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TENNIS / QATAR EXXONMOBIL OPEN 2025

Berrettini stuns Djokovic as Medvedev, Rublev advance

'Really happy because I enjoyed my time out there, which is the most important thing'

By Sports Reporter
Doha



Italy's Matteo Berrettini celebrates beating Serbia's Novak Djokovic during their singles match at the Qatar ExxonMobil Open in Doha yesterday. **PICTURES:** *Noushad Thekkayil*



Serbia's Novak Djokovic walks off the court after losing his Round of 32 match against Italy's Matteo Berrettini.

Crowd favourite and Grand Slam king Novak Djokovic of Serbia yesterday fell at the first hurdle when he was beaten by Matteo Berrettini of Italy in straight sets on day two of the Qatar ExxonMobil Open.

Berrettini, who lost the 2021 Wimbledon final to Djokovic, yesterday looked a better player as he won 7-6, 6-2 to book his place in Round Two of the 32-player tournament.

Also yesterday, Russian players Daniil Medvedev and Andrey Rublev - both former champions in Doha - posted easy wins to advance at the 500-point event.

Medvedev beat defending champion and compatriot Karen Khachanov 4-6, 7-5, 6-3.

Fifth seed Rublev, the 2020 champion, yesterday eased past Alexander Bublik 6-3, 6-4.

Djokovic, playing his first match since pulling out of the Australian Open semi-final against Alexander Zverev last month, yesterday stretched the game in the first set but once the Serbian fell short in the tie-breaker, Berrettini rolled on to sweep the two-time Qatar Open champion in 1 hour and 34 minutes.

A long return on the second match point from Djokovic saw a jubilant Berrettini celebrate with a big smile as a packed Centre Court at the Khalifa International Tennis Stadium looked stunned.

"Something I've been looking to do for a long time. I've played against him in the most important tournaments on tour," Berrettini, with a wide grin on his face, said after his hard-fought win.

"I wish I could have won one of those matches," the 28-year-old Italian added.

"Really happy with my performance," Berrettini, who wears his cap backwards, said. "Really happy because I enjoyed my time out there, which is the most important thing. A champion like Novak is always ready to come back. You don't have to think about match point. You have to think about the next point, and that's what I did," he added.

The opening set remained tight, with neither player breaking serve, ultimately leading to a tiebreak which Berrettini won, conceding just two points on Djokovic's serve.

Berrettini then seized an early advantage in the second set, breaking Djokovic's serve in game two.

The Italian held his serve comfortably throughout the second set. He eventually secured the match on his second match point, though not without some late pressure in the final game. Berrettini fired 13 aces compared to Djokovic's 9.

Medvedev's win over Khachanov yesterday was his first over a top-30 player this season. Champion in Doha in 2023, Medvedev is still trying to end a title drought that dates back to the 2023 Rome Masters.

"I thought about this before the match (that) he's the defending champion, but I won it two years ago and didn't come back, so (it was) kind of a battle of defending champions," Medvedev said after the match.

"(It was a) tough match, tough start. I think he was playing better than me at one point in the match. Then it was kind of even, and I managed to win the second set. And then in the third set I played better. I am happy that I managed to improve my level during the match, and I think the third set was really great for me, so I am looking forward to the next matches," he added.



Russia's Daniil Medvedev celebrates after defeating compatriot and defending champion Karen Khachanov yesterday.



Fifth seed Rublev, the 2020 champion in Doha, yesterday eased past Alexander Bublik 6-3, 6-4.

Also yesterday, Australia's Alex de Minaur beat Roman Safiullin of Russia 6-1, 7-5 just a day after his 25th birthday.

"They're tough days, these ones," De Minaur said yesterday. "It's cold, it's windy, you probably don't want to get out of bed. But once you step on court, you have to do everything you can to win. Whether it's ugly or pretty tennis, you just put the ball in the court, and that's what I did today. Out went any sort of tactics you had for the match and it was all about surviving more than anything," he added.

Djokovic, who is playing doubles in Doha with Spanish veteran Fernando Verdasco, yesterday said: "My plan is to try to go as far as I can in doubles, you know. I'm still in the doubles tournament tomorrow with Verdasco, and I look forward to that. So, I'll stay in Doha at least for one more match, and then we will see."

He added: "I mean, yeah, obviously I was planning to go to Indian Wells and Miami, so I'll talk with my team after I finish with this tournament."

ANNOUNCEMENT

QREC Board restructured, al-Attiyah appointed chairman

By Sports Reporter
Doha

HE the Minister of Sports and Youth Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani has restructured the Board of Directors of Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC), appointing **Hamad bin Abdulrahman al-Attiyah** as Chairman and Rashid bin Nasser al-Kaabi as Vice-Chairman.

The new board also includes Khalifa bin Mohammed al-Attiyah, Faleh bin Mohammed al-Nasr and Abdulrahman bin Mansour al-Mansour.

HE Sheikh Hamad lauded the contributions of the outgoing board, acknowledging their efforts in advancing equestrian sports in Qatar. He wished the new board success in driving further progress. Al-Attiyah, the newly appointed chairman, highlighted the challenges ahead, emphasising the importance of continuity in organising local and international races. He expressed gratitude to state officials for their trust in the new board and underscored the value of teamwork in the club's next phase.

"We are entering a crucial period that builds on past efforts, requiring meticulous preparation for the remainder of the local season and upcoming international events," al-Attiyah said.

He also extended his appreciation to the former board for their dedication and affirmed that the new leadership remains committed to elevating Qatari equestrian sports to greater heights.



FOOTBALL

Al Sadd set to meet Al Wasl, Al Rayyan face Ahli in last 16

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The line-up for the AFC Champions League Elite west zone's round of 16 was finalised following the conclusion of the league stage yesterday, with Qatar's Al Rayyan and Al Sadd making it to the next stage.

Esteghlal FC were the final team to book their spot, with the Iran side defeating Qatar's Al Rayyan SC 2-0 to finish sixth in the standings. The completion of the league phase means the lineup for the knockout rounds for the west Asian half of the draw is set, with Saudi Pro League clubs in the first three spots in the table.

Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal ensured they finished top of the standings with a 2-0 win over Al Wasl from the United Arab Emirates and Jorge Jesus' side will take on eighth-placed Pakhtakor in the next round over two legs in March.

Second-placed Al Ahli will take on Al Rayyan, while Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr face Esteghlal. Qatar Stars League champions Al Sadd will meet Al Wasl, with games to be played on March 3 or 4 and the return matches held one week later.

The quarter-finals, semis and final will be played in a centralised format featuring clubs from west and east Asia in Saudi Arabia in late April and early May.

Yesterday, Esteghlal won against Al Rayyan of Qatar as the Tehran-based side advanced at the expense of compatriots and bitter rivals Persepolis. Substitute Alireza Koushki set up Mohammad Azadi's 46th minute opener and scored Esteghlal's second 23 minutes later to take his side up to sixth in the 12-team west Asian standings, forcing Persepolis out of the eight qualification places.

Esteghlal went into their meeting with already-qualified hosts Al Rayyan knowing a draw would be enough to climb into the top eight and Sohrab Bakhtiarzadeh's side went in front soon after halftime.

Koushki drove towards the byline as the Al Rayyan defence hesitated and Azadi forced his team mate's cross over the line with his chest.

The Iranians doubled the lead in the 69th minute when they launched a counter-attack from deep, Koushki taking advantage of inept attempts to dispossess him by Andre Amaro and Julien De Sart to score past Paulo Victor.

SPORT

SPOTLIGHT

More than cricket as Pakistan hosts CT

AFP
Karachi

Pakistan will host a first major cricket tournament in almost three decades from today in a move hailed as a landmark just a few years after the country was off-limits because of security fears.

Staging the Champions Trophy in three cities over the next two-and-a-half weeks will be a huge boost to the South Asian nation's reputation if authorities can pull it off smoothly and safely.

"Convincing the world that Pakistan is a safe country and that it is capable of delivering such a global event from an administration point of view took serious hard work and convincing," former Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman Ramiz Raja told AFP.

"The world eventually understood our viewpoint," said Raja, under whose tenure the event was awarded in 2021.

The build-up has not been without problems after neighbours and arch-rivals India refused to play in Pakistan over long-standing political tensions.

A powerhouse of the sport on and off the pitch, India will instead play their matches in Dubai, but the other seven countries will be based in Pakistan.

The country has stepped up security, especially in host cities Karachi, Lahore and Rawalpindi, even if attacks in major cities are increasingly rare.

Pakistan had been due to host the Champions Trophy, the premier ODI event after the World Cup, in 2008.

It was instead staged in South Africa a year later because of a security crisis that spilled over from the war in neighbouring Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks.

Pakistan became a no-go zone for international sides in 2009 after Islamist gunmen attacked a bus carrying Sri Lanka's team in Lahore, wounding several players and killing eight policemen and civilians.

But since a sweeping military crackdown that started in 2014 and lasted several years, security has vastly improved.

Test cricket returned to Pakistan in 2019 and Australia, England, New Zealand and South Africa later toured the country, helping Pakistan's bid to host the tournament.

Those teams will all be in Pakistan for the Champions Trophy.

For 77-year-old businessman Haji Abdul Razzak, a global event coming back to Pakistan is like another birthday.

The last time Pakistan held a major international cricket tournament was as co-hosts, with India and Sri Lanka, in 1996.

Razzak raised the Sri Lankan flag on March 17, 1996 at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore when the islanders defeated Australia to clinch the title.

Twenty-nine years later the cricket fanatic will attend the opening match of the Champions Trophy in Karachi today between holders Pakistan and New Zealand.

"It is fresh in my mind," a teary-eyed Razzak told AFP. "My country was thriving back then and cricket was on everyone's mind."

He added: "Terrorism took everything away from us. I am overjoyed to see a global event coming back to our country and I am feeling like it will be my birthday."

Although militancy is still a threat in Pakistan, the violence is nearly entirely limited to the remote border regions from north to south, far away from the stadiums.

With the capital Islamabad placed in lockdown, Pakistan recently hosted a summit of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation and a global meeting on girls' education, raising its profile on the international stage.

As a test case for its readiness, Pakistan last week staged a tri-series with New Zealand and South Africa and crowds flocked to the recently renovated stadiums in Lahore and Karachi.

Raja, a former Pakistan captain who played in the 1987 World Cup hosted by Pakistan and India, said holding the Champions Trophy has enormous significance that goes beyond sport.

"This Champions Trophy is a crucial step toward normalising its standing in the global cricket community," he said.

"It's also about national pride and sending a strong message about resilience and determination. It is about youth engagement, cultural promotion and building a global image.

"Now the onus is on us to deliver."



Pakistan's Babar Azam bats in the nets during a practice session on the eve of their ICC Champions Trophy match against New Zealand at National Stadium in Karachi. *(AFP)*

CRICKET

Ferguson flies out as edgy NZ prep up for Pakistan clash

Rising star Rachin Ravindra is also in doubt for today's match

Reuters
Karachi

New Zealand fast bowler Lockie Ferguson was ruled out of the Champions Trophy with a foot injury yesterday in a major blow for the Black Caps on the eve of the tournament opener against hosts Pakistan.

All-rounder Rachin Ravindra could also miss the Group A match as he continues to recover from a blow to his forehead sustained during a tri-series match in Lahore earlier this month.

Ferguson, who suffered a hamstring injury in a T20 tournament in the United Arab Emirates earlier this month, felt pain in his right foot after bowling in Sunday's warm-up match against Afghanistan. An initial medical assessment suggested the 33-year-old would not be fit to take part in the entire tournament, New Zealand Cricket (NZC) said.

New Zealand have decided to send him home and bring in Canterbury Kings fast bowler Kyle Jamieson, who will not reach Pakistan in time for today's match.

"We're really disappointed for Lockie," head coach Gary Stead said in the statement issued by the NZC. "Lockie is a key part of the bowling group and brings a lot of major tournament experience and we know how much he was looking forward to representing New Zealand at another major event."

Jamieson returned to domestic cricket in December after 10 months on the sidelines due to a stress fracture in his back.



New Zealand's Kane Williamson and Will Young during training in Karachi yesterday. New Zealand take on hosts Pakistan in the opening match of the ICC Champions Trophy today. *(Reuters)*

"Kyle brings plenty of pace and extra bounce which will suit the conditions here in Pakistan," Stead said of Jamieson, who will be available for New Zealand's second Group A game against Bangladesh on Feb. 24.

Though on a high after winning the tri-series in Pakistan beating the hosts in Friday's final, New Zealand are also without quick Ben Sears due to a hamstring injury.

India's Jasprit Bumrah, Anrich Nortje of South Africa and Australian duo Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood are among other fast bowlers to miss out on the Champions Trophy with injuries.

New Zealand are also waiting to hear about the fitness of spin-bowling all-rounder Ravindra, who suffered a nasty blow after losing sight of the ball in the floodlights while attempting to catch it.

"He's had a couple of hits, but ... we'll take medical advice around it understanding with a hit in the head the way he got, and stitches to his forehead as well," Stead later told reporters.

"We will be taking a cautious approach with him. If he doesn't play this game, we expect he'll be right for the next one." Pakistan captain Mohammad Rizwan confirmed Babar Azam would continue to open the innings like he did in the recent tri-series.

"Babar is our most solid player, technically. He will bat at the top," Rizwan told reporters.

New Zealand beat Pakistan twice in the recent tri-series but Rizwan was hopeful they would be third time lucky.

"We have identified our shortcomings and work on them. We are confident we will not repeat those mistakes tomorrow."

Kohli, Rohit near endgame as India chase Champions Trophy glory



Rohit Sharma



Virat Kohli

Dubai: India captain Rohit Sharma and superstar batsman Virat Kohli enter the Champions Trophy this week with intense focus on their dwindling powers and speculation over when they will retire.

The 37-year-old Rohit and Kohli, 36, got back among the runs to some degree in India's 3-0 ODI home sweep of England last week. But both have been mired in long lean patches in Tests and have already retired from T20 cricket following last year's World Cup triumph.

Neither player – both mainstays of a formidable India team for more than 15 years – has said what their plans are.

But one Indian media report, citing anonymous sources at the cricket board, said opener Rohit had been pressed to make a decision on his future by the time the tournament ends.

Rohit's Test career already looks over, the skipper having "rested" for the decisive, final Test against Australia.

"Hopefully they know when the right time to play is," India's 1983 World Cup-winning captain Kapil Dev said.

"When they think it is not, they will call it off."

Following the bruising 3-1 Test defeat in Australia, India's board ordered contracted players to play domestic cricket.

But both flopped, with Rohit scoring three and 28 in his first and second innings for Mumbai in the Ranji Trophy and Kohli scoring six off 15 balls for Delhi.

If the idea was to help them play their way back into form, it did not work.

Despite intense conjecture about their futures India head coach Gautam Gambhir said the two stalwarts will have "massive roles" to play at the Champions Trophy.

India, who will play their games in Dubai after refusing to visit neighbours and hosts Pakistan, are favourites to win the title for a third time.

Rohit came into the England ODIs with just 31 runs in three matches in the Australia Test series defeat.

He scored two in the first ODI against England before rolling back the years in the second with a 90-ball 119.

Former India batsman Sanjay Manjrekar was sceptical that Rohit could push on from there.

"He wanted a big hundred and he finally got it," Manjrekar told *ESPNcricinfo*. "Whether he can hit a few more... we will have to wait. I am not confident."

Rohit then got out for one in the final match against England.

It was in that match that Kohli finally came good with his 52 – his 73rd half-century in 297 ODIs.

Kohli started tentatively before finding his groove in Ahmedabad to finish with seven fours and one six in his 55-ball innings.

No matter what happens at the Champions Trophy, the expectation in India is that Kohli will continue to play Test cricket.

Former England batsman Kevin Pietersen warned India against discarding the duo prematurely.

"You can't write these guys off because of the aura they have when they walk out to bat," said Pietersen in his role as a television pundit.

Pietersen said that Kohli in particular had earned the right to go out on his own terms.

"The question mark doesn't come down to me, you, the selectors, the coaches, and the other players," he said. "Virat Kohli can only answer the question in terms of how long he wants to continue."

ANNOUNCEMENT

Fifty One East and Fnac Qatar continue their partnership with QTEO, QEMO



Fifty One East, Qatar's favourite department store, is excited to announce its continued sponsorship of two prestigious international tennis tournaments, the Qatar TotalEnergies Open (QTEO) and the Qatar ExxonMobil Open (QEMO), alongside Fnac Qatar. This marks the second year of a three-year partnership that is set to elevate the tournaments with style, culture, and an unmatched experience for all attendees.

Running from February 9 to 15 for the ladies and February 17 to 22 for the gentlemen, the Qatar TotalEnergies Open and Qatar ExxonMobil Open are renowned as major events on the global tennis calendar. The tournaments attract world-class male and female players and are critical fixtures in the International Tennis Federation's world championships.

This sponsorship underscores Fifty One East and Fnac Qatar's ongoing commitment to supporting Qatar's sports scene and international sporting excellence. Building on their successful collaboration across the years, the two partners are poised to further enhance the experience for fans and players alike.

Fifty One East's Chairman and Managing Director, Bader al-Darwish, said: "We are proud to extend our support for these world-class tournaments as part of our ongoing sponsorship. This collaboration aligns perfectly with our mission to bring style, culture, and excitement to the forefront of Qatar's sports landscape."

He further praised the hard work and dedication of the Qatar Tennis Federation (QTF) and its executive board, acknowledging their relentless efforts in enhancing the tournaments year after year.

"Their exceptional commitment has elevated these competitions to global prominence, ensuring an unparalleled experience for players and fans alike. We look forward to another fruitful year of collaboration, reinforcing our shared passion for sports and excellence in Qatar."

As a part of this year's sponsorship, Fnac Qatar will be showcasing Eastpak's latest collection in a unique experience at the tournament grounds. Visitors will have the chance to see the full range of bags and, for the first time, witness a live graffiti art session by a guest artist, who will create custom designs based on customer requests.

Additionally, Toysaloona will present an exciting selection of the latest toys at the men's tournament, while Decode will showcase the freshest fashion, creating a one-of-a-kind atmosphere within Fifty One East's tent.

The Coin Toss for the sponsors will take place on centre court, where Fifty One East and Fnac Qatar will join the players and chair umpire to flip the e-Coin before each match.

TENNIS

WADA says Sinner case 'a million miles from doping'

Sanction has been questioned by players including Djokovic

AFP
London

Jannik Sinner's three-month ban for a pair of positive drug tests has been defended by the World Anti-Doping Agency after claims the world number one's punishment was too lenient.

Sinner's long doping saga came to an end on Saturday after the tennis star agreed to the ban, admitting "partial responsibility" for team mistakes which led to him twice testing positive for traces of clostebol in March last year. The Italian was facing a potential ban of two years after WADA appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport against his initial exoneration by the International Tennis Integrity Agency.

But WADA withdrew its appeal and came to an agreement with Sinner over his three-month ban after accepting the 23-year-old was inadvertently contaminated by his physiotherapist. Sinner said that the banned substance entered his system when his physio used a spray containing it to treat a cut, then provided massage and sports therapy to the player. The sanction has been questioned and criticised by current and former players including Novak Djokovic.

However, WADA's general counsel Ross Wenzel believes the sanction level was "in the right place" for what had occurred. "This was a case that was a million miles away from doping," he told BBC Sport.

"The scientific feedback that we received was that this could not be a case of intentional doping, including micro-dosing. WADA has received messages from those that consider that the sanction was too high and, in some respects, if you have some saying this is unfair on the athlete, and others saying it's not enough, maybe it's an indication that although it's not going to be popular with everyone, maybe it's an indication that it was in the right place. When we look at these cases we try to look at them technically, operationally and we don't do it with fear of what the public and the politicians or anyone is going to say."

In another high-profile case last year, five-time Grand Slam champion Iga Swiatek accepted a one-month ban after testing positive for the banned heart drug trimetazidine.

In contrast, the recently retired Simona Halep, a former world number one, was handed a four-year ban by the ITIA in 2022 after testing positive for the blood-boosting drug roxadustat. She argued it was the result of a tainted supplement and successfully appealed to CAS, which reduced her suspension to nine months.


Jannik Sinner's long doping saga came to an end on Saturday after the tennis star agreed to the ban, admitting "partial responsibility" for team mistakes which led to him twice testing positive for traces of clostebol in March last year.

Speaking at the Qatar Open on Monday, 24-time Grand Slam champion Djokovic said many players were unhappy with the way the cases had been handled. "There's a majority of the players that I've talked to in the locker room, not just in the last few days, but also last few months, that are not happy with the way this whole process has been handled," the former world number one said.

"A majority of the players don't feel that it's fair. A majority of the players feel like there is favouritism happening. It seems like, it appears that you can almost affect the outcome if you are a top player, if you have access to the top lawyers."

Sinner's suspension runs from February 9 to May 4, leaving him clear to play in the rest of this year's Grand Slams, starting with the French Open. He has not played competitively since defeating Alexander Zverev in the Australian Open final in January. "Once you've reached an agreement, what you can't do is then say 'oh, but we're going to have this apply from two months in the future for a period of three months'," Wenzel said. "It must come into effect quickly. Of course, once the deal is done, it's important that it is executed and that it is made public for reasons of transparency. The sanctions that we impose and the code even says this, they're blind to the calendar."

FOOTBALL

Qatar end U20 Asian Cup campaign with win over Kyrgyzstan

Qatar closed their AFC U20 Asian Cup China 2025 campaign with a 4-0 win over Kyrgyzstan at the Shenzhen Youth Football Training Base Centre Stadium yesterday. Goals from Tahsin Jamshid, Moath Taha, Mohamed Gouda and Noureldin Ibrahim saw Qatar finish third in Group A with three points while Kyrgyzstan left the tournament empty handed.

Qatar had the first attempt at goal in the seventh minute, Mohamed Hani Faragalla receiving a through ball from Gouda on the left and forcing a diving save from keeper Aziret Ysmanaliev. The 2014 champions had another go in the 25th minute when Gouda inched down the left and struck from an acute angle but his effort was easily saved.

Qatar's attacks paid off three minutes later when Jamshid made his way from the right, evaded two defenders and tucked the ball past an onrushing Ysmanaliev.

The goal galvanised Qatar, with Jamshid proving a constant threat to the Kyrgyz Republic defence with his runs down the right.

The Central Asian side's challenge became tougher when captain Atai Eshenkulov was flashed the red card five minutes into injury time for bringing down Faragalla.

Taha scored Qatar's second from Bassam Adel Eid's ensuing free-kick when he pounced on the ball deflecting off the wall to slide it past Ysmanaliev.

Qatar's third came in the 55th minute when Gouda latched onto a pass from Taha, dashed into the box from the left and calmly put the ball away.

The West Asians claimed their final goal in the 83rd minute, when a brilliant through ball from Taha in his own half half found an unmarked Noureldin Ibrahim on the left, who sprinted the length of the Kyrgyzstan half to strike home past a rooted Ysmanaliev.


Qatar finished third in Group A with three points, while Australia and hosts China progressed to the last 16.

FOCUS

Red Bull resilience key to bid for fifth straight F1 title: Verstappen

AFP
London

Max Verstappen believes the knowledge Red Bull gained from a hard-fought 2024 Formula One season could help him in his quest to win a record-equalling fifth successive drivers' world championship.

The Dutchman claimed his fourth straight title in Las Vegas in November, becoming just the fifth driver in Formula One history to achieve that feat. But were he to keep hold of his crown in 2025, -- Formula One's 75th anniversary season -- Verstappen would join an even more exclusive club by drawing level with Michael Schumacher's record of five championships in a row.

While Verstappen eventually won the 2024 title by 63 points from Lando Norris, it was Norris's McLaren team who deprived Red Bull of a hat-trick of constructors' championships. "If we are competitive as a team, then I'm sure that we can win it again," Verstappen told reporters during the 2025 Formula One Season launch at London's O2 Arena yesterday. "We are very experienced and I think we showed that also last year that it was a bit tougher for us, we were still maximising our results. And that's, I think, the big strength of the team."

But Verstappen said that with pre-season testing in Bahrain still to take place ahead of the opening Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne on March 16, it was hard to assess Red Bull's prospects. "I don't know where we are at the moment. I think no one knows that. And in a few weeks we'll know."



Asked if the upcoming season would be particularly competitive, the 27-year-old Dutchman added: "That would be nice, but it's impossible to answer right now, right? "I've not driven my car, no-one has seen the other cars, so you can speculate about it, but it's just a waste of energy to think about that yet. It's good for the sport if it's exciting, but I don't know at the moment."

Verstappen was speaking at an event where all 10 teams had gathered to launch their new cars at the same venue, the first time this has happened in the history of Formula One.

RUSSELL HAS 'NO CONCERNS' OVER VERSTAPPEN AFTER ABU DHABI ROW

Meanwhile, George Russell insisted he had "no concerns" about Verstappen heading into the new Formula One campaign despite their furious row during last season's final race in Abu Dhabi. After the race, Russell accused Verstappen of blocking him dangerously during qualifying at the Qatar Grand Prix, a claim that resulted in a stewards' investigation and Verstappen losing pole position to Russell.

After the race, said Verstappen threatened to "put me on my (expletive) head in the wall". The British driver called the Dutchman a "bully", adding his comments were "unacceptable".

Verstappen, who won his fourth consecutive world championship last season, labelled Russell a "backstabber" and a "loser".

Russell, asked during the 2025 Formula One season launch in London on Tuesday if he had talked to Verstappen since the concluding race on December 8, replied: "No, I haven't spoken (to him). I have no concerns about him or his driving – that happened last year and I want to focus on myself. But obviously things got out of line at the end of last year, and I made it pretty clear that I'm not going to take it.

"But now it's 2025 and I'm focused on the job and the job is to win. So I'm not going to change my approach, fighting him, or fighting any other drivers. The goal is the same."

CYCLING

Tarling beats Pogacar and the clock at UAE Tour

AFP
Paris

British rider Josh Tarling won a 12.2km time trial on stage two of the UAE Tour yesterday to snatch the overall lead in the seven-day race, while Tadej Pogacar was third on the day. The powerfully built 21-year-old Ineos rider, who came fourth in the Paris Olympics time trial last year despite a nasty fall, completed the course at an average speed of over 56km/h.

"I missed some big chances last year so I needed this," he said. The route yesterday suited his 6ft 4in (1.94m) frame as it was flat and featured relatively few corners. He finished 13sec ahead of Swiss rider Steffan Bissegger and 18sec ahead of Tour de France and Giro d'Italia champion Pogacar to take the overall leader's red jersey from Italian sprinter Jonathan Milan.

Milan was one of the riders to set off late and was adversely affected by high winds that picked up near the close of racing. Pogacar said he had anticipated such a turn of events. "It was a good time trial, a first all-out effort of the year and I am happy with both the speed and the legs. It was always going to be tough to compete against Tarling and Bissegger because they really fly on this kind of parcours," he said.

Tarling may struggle on stage three on Wednesday which is a 181km run through the desert from the UAE's most northern city Ras al Khaimah to a hilltop finish at Jebel Jais mountain. With a climb of 20km with a five percent average gradient until it hits seven percent in the last 2km, all eyes will be on Pogacar, who is third in the overall standings just 18 seconds behind Tarling. Bissegger is second, 13sec behind the Briton.

"Tomorrow is a very nice stage for me," said Pogacar. "I have good memories from Jebel Jais and as I always say, it is a day for a sprint between the climbers," the 26-year-old Slovenian said. "There can be surprises, of course, but I am really looking forward to it because it suits me very well."



INEOS Grenadiers' British rider Joshua Tarling celebrates on the podium after winning the second stage of the UAE Tour cycling race at al-Hudayriyat island in Abu Dhabi. *(AFP)*

E1 DOHA GP PROMISES THRILLING RACING ACTION AND STAR POWER

Doha: An unforgettable racing action is expected this weekend as E1, the world's all-electric race boat series, comes to Doha supported by title partner Visit Qatar. Nine teams backed by celebrities including Will Smith, Rafael Nadel, LeBron James and Virat Kohli, take to the waters around The Pearl Island as round two of the 2025 UIM E1 World Championship makes its first foray to Qatar from February 21 to 22.

Each team, piloted by exceptional male and female competitors drawn from the worlds of Formula 1, rallying and powerboating, will race their all-electric powerboats in their quest to pick up vital Championship points and aim for the ultimate glory of being crowned 'Champions of the Water'.

With the support of Visit Qatar, E1 is the latest and newest global competition to be welcomed to Qatar's growing elite sporting calendar. As well as providing thrilling, up-close racing action for fans, E1 is a racing laboratory that uses competition on the water as the ultimate testbed for developing cutting-edge, innovative fully electric marine mobility.

John Williams, E1 Chief Championship Officer, said: "Whether you're joining our Acceleration Festival fan zone, or enjoying our exclusive official hospitality, E1 is sure to bring exciting, close racing action on the water to fans of all ages. We are excited to bring E1 championship to Qatar for the first time and with the support of our event partners at Visit Qatar and the UDC, to be part of the country's prestigious sporting calendar of world-class events."

SPOTLIGHT

Thrilling martial arts spectacle awaits fans at ONE 171: Qatar

ONE Championship, the world's largest martial arts organisation, is returning to Qatar and the Lusail Sports Arena tomorrow for ONE 171, a high-stakes event featuring some of the most exciting fighters on the planet. The card is headlined by two World Title fights, but it also features a variety of captivating matchups designed to deliver fireworks.

In the main event, ONE Strawweight MMA World Champion Joshua Pacio will face interim titleholder Jarred Brooks for the third time in a highly anticipated World Title unification bout. This rivalry, which began in December 2022 when Brooks claimed the strawweight title, has already seen dramatic twists, including a disqualification victory for Pacio in their March 2024 rematch. Now, both fighters are looking to settle the score in Doha.

In the co-main event, ONE Bantamweight Kickboxing World Champion Jonathan Haggerty will defend his belt against Chinese icon Wei Rui.

The first-ever Championship event held in Qatar last year drew an impressive global audience of almost 20mn viewers across traditional and online platforms, officially marking ONE Championship's expansion into the Mena region. This year's event promises to be even bigger, with a star-studded lineup featuring multiple World Championship contests across MMA, Muay Thai, kickboxing, and submission grappling.

Ahead of the event, ONE Championship held a pre-event press conference in partnership with Visit Qatar, where Chairman and CEO Chatri Sityodtong expressed his excitement for the event. He stated, "The world's largest martial arts organisation is coming back to the Middle East to put on the biggest spectacle across all these incredible disciplines, with the world's greatest athletes and martial arts. We are excited, and I tell you, the main event and the co-main are going to be barn-burning, explosive. I believe both fights will end in spectacular knockouts. And here's the thing — we have 14 fights, and these are all killers and monsters, the very best of the best on the planet."

During a press conference at the Mohammed Bin Jassim House – Msheireb Museums, Pacio declared: "The difference this time is, of course, I'm going to win. Yeah, I'm going to win. The last time I won, but it's not the way that we wanted to. And I don't look [at the] past, I look forward, and here we are. It will be different. It will be different this time."

Brooks fired back, saying: "I want to be remembered as the true strawweight World Champion. I am very, very grateful for ONE Championship and the things that they have done for me. I promise you, Joshua, and I, we are more than willing and prepared, and I am going to go out and I'm going to finish him on Thursday, whether you like it, or you don't, I'm going to go out and I'm going to finish him."





In the main event, ONE Strawweight MMA World Champion Joshua Pacio (left) will face off against interim title holder Jarred Brooks for the third time in a highly anticipated World Title unification bout at the Lusail Sports Arena.

Chatri Sityodtong – ONE Championship Chairman and CEO, speaks at a press conference at the Mohammed Bin Jassim House – Msheireb Museums.

SCHEDULE
Main Event: Strawweight MMA World Championship Unification: Joshua Pacio vs Jarred Brooks
CO-main event: Bantamweight Kickboxing World Championship: Jonathan Haggerty vs Wei Rui

Welterweight MMA: Roberto Soldic vs Saygid Guseyn Arslanaliev
Bantamweight Kickboxing: Petchtanong Petchfergus vs Ilias Ennahachi
Middleweight MMA: Aung La Nsang vs Shamil Erdogan
Featherweight MMA: Shamil Gasanov vs Martin Nguyen
Bantamweight MMA: Bibiano Fernandes vs Kevin Belingon
Heavyweight MMA: Mauro Cerilli vs Kirill Grishenko
Bantamweight Muay Thai: Jake Peacock vs Shinji Suzuki
Women's Atomweight MMA: Ritu Phogat vs Ayaka Miura
Lightweight MMA: Kade Ruotolo vs Nicolas Alejandro Vigna
Preliminary card: Openweight Submission Grappling
Zayed Alkatheeri vs Mohammed Hilal Ahmad Abu Rumuh
Lightweight MMA: Abdullo Khodzhaev vs Wilian Poles
Featherweight MMA: Hussein Salem vs Walter Cogliandro

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Ancelotti dismisses talk of Man City being underdogs

Real came back to win 3-2 late on against City last week in first leg

Reuters
Madrid

Real Madrid manager Carlo Ancelotti brushed aside Pep Guardiola's claim that Manchester City have a "one percent" chance of beating the Spanish side today, saying that the defending European champions only hold a small advantage.

Real came back to win 3-2 late on against City at the Etihad last week in the first leg of their Champions League playoff, but Ancelotti urged his side not to get ahead of themselves as they seek to seal a last 16 place in front of their own fans.

"Honestly, not even (Guardiola) believes what he said, but I'm going to ask him about it before the game anyway," the Italian joked in a press conference. "He doesn't think they have a one percent chance of advancing and neither do we think we are 99 percent favourites. We have a small advantage due to what we did at Manchester and we have to use it in our favour.

"Learning to play with the advantage is a psychological issue and it is difficult to deal with it. I could come here and say that we have no advantage and will play as if we were 0-0... but it's nonsense and nobody would believe me. What you can control is the attitude of the team and ensure we play the same game as a week ago because it went well for us. But you can't forget that you have the advantage."

After Real Madrid lodged a letter of complaint against La Liga's referees after what they considered to be a number of unfair decisions, Ancelotti said the Champions League had fewer controversial calls, though he still had issues with VAR. "I do (feel calmer), the statistics speak for themselves. There is less controversy and less intervention by the VAR (in the Champions League), which only intervenes when necessary," Ancelotti said.

"In the Champions League, only the best referees from each country are assigned and the quality is very high in this respect. I have doubts (about the VAR) because I think the VAR has taken too much responsibility away from the referee. It's a bit of a dangerous system. The VAR has been introduced to avoid blatant and obvious mistakes, not for interventions that are football-related. Often the aim is to remove all the naturalness of football for the sake of an image."



Real Madrid's coach Carlo Ancelotti (centre) leads a training session on the eve of their UEFA Champions League match against Manchester City in Valdebebas, in the outskirts of Madrid. *(AFP)*

BREST WILL BE TRICKY OPPONENTS IN CHAMPIONS LEAGUE, SAYS PSG'S COACH ENRIQUE

Paris St Germain are wary of Brest's collective team strength and the Parisian side are bracing themselves for a tricky test, manager Luis Enrique said on the eve of today's Champions League second leg playoff clash at Parc des Princes.

PSG put themselves in the driving seat after a 3-0 victory at Brest in the first leg last Tuesday, thanks to Vitinha's penalty and a brace by the in-form Frenchman Ousmane Dembele. But Luis Enrique was not getting carried away, as his side, who are top of the Ligue 1 standings, chase a first Champions League title.

"Without a doubt, it is a tricky match despite the very good result. Our job is to think of this match as an obligation to win from the outset," Enrique told reporters. "I think the atmosphere will be one of total support. We just need to think about attacking and defending in a total way. Brest's strength is their team and not necessarily their individuals, even if there are players like (Pierre) Lees-Melou. (Ludovic) Ajorque obviously takes risks with his game. It's very difficult to play against Brest and you have to be prepared. Can Brest turn things around? Our aim is not to let that happen."

The Spaniard added that he was pleased with new January signing Khvicha Kvaratskhelia.

The 24-year-old joined PSG from Italian side Napoli for a reported fee of 70mn euros on a contract until 2029. He has made six appearances for PSG, scoring once.

Lewandowski lifts Barcelona past Rayo and into La Liga lead

Barcelona: Robert Lewandowski scored from the penalty spot as Barcelona scraped out a 1-0 home win over Rayo Vallecano on Monday to climb top of the Spanish La Liga.

Barcelona were seven points off first place three weeks ago but the two big Madrid clubs have suffered dips in form. Both drew their games 1-1 on Saturday playing with 10 men.

Barcelona took advantage on Monday night by eking out a victory over a third Madrid team, Rayo, thanks to their star striker. "We can't win every game 3-0, we had to work," Barcelona fullback Alex Balde said.

Lewandowski scored his 20th goal of the season with a 28th-minute penalty that went in off the post. Rayo goalkeeper Pep Chavarria repeatedly frustrated Barcelona. At the other end, Jorge de Frutos had a strike disallowed and missed with a headed chance in added time. "It was hard work for the players and at the end we are happy," said Barcelona coach Hansi Flick. "Everyone is happy about our new position. I think we played very well, although I think we can do better." Barcelona remained unbeaten in 12 matches in 2025 while ending the 10-match unbeaten run that had lifted Rayo to a surprising sixth place.

FOCUS

Lusail International Circuit announces early bird promotion for F1 Qatar Grand Prix

Lusail International Circuit (LIC) has announced the launch of its Early Bird promotion for the Formula 1 Qatar Airways Qatar Grand Prix 2025, marking the fourth edition of F1 racing at this prestigious venue since its debut in 2021.

Set to take place from November 28-30, 2025, the race will feature 57 laps around the flowing 5.38 kilometre Lusail International Circuit. Home to motorsports since 2004, the state-of-the-art circuit, celebrated for its smooth combination of 16 medium and high-speed corners, excellent facilities, record breaking pitlane, and spectacular floodlit racing, has quickly established itself as a standout venue on the F1 calendar.

During the early bird promotion period, which began yesterday for a limited time, motorsport enthusiasts can enjoy a 10% discount on all ticket categories, except for hospitality packages.

Under the Early Bird scheme, prices for the premium Main Grandstand three-day passes start at QR1,800 (regular price QR2,000), while North Grandstand tickets are available at QR1,350 (regular price QR1,500). T2, T3, and T16 Grandstand tickets are priced at QR900 each during the promotional period, down from the regular price of QR1,000.

For General Admission, fans can choose from single-day or three-day passes: - Friday tickets: QR180 (regular price QR200)



- Saturday tickets: QR450 (regular price QR500)
- Sunday tickets: QR450 (regular price QR500)
- Three-day General Admission pass: QR540 (regular price QR600)

Regular ticket sales will commence on March 20, and continue through November, subject to availability. Visit LIC's official website to book tickets.

FOOTBALL

Feyenoord knock out 10-man AC Milan to reach last 16

AFP
Milan

Feyenoord reached the last 16 of the Champions League yesterday after a 1-1 draw at 10-man AC Milan which took them past the seven-time kings of Europe 2-1 on aggregate.

Julian Carranza thumped home the winning header in the 73rd minute at a frigid San Siro, cancelling out Santiago Gimenez's first-minute opener for Milan and sending the Dutch through to meet either Inter Milan or Arsenal.

Argentine attacker Carranza struck for Feyenoord shortly after coming on as substitute as the away side pushed to reach the next round, while Milan struggled following Theo Hernandez's sending off early in the second half.

Already on a booking for a needless foul on Anis Hadj-Moussa just before half-time, Hernandez was ruled by referee Szymon Marciniak to have dived in the penalty box when under pressure from Givairo Read.

The France full-back was dismissed, leaving Milan on the back foot after having dominated up to that point. Hernandez's sending off and Carranza's tie-winning header ruined what looked to be Gimenez's night when he nodded home the opener against his old team after just 36 seconds.

Sergio Conceicao's Milan are by no means assured of a spot in next year's tournament as they sit seventh in Serie A, five points off the top four with a game in hand.