchman with a 6-7 (7-5), 7-6 (8-6), 7-5 victory in a match lasting around three hours.

"I feel like I was here for 10 hours today. I felt like me and Tallon played for ages and I feel like it was a marathon. We started yesterday and finished today," he joked.

"I always felt that he brought the best out of me. We were both fighting pretty well out on the court. These are matches that are going to be remembered."

Tsitsipas now faces a quarter-final clash with Italian qualifier Mattia Bellucci, who shocked second seed Daniil Medvedev in a marathon three-setter on Wednesday.

Also through to the quarter-finals in the bottom half of the draw was last year's runner-up Alex de Minaur, who defeated Czech teenager Jakub Mensik 6-4, 6-4.

Top seed Carlos Alcaraz will be hoping to avoid Medvedev's fate when he takes on another Italian qualifier, Andrea Vavassori in Thursday's late-night match.

BOTTOMLINE

NFL to play 2026 regular-season game at MCG

AFP
New Orleans

The NFL will stage its first ever regular-season game in Australia in the 2026 season with the Melbourne Cricket Ground hosting the contest, the league announced yesterday.

Peter O'Reilly, head of NFL International, said the designated team in that game would be the Los Angeles Rams.

The game at the 100,000-capacity MCG will be part of a "multi-year" arrangement as the league continues its global expansion. O'Reilly indicated that the game could be played in Week One to allow teams plenty of time to acclimatise after the long flight. The NFL has already played regular-season games in London, Munich, Frankfurt, Sao Paulo, Mexico City and Toronto. The NFL can now schedule up to eight league-operated international regular-season games per season.

In 2025, the NFL has confirmed games in London, Berlin and Madrid as part of the international games slate

"Expanding to Melbourne, Australia, a beautiful city with a rich sports history, underlines our ambitions to become a global sport and accelerate international growth," NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell in a statement. "Together with the Victorian State Government, Visit Victoria and the Melbourne Cricket Ground, and with the Los Angeles Rams in 2026, we look forward to making history in what is an important market for the NFL and a significant next step in expanding our international footprint."

NFL International has an office in Australia which has been working on the deal for almost three years and there had been intense efforts from the state government to secure Melbourne as the venue. "We're thrilled the NFL will be touching down in the sporting capital of Australia. Victoria is now the first-ever state in Australia to host a regular season NFL game," said Premier of Victoria Jacinta Allan in the league statement.

RYBAKINA BATTLES PAST JABEUR, INTO ABU DHABI SEMIS

Abu Dhabi: Defending champion Elena Rybakina edged out Ons Jabeur in a deciding-set tie-break yesterday to reach the semi-finals of the Abu Dhabi Open.

The world number five, whose coach Stefano Vukov remains suspended for allegedly breaching the WTA tour's code of conduct, beat Jabeur 6-2, 4-6, 7-6 (7/4). Kazakh Rybakina missed two match points in the 12th game of the third set but kept her cool to see off the challenge of three-time Grand Slam finalist Jabeur.

"It's not easy," Rybakina said. The 2022 Wimbledon champion will next face Switzerland's Belinda Bencic for a place in the final. Bencic reached her first WTA Tour semi-final since returning from maternity leave with a 7-5, 6-3 win over Marketa Vondrousova in a repeat of the Tokyo Olympics final won by the Swiss.

American world number 51 Ashlyn Krueger also made the semi-finals courtesy of a 7-5, 4-6, 6-2 victory against Leylah Fernandez.

Krueger will next face Linda Noskova after the Czech youngster's 6-4, 6-3 win over Poland's Magda Linette.

SPOTLIGHT

Lusail Circuit a premier hub for motorsports: CEO al-Mohannadi

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Lusail International Circuit is all set for another year of mega events in 2025. On Wednesday, Abdulaziz Ali al-Mohannadi - CEO of Lusail International Circuit, announced that the state-of-the-art circuit will be hosting many events this year, starting with the Qatar 1812 KM followed by the MotoGP and later the Qatar Formula Grand Prix besides several regional and local championships including MENA Karting.

Addressing the media, al-Mohannadi, said: "Lusail International Circuit is proud to be a premier hub for motorsports and major events. In 2025, we are set to host various events, including the Qatar 1812 KM race, MotoGP, and Formula 1, along with key regional and local championships. These events go beyond racing—they create unforgettable experiences,



Abdulaziz Ali al-Mohannadi - CEO of Lusail International Circuit

delivering electrifying atmospheres and showcasing motorsport at its finest.

"With the continued support of the media and the unwavering passion of our fans, we are building a lasting sporting legacy that reinforces Qatar's global standing. Our commitment to excellence remains steadfast, ensuring that Lusail International Circuit remains a top destination for motorsports worldwide."

Later, the media was taken on a tour of the 5.38km LIC race track, touted by top F1 drivers and MotoGP riders as the fastest and among the best in the world.

Fatima al-Qaedi - Marketing and Communications Manager, Arthur Gillion - Director of Marketing and Communications, and Andrew Bowers, Director of Commercial and Partnerships, briefed the media about the circuit facilities, ticketing and hospitality measures that make for a gripping experience for the fans.

LIC has been delivering unforgettable experiences that makes it a standout destination in the competitive sports and entertainment landscape.

LIC is more than a motorsport venue—it is a global stage for major sporting events, reinforcing Qatar's position as a premier destination for sports and entertainment. It is positioning Qatar as a leading destination for sports, tourism, and culture.

The FIA Grade 1 and FIM Grade A certified circuit meets the highest global motorsport standards. Originally opened in 2004, with the latest track resurfacing completed in 2024, LIC is 5.38km circuit featuring 16 turns (10 right, 6 left).

The circuit offers three distinct layouts: GP Circuit, Fast Lap Circuit, and Academy Circuit. Beyond motorsport, it serves as a venue for walking, cycling, running, and other activities.

LIC also holds a Guinness World Record for the longest motorsport pitlane building (402.1m). It boasts of state-of-the-art and largest F1 pit garages, featuring 50 pit boxes (22.8m x 6.3m, 129sqm, and 145sqm). Fully air-conditioned with extensive power supply, Epoxy-coated flooring for easy maintenance and efficient vehicle servicing, and three front-facing garage doors and two rear access doors for streamlined operations.

GOLF

Robinson-Thompson, Neergaard-Petersen share lead at DGC

Pavan and Bairstow were in a tie for third one shot behind the co-leaders

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Englishman Brandon Robinson-Thompson drained a 60-foot birdie putt on the eighth - his penultimate hole of the opening day to – to share the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters lead on 6-under par with Denmark's Rasmus Neergaard-Petersen yesterday.

In the morning start, Neergaard-Petersen weathered the tricky conditions at the Doha Golf Club (DGC) and recovered from an opening bogey to post a sensational 66. Italy's Andrea Pavan and England's Sam Bairstow were in a tie for third one shot behind the co-leaders after shooting 67s.

Neergaard-Petersen began the tournament with a bogey but bounced back immediately at the second, holing from eight feet for a birdie. He repeated the trick at the fourth from a similar distance before picking up further shots on the seventh and ninth as he reached the turn in 33. Neergaard-Petersen then made back-to-back birdies from tap-in range at the tenth to get to four under. A 30-foot birdie followed on the 13th before another gain at the 14th took Neergaard-Petersen to six under.

"I'm extremely pleased, even after the bogey at the first. To bounce back like that was huge. I felt really good on the greens today and was able to roll in some putts. It was a lovely day," he said.

The Dane has made a bright start to the new campaign following a stunning 2024 in which he won three times on the European Challenge Tour to earn automatic promotion to the DP World Tour.

"I made a conscious effort this week to try and start fast. I told my caddie, Brian, going into this week that was the main goal, get off to a good start, be under par through six and take it from there," the 25-year-old Dane said.

And despite an early blip in windy conditions, where he dropped a shot at the first hole after missing his 14-foot par putt, Neergaard-Petersen continued his fine recent form as he made seven birdies and no bogeys over the next 17 holes to set the early clubhouse target at six under par.

Robinson Thompson then caught Neergaard-Petersen at the summit late in the



England's Brandon Robinson-Thompson plays a shot on the first day of the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters at the Doha Golf Club in Doha yesterday.

afternoon after draining his 60-foot birdie putt on the eighth - his penultimate hole.

Robinson-Thompson, who smashed the course record as he opened with a 61 in Bahrain last week, had a chance to hold the outright first-round lead for the second week in a row but was unable to make his birdie putt from ten feet on the ninth and had to settle for a share.

"Just a lot of good stuff out there today. Tricky conditions with the wind, but first and foremost the golf course is in unbelievable condition. The guys at Doha Golf Club have done such a good job. I just took advantage of opportunities that came my way," the 32-yearold Englishman said.

Robinson-Thompson started from the tenth tee yesterday and mixed four birdies with one bogey on his way to the turn. After making a ten-foot birdie on the par-five first, he had to wait until the seventh for his next gain before going back-to-back from long range at the eighth.

Three good shots into the long ninth set up a decent birdie chance at his last hole but Robinson- Thompson was unable to convert and had to make do with a closing par.

"The first round is always important, it can get you in the tournament, you can relax and build on it. This is almost like a home game for me. I've been here so many times and I'm so comfortable here," he said.


Rasmus Neergaard-Petersen of Denmark weathered the tricky conditions at the Doha Golf Club and recovered from an opening bogey to post a sensational 66.

Frenchman Pierre Pineau and Armenia's Jean Bekirian were another shot back with two holes still to complete when play was suspended at 5:12pm due to darkness. They will return early in the morning when round one restarts at 7am.

Last week's winner in Bahrain, Laurie Canter finished the round with 4-under par. Thirteen-year-old Daniil Sokolov, a Russian national who represents Qatar and was in the field courtesy of an invitation shot 3-over 75. With the effort he has given himself a chance of making the weekend in just his second appearance in a European tour event.

Sokolov was 2 under after four holes but picked up four bogeys and a double to drop into a tie for 105th when play was suspended with 12 players yet to finish their round. Sokolov also played the Qatar Masters last year at the age of 12, shooting rounds of 78 and 82 to miss the cut.

FOOTBALL

Real Madrid great Marcelo announces retirement

AFP
Rio de Janeiro

Former Real Madrid left-back **Marcelo** announced his retirement from professional football yesterday after a trophy-laden career. The 36-year-old spent 16 years at Spanish giants Madrid, winning six La Liga titles and five Champions League trophies. "At 18, Real Madrid came knocking on my door and I arrived here," Marcelo said in a video posted on social media. "Now, I can proudly say that I am a true 'Madrileno'. What a journey. Real Madrid is a unique club."

Marcelo enjoyed a strong relationship with Cristiano Ronaldo, lifting four Champions Leagues with the five-time Ballon d'Or winner. The pair both scored in the 2014 final victory over Atletico Madrid when Real ended a 12-year wait for their 10th European Cup.



"My brother, what an incredible career! We have lived a lot together, it has been years of achievements, victories and unforgettable moments," Ronaldo said in a post on Instagram. "More than a teammate, a partner for life."

Marcelo also won the Copa del Rey twice and the Club World Cup four times during his time with Los Blancos, for whom he made 546 appearances, scoring 38 goals.

"One of the greatest left-backs in Real Madrid and world football history, and we had the privilege of watching him for a long time," said Real Madrid president Florentino Perez in a statement. "He is one of our greatest legends and Real Madrid is and always will be his home."

Marcelo was an unused substitute in the 2022 Champions League final when his compatriot Vinicius Junior scored the only goal against Liverpool. Marcelo made 58 appearances for the Brazil national team, playing at the 2014 and 2018 World Cups and winning the 2013 Confederations Cup. He was part of the teams that won a silver medal at the 2012 Olympics and bronze in Beijing in 2008.

Marcelo started his career with Brazilian club Fluminense before leaving for Real. When he finally left the Santiago Bernabeu he joined Greek club Olympiakos but terminated his contract after just five months to rejoin Fluminense. Marcelo helped his home team win the Copa Libertadores for the first time with victory over Boca Juniors in the 2023 final. He left the club by mutual consent last November and has not played since.

Real Madrid out to hurt La Liga, playing victim, says Tebas

Madrid: La Liga president Javier Tebas said Spanish champions Real Madrid were playing the victim and have "lost their head" after they attacked refereeing in the country.

Los Blancos were beaten 1-0 at relegation-battling Espanyol on Saturday and subsequently sent a furious letter to the Spanish football federation blasting the country's refereeing as "rigged" and "completely discredited".

League leaders Madrid were upset Espanyol defender Carlos Romero avoided a red card for hacking down striker Kylian Mbappe and went on to score the winning goal. "Real Madrid wants to harm the competition (La Liga), not just the refereeing group," Tebas told reporters. "They have built a story of victimhood and I think the cherry on top was the letter they published the other day... The issue has been blown out of proportion, they have lost their head."

Tebas was speaking after attending a meeting with La Liga clubs, the Spanish federation (RFEF) and representatives of Spain's refereeing committee (CTA). Spanish media said Real Madrid refused to attend the meeting, which was held in order to discuss improvements to football in the country.

MAN UNITED CONFIRM MARTINEZ CRUCIATE LIGAMENT INJURY

Manchester United confirmed defender Lisandro Martinez had sustained cruciate ligament damage, which is likely to rule him out for the rest of the season. The Argentina centre-back, 27, was carried off on a stretcher after his left knee buckled late in Sunday's 2-0 defeat by Crystal Palace at Old Trafford. United boss Ruben Amorim said after Palace match that he thought it was a "serious situation", adding: "Licha is really important for us, not just as a football player but the character he has, especially in this hard moment."

The result left Amorim's side, who host Leicester in the FA Cup on Friday, 13th in the Premier League. United signed left-back Patrick Dorgu from Lecce in the January transfer window but there are fresh doubts over the fitness of defender Luke Shaw, who has not started a game for the club in almost 12 months.

Martinez's injury came almost exactly a year after he sustained a knee injury against West Ham. He returned on March 30 but then suffered a calf problem. The Argentine has played 32 times for United this season.

FOURTH-TIER TEAM IN FRENCH CUP STUNNER

Fourth division Stade Briochin stunned top-flight Nice 2-1 to reach the French Cup quarter-finals on Wednesday with a performance the minnows' coach admitted was beyond his "wildest dreams".

Nice, fifth in Ligue 1 and chasing a place in Europe next season, were ahead in the tie thanks to Tom Louchet's 55th-minute effort. However, Stade Briochin levelled in the 88th minute through Boubacar Diakhaby before Hugo Boudin scored the winner in stoppage time to send the Brittany club through to the last-eight for the first time.

"It's extraordinary. Even in our wildest dreams, we didn't imagine that," admitted coach Guillaume Allanou, who also doubles up as president and sporting director of the club.