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TENNIS / QATAR TOTALENERGIES OPEN 2025

Swiatek starts bid for fourth straight title with easy win

Arab superstar Ons Jabeaur crushes McCartney Kessler in straight sets as Svitolina beats Vondrousova

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Second seed and crowd favourite Iga Swiatek of Poland yesterday relied on her experience to beat Maria Sakkari of Greece in straight sets at the WTA 1000 Qatar TotalEnergies Open.

Aiming to win her fourth successive title in Doha, Swiatek won 6-3, 6-2 in 1 hour 22 minutes on the Centre Court at Khalifa International Tennis Complex.

It was Swiatek's fourth consecutive win over Sakkari, 29, in seven matches on the Tour.

Sakkari, on the other hand, has not been able to put together back-to-back WTA Tour match-wins since Paris Olympics last year.

Swiatek, winner of four French Open titles and one US Open, is aiming to join an elite club of female tennis players by winning the same tournament four years in a row.

If she succeeds, she'll be the first woman to achieve this feat this century, with the exception of Caroline Wozniacki who won in New Haven from 2008-2011.

Since her second-round match against Viktorija Golubic at the 2022 Qatar Open, the 23-year-old Pole hasn't lost a single set at the tournament.

Also yesterday, ninth seed Paula Badosa of Spain beat Renata Zarazua of Mexico in three sets.

Badosa won 6-3, 4-6, 6-2 in 1 hours and 47 minutes. Badosa fired a staggering 14 aces in her feisty win.

With top seed and world No 1 Aryna Sabalenka yet to hit the court, Swiatek yesterday got stalled by a slightly shaky start but recovered in quick fashion to overpower Sakkari.

This match marked Swiatek's return to court after losing to eventual champion Madison Keys in the Australian Open semi-finals last month.

As the world number two, Swiatek is now set to face either Yulia Putintseva of Kazakhstan or Czech teenager Linda Noskova in the round of 16.

"Maria is a great player, and I have a lot of respect for her. We've already played many important matches, so facing her in the second round was tricky," Swiatek said yesterday. "Honestly, I am used to challenging draws at these kind of tournaments because they have smaller fields. You can easily face a Grand Slam champion in the first round, so I was ready from the beginning and prepared for a battle," she added.



Iga Swiatek of Poland in action against Maria Sakkari of Greece during their Qatar TotalEnergies Open match at the Khalifa Tennis Complex in Doha yesterday. Swiatek won 6-3, 6-2. **PICTURES:** *Noushad Thekkayil*



Ons Jabeur of Tunisia gestures during her match against McCartney Kessler of the USA yesterday. Jabeur won 6-2, 6-0.

Tunisia's Jabeur starts Doha journey with commanding win

Arab superstar Jabeur yesterday thrilled the Doha crowds with a 6-2, 6-0 dismissal of McCartney Kessler of the US on Centre Court. The Tunisian needed just 56 minutes to slice and dice her way past the power-hitting American.

Former world No 2 Jabeur, the highest-ranked Arab player in tennis history, is making her milestone 10th Doha main-draw appearance this week.

She kicked this run off with a bang, winning 89 percent of her second-service points en route to a swift win over 57th-ranked Kessler.

A two-time Doha quarter-finalist, Jabeur will need to collect a Top 10 win in order to make this week's Round of 16. Jabeur's next match will be against No 7 seed Zheng Qinwen of China, their first meeting since the 2023 US Open. Zheng holds a 2-0 lead in their head-to-head.

In a clash between former Top 10 players, Ukraine's Elina Svitolina yesterday shook off a tough first set to overcome Marketa Vondrousova of the Czech Republic 0-6, 6-2, 7-5 in 1 hour and 54 minutes.

Svitolina also had to fight back from an early break down in the third set, and she missed out on one match point at 5-4 before breaking for the win at last. Former world No 3 Svitolina now holds a slim 4-3 lead in her rivalry with 2023 Wimbledon champion Vondrousova.

Next up for Svitolina will be a second-round meeting with No 6 seed Jessica Pegula of the United States, last year's US Open runner-up. Pegula leads their head-to-head 4-2, but Svitolina won their most recent meeting at the 2024 Paris Olympics.



Fans cheer on Ons Jabeur during her first round match yesterday.

A round ahead of the aforementioned winners, Fernandez booked a Round of 16 spot with a 6-2, 6-2 victory over No 8 seed Emma Navarro. World No 27 Fernandez took only 66 minutes to grab her eighth career Top 10 win.

Despite their current rankings, Fernandez has had the upper hand on Navarro in the past. Fernandez leads their tour-level head-to-head 3-1 - and the Canadian also defeated Navarro handily in the 2019 Junior Roland Garros final.

Results from the WTA's Qatar TotalEnergies Open in Doha yesterday (x denotes seeding):

2ND RD
Leylah Fernandez (CAN) bt Emma Navarro (USA x8) 6-2, 6-2
Iga Swiatek (POL x2) bt Maria Sakkari (GRE) 6-3, 6-2

1ST RD
Daria Kasatkina (RUS x10) bt Polina Kudermetova (RUS) 6-0, 6-0
Magda Linette (POL) bt Veronika Kudermetova (RUS) 3-6, 6-0, 6-4
Sofia Kenin (USA) bt Ashlyn Krueger (USA) 6-4, 6-4
Jelena Ostapenko (LAT) bt Aoi Ito (JPN) 6-2, 6-1
Rebecca Sramkova (SVK) bt Anhelina Kalinina (UKR) 6-2, 6-3
Linda Noskova (CZE) bt Donna Vekic (CRO x15) 6-2, 6-4
Yulia Putintseva (KAZ) bt Moyuka Uchijima (JPN) 6-2, 6-7 (5/7), 6-3

FOCUS

Djokovic 'almost 100%' over injury, aiming for 100th title in Doha

Reuters
Doha

Novak Djokovic has almost fully recovered from the injury that ended his Australian Open campaign and has set his sights on lifting a 100th singles title at the Qatar ExxonMobil Open set to begin on Feb 17.

The 24-times Grand Slam champion retired due to a hamstring injury in his semi-final against Alexander Zverev last month. The world number seven was booed by the crowd at Melbourne Park and responded by posting a photo of an MRI scan taken of his left hamstring with the caption: "Thought I'd leave this here for all the sports injury 'experts' out there."

He also withdrew from Serbia's Davis Cup first-round qualifying tie, in which they lost to Denmark.

"There is no more rupture in the muscle, the injury is almost 100% healed ...," Djokovic, 37, told Montenegrin daily newspaper *Vijesti* in an interview published yesterday.

"I have the green light from the medical team to be able to train, to be able to prepare. The tournament in Doha is scheduled for a week now, so I am sticking to the schedule. Thank God, I managed to recover quickly.

"I have had a few more injuries lately than I did in the first 15 years of my career. That probably comes with age, but my body still listens to me, the flame and desire for achievement and new achievements still burns in me."

At the February 17-22 Qatar Open, Djokovic will be hoping to become only the third man to win 100 singles titles on the tour in the professional era after Jimmy Connors (109) and former rival Roger Federer (103).

The Serbian, whose 99th title came in August with his victory at the Paris Olympics, came closest to winning his 100th at the Shanghai Masters where he was beaten by world number one Jannik Sinner in the final in October.

"I hope that the 100th trophy can come already in Doha, I've been chasing it for a long time, since October last year, but about that - it will come when it's supposed to come," said the 37-year-old, who won the title in Doha in 2016 and 2017. "I know it will come, we'll see when and where."



Novak Djokovic of Serbia exits after his match against Alexander Zverev of Germany in the Australian Open semi-finals in Melbourne. *(Reuters)*

CRICKET

COMMENT

India relieved as captain Rohit regains his form ahead of Champions Trophy

Reuters
Cuttack



A month after his poor form forced **Rohit Sharma** to drop himself from a Test match in Sydney, the India captain can finally breathe easy after producing a faith-restoring hundred in Sunday's second one-day international against England.

Rohit quit T20 Internationals minutes after leading India to their second 20-overs World Cup title last year and has struggled in tests.

The Mumbai player turns 38 in April and media reports claim the selectors have asked him about his future plans beyond the Champions Trophy beginning later this month.

Rohit scored two in the opening ODI against England, but Sunday's 119 off 90 balls was a timely reminder that the elegant opener is not a spent force yet.

One of the cleanest strikers of the ball, Rohit clobbered seven effortless sixes and the familiar sweet sound of the bat whacking the ball announced the 50-overs stalwart was back in his element.

"I really broke it down into pieces about how I wanted to bat," player-of-the-match Rohit said of his approach.

"It's a 50-over format ... but you still need to break it down and assess what you need to do at regular intervals and that is what I kept doing. It was important for a batter who gets set to bat as deep as possible and that was my focus." It has been Rohit's template in ODIs – assessing before exploding, an approach that has fetched him three 200-plus scores, the most by a batsman, including a 264 that remains the highest individual score in this format. In Cuttack on Sunday, it was a typical Rohit knock where he shunned the cross-batted shots early in his knock before hitting the English bowlers all over the park at Barabati Stadium.

"When you play on black soil, (the ball) tends to skid on a bit, so it's important that you show the full face of the bat when you're batting initially," the right-hander said. "Once I got into my innings, I understood what they were trying to do – bowling into our body and trying to not give any room, keeping it on the stumps.

"That's where I prepared my plan as well, what I wanted to do with those kind of deliveries, trying to access the gaps which were there.

"It's about understanding what you want to do as a batter."

With Gill, his opening partner, Rohit added 136 in just under 17 overs, eating into a large chunk of India's 305-run target, which they eventually got to in the 45th over to win the three-game series with a match in hand.

Gill, who Rohit called "a very, very classy player" who "doesn't seem to get overawed" by the situation, was effusive in his praise for his captain.

"He makes things much easier than what it is," Gill, who scored 60 in 52 balls – his second half-century in the series – said. "The way that he took on the bowlers... we have seen that over the past couple of years, how he's been batting in the ODIs, and the way he dominated the fast bowlers today was just a treat to watch from the non-striker's end."

Raina applauds Rohit effort

Suresh Raina, former Indian batsman, expressed confidence that Rohit would soon score his 33rd ODI century, following his impressive 32nd hundred in Sunday's ODI against England at Cuttack's Barabati Stadium. 1

"Look at all those shots in the 'V'! He used his footwork brilliantly against the spinners. He played fewer dot balls after each boundary and six, focusing more on rotation," Raina said on *Star Sports* after the match on Sunday.

"I had already said in the show that today is Rohit's day. There was a different vibe in Cuttack, the fielding was sharp, and that's how big players are — they win the series today, and they won't leave Ahmedabad without seizing another opportunity. That 33rd century is also loading — I'm telling you!"

India begin their Champions Trophy campaign against Bangladesh in Dubai on February 20.

TRI-SERIES

Williamson hits century as NZ qualify for final

South Africa opener Breetzke smashes record score on ODI debut

AFP
Lahore, Pakistan



New Zealand's Kane Williamson plays a shot during the one-day international against South Africa at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore yesterday. *(AFP)*

Star cricketer Kane Williamson hit a brilliant century to take New Zealand into the tri-series final with a thumping six-wicket win yesterday, overshadowing South African opener Matthew Breetzke's record score on debut.

Breetzke scored 150 – the highest score by any batter in his first one-day international – to lift South Africa to 304-6 but Williamson's unbeaten 133 proved match winning at Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore.

The tri-series is a warm-up event before the eight-nation Champions Trophy starting February 19 in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

Pakistan, the third team in the tri-series, will play South Africa tomorrow in Karachi to decide who meets New Zealand in the final at the same venue on Friday.

Williamson hit his first ODI century in nearly five years yesterday and was ably supported by opener Devon Conway who missed his century by just three runs.

The pair added a solid 187 runs for the second wicket after Will Young was dismissed for 19, steadily setting New Zealand's second win in as many games in the tri-series.

"You need partnerships to chase targets and it was an outstanding knock from Conway and that partnership between him and Kane that led us to the win," said New Zealand skipper Mitchell Santner.

Williamson was so assured of finishing the game that the loss of Daryl Mitchell (10) and Tom Latham (nought) did not deter him as he hit the winning boundary to seal the win in 48.4 overs.

Meanwhile a new record for the highest ODI score on debut was clinched by Breetzke, who smacked 11 fours and five sixes, topping the 148 scored by Desmond Haynes for West Indies against Australia in Antigua in 1978.

South Africa's skipper Temba Bavuma said the record was among "some positives" in the match. Breetzke hit New Zealand pacer Will O'Rourke for a boundary to reach three figures off 128 balls, becoming the fourth player from his country to hit a century on ODI debut.

South Africa were forced to give four debuts in this match as their top players were either active in a Twenty20 league back home or recovering from injuries.

New Zealand brought in Conway for Rachin Ravindra who got injured in team's 78-run win over Pakistan in Lahore on Saturday.

BRIEF SCORES
South Africa 304-6 in 50 overs (M. Breetzke 150, W. Mulder 64; M. Henry 2-59, W. O'Rourke 2-72)
New Zealand 308-4 in 48.4 overs (K. Williamson 133 not out; D. Conway 97)
Result: New Zealand won by six wickets
Toss: New Zealand
Next match: Pakistan vs South Africa, February 12, Karachi

FOCUS

Spinner Humphreys strikes again as Ireland beat Zimbabwe in Test



Ireland players walk off the field in Bulwayo after beating Zimbabwe in their one-off Test yesterday. *(@cricketireland)*

AFP
Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

Spinner Matthew Humphreys starred again in Bulawayo yesterday, adding two wickets to four earlier in the innings as Ireland wrapped up a 63-run win over Zimbabwe in a one-off Test.

Ireland won the toss at Queens Sports Club and posted 260 and 298. Zimbabwe made 267 and 228 in reply with a dashing 84 from all-rounder Wessly Madhevere the highlight of their second innings.

It was the second Test victory in a row for the Irish over the southern African nation having won by four wickets in Belfast last July.

"Humphreys was superb, (Andy) McBrine too. Our bowlers worked hard, taking wickets at key times," said Ireland captain Andy Balbirnie.

"We love Test cricket as a team. Our guys have been brought up on one-day and Twenty20 cricket, but they prepared well for this match."

Zimbabwe skipper Johnathan Campbell said: "Our bowlers impressed throughout. However, we flopped with the bat. There were good individual performances, but a lack of overall cohesion.

"Wessly had a fighting knock and debutant Nick (Welch) did well. There is exciting talent in Zimbabwe and we are not far off."

Humphreys (6-57) wreaked havoc over three days after Zimbabwe were set a target of 292 to end a four-year winless run in Tests.

He took the wicket of first-innings star Welch (5) on Saturday, and his three victims the following day included Brian Bennett (45) and Campbell (33).

His first casualty yesterday was tail-ender Newman Nyamhuri (8), trapped leg before after the ball struck his front pad when attempting a sweep.

Madhevere, who celebrated his maiden Test half-century on Sunday, added 23 runs to his overnight 61 before being bowled by Humphreys.

The Zimbabwean watched in horror as a quick delivery with the second new ball skidded past the outside edge and sent the stumps flying. McBrine then atoned for several missed catch opportunities on the final day by bowling Richard Ngarava (14) to end the Zimbabwe innings.

The 31-year-old, whose first-innings 90 steadied Ireland after they were reduced to 31 for five, was named player of the match.

The teams travel north to Harare for three one-day internationals beginning Friday, followed by three Twenty20 matches.

BRIEF SCORES
Ireland 260 and 298 v Zimbabwe 267 and 228 (W. Madhevere 84, B. Bennett 45; M. Humphreys 6-57)
Result: Ireland win by 63 runs
Series: Ireland win 1-0
Toss: Ireland

DEEPTI AIMS TO FOLLOW HEALY'S FOOTSTEPS AS NEW UP WARRIORZ CAPTAIN

Bengaluru: The new UP Warriorz captain Deepti Sharma has promised to be as bold in her leadership in this year's Women's Premier League (WPL) as the person she replaced in the role – Australian Alyssa Healy.

India all-rounder Deepti was appointed Warriorz captain on Sunday, replacing injured Australia wicket-keeper batter Healy, who led the side in the last two campaigns.

"Based on my discussions with her (Healy) in the last two seasons and her mindset, I found out that she used to like taking risks," Deepti told Reuters. "There were times when we used to think differently on the ground but she always loved taking risks.

"I have learned that from her.

"The more we'll play out of our comfort zone or take tough decisions, the more it'll help us and lead our team to a good note."

Deepti, the highest run-scorer for the Warriorz in the 2024 season, floated between three and eight for much of the last campaign and now wants to bat in the top order to better serve her team.

"I prefer a top-order position, be it three, four or whatever. When I get more number of balls, I play and execute well," said Deepti, the first Indian woman to complete the double of 1,000 runs and 100 wickets in T20Is.

"I like to play in the top order regardless of the format because the more I play at the top, I understand and read the game better in terms of how I can deal with a particular situation or what can be a par score.

"So, the more time you spend on the wicket, the better you become in decision-making."

Before WPL, Deepti featured in multiple overseas leagues, including the Big Bash (Australia) and the Hundred (England), but the all-rounder said a lot of attention has now moved to the Indian league.

"I have also played in Super League, so you get to know about different leagues when you play in them but this interest has now been completely shifted," Deepti said.

"Now overseas players ask us about the start of the WPL and how the tournament is played.

"The way Indian players used to think of playing the foreign leagues, similarly the overseas players now want to play in the WPL... because they find it as a good opportunity."

The third season of the WPL, to be played in a home-and-away format for the first time, will begin on February 14 in Vadodara, Gujarat.

Deepti, who grew up in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh and idolises former India cricketer Suresh Raina, will play matches at her home ground in Lucknow from March 3, a change that she considers to be the "biggest thing for the team".

GOLF

Woods withdraws from Genesis after mother's death

'I planned to tee it up this week, but I'm just not ready'

Reuters
San Diego, US

Tournament host Tiger Woods has put his PGA Tour season debut on hold, saying he decided to withdraw from this week's Genesis Invitational at Torrey Pines while processing the recent death of his mother.

The opening round of the February 13-16 tournament, which was relocated to San Diego from Pacific Palisades this year due to the Los Angeles wildfires, will be held nine days after the 15-times major champion's mother died. "I planned to tee it up this week, but I'm just not ready. I did my best to prepare, knowing it's what my Mom would have wanted, but I'm still processing her loss," Woods, 49, said in a post on X. "Thanks to everyone who has reached out. I hope to be at Torrey later in the week and appreciate the continued kindness since my Mom's passing."

Woods, who has played a limited schedule since his Feb. 2021 car crash and said last December he was not "tournament sharp yet", has not played in an official PGA Tour event since missing the cut at last July's British Open. Since the British Open, Woods had surgery in September on his lower back, played with his son in a laid-back 36-hole event in December and competed twice last month in the indoor team golf league he co-founded. The Genesis Invitational is PGA Tour Signature Event that has a $20mn purse and benefits Woods' TGR Foundation.



Tiger Woods has not played in an official PGA Tour event since last July's British Open.

LIV GOLFERS RECEIVE PATHWAY TO OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP

Players from the LIV Golf League now have a qualification pathway into the Open Championship, the R&A announced. The leading player in the top five of the LIV Golf standings at the end of June who is not already exempt will earn a spot in the 153rd Open Championship on July 17-20 at Royal Portrush in Northern Ireland.

"The Open is a global championship for the best men's golfers, and each year we review our exemptions to ensure that we offer pathways into the championship based on results achieved on the leading professional tours," Mark Darbon, CEO of The R&A, said in a statement. "We acknowledge that players competing in LIV Golf should also have the opportunity to secure places in The Open through its individual season standings as well as existing pathways."

The selection will happen after LIV Golf's tournament in Carrollton, Texas, from June 27-29. "We thank Mark Darbon for his leadership and the R&A for taking this step for the benefit of moving golf forward," LIV Golf CEO Scott O'Neil said.

"The Open Championship is one of the most prestigious events in all of sports. The acknowledgement that competitors from the LIV Golf League and The International Series will have the opportunity to play in golf's original major is a true testament to the strength of fields and the R&A's commitment to golf fans around the world. LIV will continue our mission to bring the best players to the four corners of the world to grow the game. We are excited for the future of this great sport."

LIV Golf members who are already exempt for the Open Championship as past major winners include Jon Rahm, Bryson DeChambeau, Dustin Johnson, Phil Mickelson and Brooks Koepka.

The R&A's announcement follows a similar move announced last week for the US Open by the United States Golf Association. As of May 19, the leading golfer in LIV's top three not otherwise exempt will gain a spot in the June 12-15 tournament at Oakmont Club.

SPOTLIGHT

Ronaldo attends Premier Padel P1 tournament in Riyadh



Padel continues to capture the attention of global sports icons, with Cristiano Ronaldo among the spectators at the Riyadh Season Premier Padel P1, enjoying the top-level action on court. The Portuguese football legend followed the matches closely and celebrated the victory of his compatriots Miguel and Nuno Deus, who secured their place in the main draw with an impressive performance in the final round of qualifying.

Ronaldo is the latest in a growing list of global sports stars drawn to Premier Padel and its elite-level competition. Last year, Neymar Jr attended the Riyadh Premier Padel P1, while other football greats including Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Esteban Cambiasso, Leandro Paredes and Paulo Dybala have also shown their passion for the sport by recently attending tournaments.

Beyond football, combat sports icons Khabib Nurmagomedov and Ilia Topuria have also attended Premier Padel tournaments.

During the Qatar Grand Prix in 2024, sporting legends including Novak Djokovic, F1 world champion Max Verstappen, drivers Lando Norris, George Russell and Oscar Piastri, footballers Luis Figo and Marco Materazzi, and basketball's Tony Parker attended a sporting legends tournament during the event, further highlighting Premier Padel's appeal.

The Riyadh Season Premier Padel P1 is the first tournament of the 2025 season, following an exceptional 2024 campaign that featured 24 tournaments across 16 countries. As part of Premier Padel's continued global expansion, the event brings world-class padel to Saudi Arabia, with top international players battling for valuable ranking points and the first title of the season.

FOCUS

Boxing organisation to launch lawsuit over Olympic gender row

AFP
Lausanne

The International Boxing Association (IBA) said it is to take legal action against the International Olympic Committee (IOC) over the inclusion of Algeria's Imane Khelif and Taiwan's Lin Yu-ting at last year's Olympic Games.

The two female boxers had been excluded from the IBA's 2023 world championships after the fighters failed gender eligibility tests but the IOC cleared them to fight and both went on to win gold medals in Paris. The IOC organised the boxing in Paris following the expulsion of the IBA from the Olympic movement after financial and ethical irregularities.

In its statement, which linked their action to US President Donald Trump's executive order last week seeking to ban transgender athletes from participating in women's sports, the IBA said that it is "filing an official complaint with the Attorney General of Switzerland... regarding the IOC's actions".

It added that it was filing similar complaints in France and the United States. "President Trump's order to ban transgender athletes from women's sport validates IBA's efforts to protect the integrity of female sports," claimed IBA president Umar Kremlev, a Kremlin-linked Russian oligarch.

Neither Imane Khelif nor Lin Yu-ting are transgender women. Both were born and raised as women, which is how they are registered on their passports.

CRICKET

Asalanka to lead SL in two-match ODI series against Australia

Reuters
Colombo

Sri Lanka named a 16-member squad yesterday, led by **Charith Asalanka** for the two-match ODI series against the touring Australian team.

The first match will be on Wednesday and the second on Friday. Both matches are day games and will be played in Colombo at the Premadasa stadium.

Australia arrived in Sri Lanka last month and played two Tests and won both comprehensively.

Australia celebrated a crushing victory in the first Test, with the innings and 242-run humiliation Sri Lanka's worst defeat in Test history.

Australia won the second Test against Sri Lanka by nine wickets in Galle on Sunday to sweep the series 2-0.



SQUAD: Charith Asalanka (capt), Pathum Nissanka, Avishka Fernando, Kusal Mendis, Kamindu Mendis, Janith Liyanage, Nishan Madushka, Nuwanidu Fernando, Wanindu Hasaranga, Maheesh Theekshana, Dunith Wellalage, Jeffrey Vandersay, Asitha Fernando, Lahiru Kumara, Mohamed Shiraz and Eshan Malinga.

Al Shaqab to host National Sport Day event

Doha: Al Shaqab, in collaboration with Qatar Reads, will celebrate National Sport Day with a one-of-a-kind event under the inspiring theme of "Horses and Reading". This unique celebration will take place at Oxygen Park from 8am-3pm, offering an unforgettable experience for all ages.

The event promises a delightful mix of activities, starting with pony rides for children, providing a fun and safe experience guided by expert handlers.

For adults, horseback rides offer the chance to enjoy the elegance and grace of riding while soaking in the serene beauty of Oxygen Park.

What makes this event special is its perfect blend of two passions: reading and horseback riding. Participants will experience the joy of reading in a lush park setting, where the mind and body come together in harmony, embodying the essence of the saying, "a healthy mind in a healthy body."

The event is an opportunity to make memories with family and friends while sharing the joy of reading and horseback riding in a scenic, inspiring environment.

NFL

Eagles crush Chiefs to win Super Bowl

AFP
New Orleans

The Philadelphia Eagles soared to a crushing 40-22 Super Bowl victory over the Kansas City Chiefs on Sunday, shattering their opponents' bid for a historic hat-trick of NFL titles in a rout watched by President Donald Trump. Philadelphia quarterback Jalen Hurts threw for two touchdowns and rushed for another as the Eagles avenged their agonizing Super Bowl defeat to the Chiefs two years ago in emphatic style at New Orleans' Superdome.

"I've been able to use every experience and learn from it – the good, the bad, all of it – to pursue my own greatness," Hurts said. "But I couldn't do any of these things without the guys around me. We had a special group this year – we were able to learn from the past, get some nice new pieces and get over that hump."

The Chiefs had been bidding to become the first team in history to win three consecutive Vince Lombardi trophies following Super Bowl victories in 2023 and 2024. But Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes – who was sacked six times and threw two interceptions – never looked like leading his team to glory as the Eagles' iron defence and clinical offence dominated throughout.

"Credit to the Eagles, they played better than us from start to finish," Mahomes said. "Obviously the turnovers hurt, and I take all the blame for that. I just didn't play to my standard and I have to be better next time."

The Eagles effectively had the game won by half-time, powering into a 24-0 lead at the break after three unanswered touchdowns from Hurts, Cooper DeJean and A J Brown. They extended the lead to 34-0 late in the third quarter before Kansas City finally grabbed three late consolation touchdowns. Eagles kicker Jake Elliott bagged four field goals.

Sunday's extravaganza was watched by a star-studded 65,719 crowd bristling with celebrities and VIPs headed by Trump, who became the first sitting US President to attend the Super Bowl after jetting into New Orleans from Florida on Air Force One earlier in the day following a round of golf with Tiger Woods. Trump has had an uneasy relationship with the NFL over the years, triggering uproar in 2017 after attacking players for kneeling in protest against racial injustice during renditions of the US national anthem.


Philadelphia Eagles' quarterback Jalen Hurts (left) and head coach Nick Sirianni celebrate with the Vince Lombardi Trophy after winning the Super Bowl against Kansas City Chiefs.

But the US leader was given a broadly positive reception at the Superdome after arriving at the venue shortly before kick-off. Soon after arriving, Trump met with first responders and family members of victims of the January 1 attack in New Orleans that left 14 people dead and dozens wounded.

Later, loud cheering could be heard among the crowd when the Superdome's giant screen showed Trump saluting during the national anthem. That warm applause was in stark contrast to the booing that rang around the venue early in the first quarter when the same screen showed pop icon Taylor Swift sitting in the VIP seats. Swift, watching boyfriend and Chiefs ace Travis Kelce, was among a galaxy of stars crowded into the venue, with the likes of Beatles legend Paul McCartney rubbing shoulders with Hollywood actors Kevin Costner, Paul Rudd and Anne Hathaway and soccer star Lionel Messi.

The catcalls for Swift – who backed Trump's opponent Kamala Harris in last year's election – were not lost on the US president. Trump later shared a post on his TruthSocial network which read: "Trump gets massive cheers at the Super Bowl while Taylor Swift gets booed - the world is healing!"

The star wattage meanwhile was ramped up before kick-off with singer Lady Gaga making a surprise performance in New Orleans' famous Bourbon Street in a segment paying tribute to victims of recent tragedies around the US. Trump meanwhile expressed hope the nation could come together for the Super Bowl, which is by far the biggest annual event on the American sporting calendar.

Trump left the stadium early in the third quarter after a half-time concert headlined by rapper Kendrick Lamar that included a cameo appearance from singer-songwriter SZA while tennis legend Serena Williams was also seen bopping along with dancers on a makeshift stage.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

PSG's Enrique stresses caution ahead of Brest showdown

Reuters
Brest, France

Paris St Germain manager **Luis Enrique** dismissed any notion of over-confidence ahead of their Champions League clash at Brest today, despite a recent dominant win against the Brittany side.

The first leg of the knockout phase play-off tie will take place in a sold-out venue in Guingamp, where Brest are hosting the match due to UEFA stadium regulations. Luis Enrique is taking nothing for granted even though PSG thrashed Brest 5-2 less than two weeks ago in Ligue 1.

"They were one of the best teams in France last season," he told reporters. "Their reward was playing in the Champions League, and they qualified with impressive performances. In football terms, I don't know what will happen on Tuesday. We are all aware of the importance of this match and what it means for the club. The best-playing team doesn't always win. Brest can score goals against us, and we want to play as well as possible and prepare in the best way."

Enrique made it clear that PSG must approach the clash with full focus due to the unpredictability of knockout stages, with the return leg at Parc des Princes on Feb, 19. "We are aware that this is a different two-legged tie because it's between two French clubs, and only one will go through. We are favourites, but football is full of surprises," he said.

"The Champions League is an important competition for us. It's two matches of 90 minutes. We have to win, we have no choice. We are focused on trying to win."

The 54-year-old Spaniard also highlighted winger Ousmane Dembele as a key player for the match. "He is brilliant at finding space and finishing in one touch. It's great to be part of a team where these qualities come together."

PSG have made a habit over the last decade of going into the Champions League knockout stages with doubts over their form and the fitness of key players, but this season appears to be different. The French champions could hardly be in better shape ahead of the first leg of their play-off tie against domestic rivals Brest.

PSG's stuttering European form at the tail end of 2024, when defeats against Arsenal, Atletico Madrid and Bayern Munich left them in danger of being eliminated early from the Champions League, is now firmly behind them.

Enrique's team swept aside Manchester City and Stuttgart to secure a place in these knockout phase play-offs, scoring four goals against each opponent. They could hardly have asked for a kinder draw in the play-offs either, given that they have been beaten just once in their last 61 games against French sides. Qatar-owned PSG's enormous financial advantage over every other French club helps explain that, but they still looked like genuine contenders to win the Champions League as they thrashed Monaco 4-1 in Ligue 1 on Friday.

It appears that the Parisians have now adapted to life without Kylian Mbappe, in large part thanks to the sensational form of Dembele. Mbappe's France teammate has 16 goals in his last 10 appearances, and an astonishing eight in his last three matches. That includes a hat-trick in PSG's 5-2 victory in Brest in Ligue 1 just over a week ago.

Bradley Barcola has been back to something like his best form in recent weeks too, while January signing Khvicha Kvaratskhelia got his first PSG goal in the win over Monaco. A team that struggled badly to score goals in their earlier Champions League matches this season suddenly looks unstoppable.



PREVIEW

City wary of weakened Real Madrid: Guardiola

Spanish giants will be without key defenders Carvajal, Rudiger, Militao and Alaba.

Reuters
Manchester

Manchester City coach Pep Guardiola said his side were well aware of Real Madrid's habit of producing their best in tough times, with a string of injuries having depleted the visitors' defence ahead of today's Champions League playoff.

Real and City failed to advance automatically to the last 16 as one of the top eight sides in the Champions League table after they finished 11th and 22nd, respectively, in the new league-phase format and have to play a two-legged playoff. The clubs will clash for a fourth consecutive year, having met in four Champions League knockout ties since 2020.

In the first leg of the playoff tie at the Etihad today, La Liga leaders Real will be without key defenders Dani Carvajal, Antonio Rudiger, Eder Militao and David Alaba. "I think both teams have had problems in terms of injuries during the season. Madrid handled it much better than us because they are still top of the league and fighting against Atletico Madrid," Guardiola said.

"That shows again the consistency they have. At the end they are a huge competitor. We know it. We have faced it many times with them and how in the tough moments they bring the best of them – we know it. Of course we have to make two good games to go through."

Since the sides' met last year, Real have strengthened an already formidable attack with the acquisition of Kylian Mbappe, who is supported by Rodrygo, Jude Bellingham and Vinicius Jr. Guardiola said it would be impossible to shut out Real's forwards, adding: "They are exceptional. How they combine, the runners, the ability one-against-one, how they keep the ball, all four are exceptional. Everybody knows it, so you have to reduce that involvement as much as possible, knowing that it's going to happen, accept it."

Defender Ruben Dias said the campaign has been his most challenging since joining City in 2020, but the Portuguese international stressed he was still optimistic about the club's chances in the Champions League. "I'm a firm believer that even in the most difficult scenario, most difficult beginning, you can still do something and achieve something beautiful in the end," he said. "Right now, we are still in that position. Obviously we know how difficult our opposition is and how difficult our way will be to get there. "But it's a question of believing in what we have in the dressing room and we have loads of talent. We just have to use them in the right way. With the right belief, we are able to do anything."



Manchester City players train yesterday, on the eve of their Champions League match against Real Madrid. *(Reuters)*

MAN CITY STILL WORST OPPONENT FOR REAL MADRID, SAYS ANCELOTTI

Meanwhile, Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti believes the winner of his side's Champions League play-off clash with Manchester City will be among the favourites to lift the trophy. The victor in the tie between Real and City has gone on to win the Champions League in each of the past three seasons and Ancelotti expects the streak could continue.

"Yes, the most difficult opponent, most important opponent and against the best manager," Ancelotti said at a pre-match press conference yesterday. "I'm convinced the team that goes through in this tie will go very deep into the competition."

City won just once in 13 games in a torrid spell between the end of October and December. Guardiola's men have picked up slightly in 2025, but their frailties were still exposed in a 5-1 thrashing by Arsenal in their last Premier League match.

Ancelotti expressed his surprise at that run but believes City still have the players and coach to do damage to the Champions League holders. "I continue to think City is one of the best teams in Europe and that they have the best coach in this competition. It is still the most difficult game we could have," he said.

"I am surprised they had a period where it was difficult to overcome the injuries but now the team I saw in the last few games is a good team, a competitive team. I struggle to imagine Manchester City not being strong. They are really strong with fantastic players and a fantastic manger."

Ancelotti will have to field a makeshift defence after Lucas Vazquez became his latest injury casualty.

Midfielders Aurelien Tchouameni and Federico Valverde are expected to start in the back four alongside Raul Asencio and Ferland Mendy.

FOCUS

Juve's previous win over PSV counts for nothing: Motta



Juventus players warm up before a training session in Turin, Italy. *(AFP)*

Reuters
Turin, Italy

PSV Eindhoven will pose a more formidable challenge for Juventus as they battle for a place in the last 16 of the Champions League despite the Italians beating the Dutch side earlier in the competition, Juve coach Thiago Motta said. Motta's side opened the new league phase with a 3-1 win over PSV in September, but Juventus finished 20th in the standings and in the knockout phase play-off they take on a side who placed 14th, after they defeated Liverpool in the final game.

"We played a good game against PSV at that point but a lot of things have changed, both here and there," Motta told reporters ahead of first leg in Turin.

"Tomorrow is a different story. Tomorrow is a different game and we're focused on doing our job well. We saw in the first leg that we had some very good moments in the game. We took advantage of that and finished the actions we'd set up well. But at the same time, we suffered from their passing and possession. The arrival of the two full backs, who came in very well from behind. The midfielders who can give the team a bit more balance but also give the team a lot of space."

Juventus suffered their first Serie A defeat in January, losing to Napoli, and then lost to Benfica in the Champions League, and while they won their two most recent games, they were second best on Friday at Como despite the 2-1 victory.

"We saw in the last match, even if it is not a good example, the resilience of this group has increased a lot," Motta said. "We were able to win a game without playing well. But that's no use at all. As an example, yes, it's a positive point. You manage to win a game where you don't play better than your opponent. It's a positive point, but we know that's not the way. Tomorrow we need to play a different type of game, a very complete game to compete against a strong team and get the win."

Juventus will have French forward Randal Kolo Muani available who, since his arrival on loan from Paris St Germain, has scored five goals in three games, and has kept the team's top scorer, Dusan Vlahovic, out of the starting side. "He and his teammates have done very well. This is a team, a single player on his own doesn't go anywhere. Randal, like everyone else, knows that very well," Motta said.

"Everyone wants to play and they know full well that what matters is the quality of the minutes they play, not the number of minutes they play in a game or in a season."

Plymouth handed Man City tie in FA Cup fifth round

London: Plymouth will travel to Manchester City in the FA Cup fifth round as the Championship strugglers landed a dream draw to follow their stunning win against Liverpool.

The Pilgrims shocked Premier League leaders Liverpool as Ryan Hardie's second half penalty sealed a memorable 1-0 win at Home Park on Sunday.

Miron Muslic's side are bottom of the second tier, with only one league win in three months. But they have eliminated Liverpool and Brentford to earn a shot at Pep Guardiola's spluttering Premier League champions. FA Cup holders Manchester United will face Fulham at Old Trafford after beating Leicester 2-1 on Friday thanks to Harry Maguire's controversial last-gasp winner.

League Cup finalists Newcastle meet Brighton, who knocked out Chelsea on Saturday, while Bournemouth take on Wolves in another all-Premier League tie.

Aston Villa, 2-1 winners against Tottenham on Sunday, will host Championship team Cardiff. Exeter or Nottingham play Ipswich and Doncaster or Crystal Palace will be at home to Millwall.

Draw: Preston v Burnley; Aston Villa v Cardiff; Doncaster or Crystal Palace v Millwall; Manchester United v Fulham; Newcastle v Brighton; Bournemouth v Wolves; Manchester City v Plymouth; Exeter or Nottingham Forest v Ipswich

Ties to be played on the weekend of March 1 and 2.

MONZA RECALL ITALY ICON NESTA AFTER SACKING REPLACEMENT BOCCHETTI

Monza have recalled Alessandro Nesta to take over as manager following the sacking of Salvatore Bocchetti, the Serie A club said yesterday, after a heavy defeat at the weekend kept the club rooted at the bottom of the standings.

Bocchetti replaced Nesta in December, signing a contract until June 2027, but his side registered only one win in seven league games, and Sunday's 5-1 loss at Lazio was Monza's fourth consecutive defeat.

Monza also exited the Coppa Italia, losing 4-0 to Bologna, during Bocchetti's time in charge, and Nesta, a former Italy international and defender with Lazio and AC Milan, now returns to the bench seven weeks after his sacking. Nesta originally took charge when Raffaele Palladino left for Fiorentina at the end of last season, but his first managerial role in Serie A initially ended after Monza managed one league win in the opening 17 games. Monza, with two league wins this season, have 13 points from 24 games, and host Lecce on Sunday.

FLICK HAILS BARCA'S WIN OVER SEVILLA

Barcelona manager Hansi Flick said he was proud of his players' effort in 4-1 victory at Sevilla, praising their maturity in controlling the match and scoring a late goal despite playing over 30 minutes with 10 men. After Fermin Lopez and Raphinha scored early in the second half to put Barca 3-1 ahead, Lopez was sent off with a straight red card after a nasty tackle on Djibril Sow. But Barca, who had opened the scoring through Robert Lewandowski, held off Sevilla and managed to score their fourth through Eric Garcia's header in the 89th minute to edge closer to the top of La Liga.