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SPORT



MOTORSPORT

Ducati unleash deposed MotoGP kings Marquez and Bagnaia

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MOTORSPORT

F4 Middle East Championship finale set to thrill at Qatar 1812 KM





QMMF drivers Bader Sulaiti and Taneem Hassiba (right) in action during the round 4 of F4 Middle East Championshipat the Yas Marina Circuit in Abu Dhabi on February 13.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The F4 Middle East Championship is set for a dramatic conclusion at the iconic Qatar 1812 KM event, serving as a support race for the FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) season opener at Lusail International Circuit from February 26-28, 2025. The F4 Middle East Championship represents the first step on the FIA single-seater pathway, providing young drivers with a professional platform to develop their racing careers.

The championship features state-of-the-art F4 cars and operates under FIA regulations, ensuring the highest standards of competition and safety.

The title fight comes down to three exceptional talents: championship leader Emanuele Olivieri (269 points), Kean Nakamura-Berta (221 points), and Alex Powell (207 points). With crucial points still available in the final round, the championship remains wide open, promising intense competition at the world-class Lusail facility.

LOCAL HEROES

In a historic moment for Qatar motorsport, three homegrown talents from the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) and Qatar Motorsport Academy will compete on their home circuit.

Bader al-Sulaiti, Taha Hassiba, and Tameem Hassiba have shown remarkable progress throughout the championship, with Bader and Taha making history as the first Qatari drivers to score championship points in the series.

PERFECT PLATFORM

The F4 Middle East Championship finale running alongside the WEC season opener provides an exceptional platform for emerging talents.

The presence of Qatari drivers competing at this level demonstrates the success of QMMF's motorsport development programme and serves as inspiration for the next generation of local racing talent.

The F4 Middle East Championship races will complement action-packed three days of racing that includes the highly anticipated Qatar 1812 KM WEC race and the Lusail Classic Endurance Race, offering motorsport fans an unprecedented celebration of racing across multiple disciplines.

FOOTBALL

Maresca says Chelsea are over-reliant on Palmer

'We struggle to score goals and we need to be a little bit more clinical when we get the chances'

AFP
London

Enzo Maresca has challenged his misfiring Chelsea squad to step up during a lean spell for Cole Palmer, admitting "we rely on Cole for everything".

The England attacking midfielder has scored 14 goals and provided six assists in the Premier League this season but his last goal was in mid-January and he last set up a goal on December 1.

Chelsea, just two points behind runaway leaders Liverpool in mid-December, have slipped to seventh in the table after three defeats in their past four games, though they are just one point behind fourth-placed Manchester City.

Maresca, preparing his team to host rock-bottom Southampton today, said he was not worried about Palmer's dip in form.

"I'm not concerned about Cole because Cole is a human being and during the season he can have some moments where he struggles a little bit more," he told reporters yesterday.

"The problem with Cole is probably that we rely on Cole for everything and I said since we started that we need to rely on the team. For sure we need big players, top players like Cole, but we are not worried about Cole at all."

He added: "Every game we expect from him a goal or assist. It's difficult, he's a human being, he's a player. At this moment, probably his performance also reflects a little bit the team performance.

"We struggle to score goals and we need to be a little bit more clinical when we get the chances."

The Italian, in his first season at Stamford Bridge, remains upbeat over Chelsea's form as they chase a Champions League place.

"Even against Villa (a 2-1 defeat on Saturday), I think the identity was there," he said.

"The way we play on the ball and off the ball was there, very similar to what we are doing during the season.

"So the identity is there. I said after Aston Villa game, in this moment I have the feeling that winning one, we can have a good run again and we can build a good momentum again. That is what I think in this moment the players need."

Chelsea centre back Trevoh Chalobah will be out of action for at least a week after picking up an injury during the loss at Aston Villa, Maresca said.

Chalobah's absence adds to seventh-placed Chelsea's long injury list with Nicolas Jackson, Noni Madueke, Romeo Lavia and Wesley Fofana missing Saturday's trip to Villa. "He had a check yesterday and he will be around one week to 10 days," Maresca said.

"On one side it is good because it is not an important injury but on the other side it is a shame because we lose another player at this moment with the amount of injuries that we had."



Chelsea's midfielder Cole Palmer (right) runs away from Aston Villa's defenders Ian Maatsen (centre) and Youri Tielemans during the English Premier League match at Villa Park in Birmingham on Saturday. *(AFP)*

An error by goalkeeper Filip Jorgensen led to Villa scoring a late second goal, handing Chelsea their third straight loss in all competitions. Maresca said he still had faith in Jorgensen as his number one keeper. "He feels a little bit sad and upset because he recognises it was a mistake but overall he is okay," the manager added.

Maresca said Chelsea, who are just a point below fourth-placed Manchester City, will face a stiff test against Southampton despite them being bottom of the league.

"I don't trust games like this; they can be tricky games. If you watch the game against Manchester United away they were winning 1-0 until the last five minutes," he said. "It's a tricky one and from now on, every game, every team is playing for something so they are all going to be tough."

Former Leicester City manager Maresca said Chelsea had improved but needed to pick up some positive results to build momentum. "When you are at Chelsea, I don't think you have games you don't prepare to win. Our duty is to prepare for every game to win. From now on we have 12 games to go and no doubt all of them are must-win for us," he said.

CRICKET

SPOTLIGHT

Kohli and Rohit 'have a lot of cricket left'



India's captain Rohit Sharma walks back to the pavilion after his dismissal during the ICC Champions Trophy match against India at the Dubai International Stadium in Dubai on Sunday. *(AFP)*

AFP
Dubai

Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma have "a lot of cricket left in them", former India opener and Champions Trophy winner Shikhar Dhawan says, adding that the mere presence of the veteran duo can unsettle any opposition.

Kohli hit an unbeaten 100 on Sunday, his 51st ODI century, as India swept aside Pakistan by six wickets in Dubai to stand on the cusp of the ICC Champions Trophy semi-finals.

Pakistan, who are hosting all of the games except those involving India, are on the brink of elimination after their second defeat of the tournament.

Rohit made a quickfire 20 at the top of the innings as India went after 242 for victory and Kohli took charge after the captain's exit to steer the team home with 45 balls to spare.

Kohli, 36, and Rohit, 37, have struggled for form since retiring from T20 internationals after last year's World Cup win, with speculation swirling that they could soon retire.

But Kohli rolled back the years with his first ODI century since November 2023.

"Virat standing on the crease, his presence is big. The opposition have fear in them," said Dhawan, who is in Dubai as a tournament ambassador.

Kohli went past 14,000 ODI runs early in his innings, becoming only the third batsman to achieve the landmark after Sachin Tendulkar and Kumar Sangakkara.

Rohit struck form with a century in India's 3-0 home sweep of England earlier this month and hit a 36-ball 41 in India's opening win over Bangladesh.

"Recently Rohit scored an amazing century, but it's not about a century or half-century," said Dhawan, a swashbuckling opener who played his last ODI in 2022 and won the Champions Trophy in 2013.

"Today Rohit played a quick 20 runs, that also carries value. He created that fearless environment for the whole team," he added.

"He's got a great impact in early overs in today's cricket.

"Things have changed, so now it's good to take that risk and play aerial shots.

"We used to see it only in T20 cricket but now we see it in 50-over cricket.

"The Pakistan batsmen did not play any aerial shots, but Rohit came and took that risk, which played in India's favour."

Pressed on the futures of Rohit and Kohli, Dhawan said: "They have a lot of cricket left in them."

Spinner Kuldeep Yadav, who took a crucial 3-40 to peg back Pakistan, hailed man-of-the-match Kohli.

"There is only one big player in the team and that is Virat 'bhai' (brother), who played a brilliant innings," Kuldeep said.

"Hope that I can continue performing well," added the left-arm wrist spinner, who recently returned after hernia surgery.

"Obviously if you play good cricket, stick around with good players, and you know you have a good team with two senior players who are greats."

MATCH REPORT

Ravindra shines as New Zealand reach CT semis

The result means Pakistan, Bangladesh knocked out of tournament

Reuters
Rawalpindi

New Zealand powered into the semi-finals of the Champions Trophy, taking India along with them after Rachin Ravindra's century and inspired bowling from Michael Bracewell ensured a five-wicket win over Group A opponents Bangladesh yesterday.

Chasing 237 for victory thanks to Bracewell's four-wicket haul, New Zealand lost Will Young for a duck in the opening over and Kane Williamson for five shortly after but Ravindra's classy 112 and Tom Latham's 55 secured the victory in 46.1 overs.

Bangladesh earlier squandered a good start and made 236-9 in 50 overs thanks to Najmul Hossain Shanto's 77 and Jaker Ali's 45 but paid a heavy price for 178 dot balls in their innings.

The result meant that defending champions Pakistan joined Bangladesh in being knocked out of the tournament after losing their opening two matches against New Zealand and India.

"Yeah, that's nice (to go through). We knew Bangladesh were a tough challenge on this wicket," New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner said.

"The way we were able to pull it back in the middle with the ball was pleasing. It's probably the hardest thing to do in one-day cricket, take wickets in the middle and I think Bracewell was outstanding."

Ravindra, who came into the side in place of the ill Daryl Mitchell, was nearly run out while on 25 but settled his nerves with delightful boundaries on the off side and brought up his half century with a driven four behind the bowler.

After Devon Conway was castled by Mustafizur Rahman for 30, Ravindra continued to grind and made the most of being dropped on 93 by Mehidy Hasan Miraz before scoring his fourth one-day international century.



New Zealands' Rachin Ravindra (left) celebrates after scoring a century with teammate Tom Latham during the ICC Champions Trophy match against Bangladesh at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium in Rawalpindi yesterday. *(AFP)*

The left-hander, who forged a 129-run partnership with the in-form Latham, was handed another lifeline after being dropped by Mahmudullah on 105 before finally departing with the job all but done.

Glenn Phillips made an unbeaten 21 and Bracewell scored 11 not out to take their team home.

Earlier, Bangladesh made a solid start after being asked to bat first but poor shot selection by their middle order batsmen meant they ended up with a modest total.

The introduction of spinner Bracewell in the ninth over gave New Zealand the breakthrough as opener Tanzid Hasan departed for a run-a-ball 24, before seamer Will O'Rourke had Miraz caught for 13 to leave Bangladesh reeling at 64-2.

Shanto looked to steady the ship but New Zealand's bowlers applied the squeeze and Bracewell provided the cutting edge to finish with 4-26 after getting rid of Towhid Hridoy for seven, Mushfiqur Rahim for two and Mahmudullah for four.

Bracewell then pulled off a fine running catch to dismiss Shanto in the 38th over bowled by O'Rourke, leaving Bangladesh desperate for a strong finish to add some respectability to their total.

Ali laid the platform with his rearguard effort but he was run out by wicketkeeper Tom Latham in the penultimate over, as Bangladesh limped to a below-par score.

"It was a pretty good wicket to bat on," said Shanto.

"We needed two big partnerships but the way we batted was really disappointing," Shanto added.

"The batting unit needs to improve a lot."

BRIEF SCORES

New Zealand 240 for 5 (Ravindra 112, Latham 55) **beat Bangladesh 236 for 9** (Shanto 77, Bracewell 4-26, O'Rourke 2-40) **by five wickets**

COMMENT

'Bullish' Bavuma wary of Australia ahead of clash in Rawalpindi



South Africa's captain Temba Bavuma speaks during a press conference on the eve of their ICC Champions Trophy match against Australia at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium in Rawalpindi yesterday. *(AFP)*

AFP
Rawalpindi, Pakistan

South African captain Temba Bavuma yesterday said his side would not be taking world champions Australia lightly despite a depleted bowling attack.

The two former Trophy champions meet for the first time in the event's history in Rawalpindi today, having each won their first games in Group B.

Australia – missing their pace trio of Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and Mitchell Starc – chased down a stiff 352-run target against England in Lahore - on Saturday.

It was the highest-ever chase in the event's history started in 1998.

Bavuma hailed Australia's penchant for International Cricket Council (ICC) events.

"I mean any Australian outfit that comes together for an ICC event is always one that you don't take lightly," said Bavuma in a press conference.

Australia have won the Champions Trophy twice while they won the ODI World Cup for the sixth time in India two years ago. In addition they also won the Twenty20 World Cup in 2021.

"They don't have their mainstay bowling attack but I think their batters may be doing a little bit more than what they're accustomed to."

Bavuma hopes his own batters will take advantage of Australia's inexperienced bowling.

"Probably within the bowling there's opportunities and I think if that presents itself on the day we'll definitely be looking to make use of that opportunity," said Bavuma.

Bavuma said Heinrich Klaasen was still recovering from a sore elbow that forced him to miss the first match.

"We still have to assess his (Klaasen) fitness. Mainly he is batting and I guess him and the medical team they'll make a decision accordingly."

Bavuma reckoned South Africa have a good chance to break the ICC event jinx, having not won any title since winning the Champions Trophy in 1998, then called the ICC Knock-Out tournament.

"Yeah, we're quite bullish about our chances. I think – as much as in the tri- series, we didn't have all our guys, it still was an opportunity for us to get info about conditions," said Bavuma.

Carey says Australia excited by rare South Africa challenge

Alex Carey said Australia are excited by the challenge posed by a formidable South Africa when they meet in the Champions Trophy for the first time in Rawalpindi today.

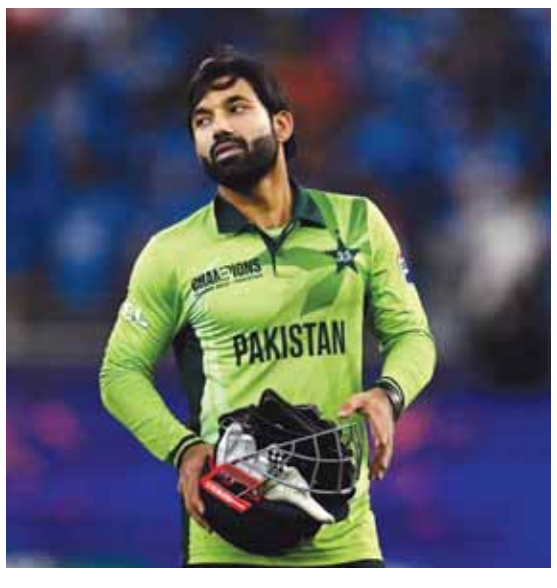
"I think South Africa are playing really well in one-day cricket and look like they've got a great balance across their 11 players," the 33-year-old Carey said yesterday.

"So, another exciting opportunity for us coming off the back of a great game against England, play with a lot of freedom, take the game on."

"Look, it's (Australia's) an inexperienced bowling attack, there's no hiding away from that. In and around that we've got some experience with our leg-spinner Adam Zampa and Glenn Maxwell," Carey said. The pace trio of Spencer Johnson, Ben Dwarshuis and Nathan Ellis went for 171 runs for three wickets between them in 27 overs as England scored 351-8 in their 50 overs.

FOCUS

Captain Rizwan admits pressure got to Pakistan's batsmen in loss to India



Reuters
Dubai

Captain **Mohammad Rizwan** said Pakistan's middle order succumbed to the pressure in a Champions Trophy defeat by fierce rivals India on Sunday that left the tournament hosts' chances of progressing to the knockout stage hanging by a thread.

The defending champions were restricted to 241 all out in 49.4 overs and India comfortably chased down the total with six wickets and 45 balls remaining thanks to Virat Kohli's unbeaten 100 at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium.

Rizwan, who scored 46 in a 104-run stand with Saud Shakeel (62), said his team had paid a heavy price for failing to build on the momentum.

"The middle order wasn't good enough," Rizwan told reporters. "The players performed well before this. In our meeting we had discussed that on this pitch around 270-280 would be enough (but) because the outfield was slow, the pitch was slow, the ball wasn't going into the gaps.

"Saud and I tried to build a partnership and took a lot of time, but after that the shot selection was poor. That's where they got a chance to take our wickets. Our middle order maybe couldn't take the pressure."

"For now, we can say that it's over. This is the truth. We'll see what Bangladesh do with New Zealand, what New Zealand do with India, and what we do," Rizwan said.

"As a captain, I don't like this (depending on other teams). If you're good enough, you show it by winning and keeping things in your hands.

"What matters is that India and New Zealand beat us. They played strong and we didn't play well. If we get a chance (to sneak through) then so be it."

Meanwhile top-order batsman Saud Shakeel said Pakistan must be better in every facet.

Shakeel top scored with 62 as Pakistan were dismissed for a below-par 241 in 49.4 overs in Sunday's blockbuster Group A clash against India.

Pakistan are hosts of the one-day event but the match took place in Dubai in front of a packed 25,000 crowd after India refused to travel to their neighbour.

"We did not play well in all three departments and that is why this result has come and we have to accept this," Shakeel told reporters.

"We are losing wickets in bunches and are not building big partnerships," he said. He added: "When we were batting the pitch played slow.

"We tried to bat deep but it did not happen.

"I am sure fans will be disappointed, just like we are."

"Some things did not go in our favour," said spinner Abrar Ahmed, but agreed with Shakeel.

"We have to change a lot of things within the group.

"This tournament is like that – you go out if you lose one match. We have to improve our batting and have to do more work on bowling."

Pakistan face Bangladesh in their last group match in Rawalpindi on Thursday, but both will already be eliminated if Bangladesh lose to New Zealand later on Monday.

Pakistan is hosting a major international cricket tournament for the first time in nearly three decades.

MOTOGP

Bold Ducati unleash speed kings Marquez and Bagnaia

Marc Marquez, 6 times champion, has joined double champion Francesco Bagnaia in Ducati factory-team pit

AFP
Paris

As the lights go out to start the MotoGP season in Thailand on Saturday, the road seems clear for one of the sport's two deposed kings to reclaim their crown – if they do not get in each other's way.

Marc Marquez, six times champion, has joined double champion Francesco 'Pecco' Bagnaia in the Ducati factory-team pit.

The question is whether that high-octane mix will prove too combustible.

"If you put two roosters in the same pen at 22 or 25 years old, it's bad. It's a bomb. But he's 27 and I'm 32," Marquez told Spanish television, in response to one in a string of chemistry questions he, Bagnaia and Ducati bosses have faced.

Ducati, with eight bikes on the grid, dominated last season. They won 19 of 20 Grand Prix, and 17 of 20 sprints.

Their misses all came in the first six races, when the other Italian marque, Aprilia, was briefly competitive.

Bagnaia, on a Ducati factory bike, won 11 times on a Sunday, but missed a third straight title, by 10 points to Jorge Martin, also on a 2024 Ducati with Pramac, even though the Spaniard won just three main races.

Marquez, healthy again after a long recovery from a crash in 2020, and competitive again on a Ducati with Gresini, won three races and finished third.

Claudio Domenicali, Ducati's CEO, embraces his team's status as overwhelming favourites.

"It is much better to start from a good base than start as an outsider," he said.

Ducati decided, before the end of last season, to promote Marquez rather than Martin.

Martin responded by signing for Aprilia this season.

At the start of February, 13 laps into his first official test, Martin crashed, breaking bones in his right hand and left foot.

He plans to race in Thailand after a short convalescence.

Meanwhile, Ducati opted to stick with their 2024 engine. Under MotoGP rules designed to curb spending, they will also have to use it next season. "The 2024 bike is very difficult to improve," said Davide Tardozzi, Ducati's team co-ordinator. "We try hard but finally we didn't find what we thought."



Marc Marquez (left) and Francesco Bagnaia

Team management has also been facing questions about their social engineering.

"We try to be very close with the people, so friendship personal relation is like in a family," said Domenicali.

"We are doing everything possible to set up an environment in which both of them feel welcome, both of them feel appreciated and both of them feel that we appreciate fair competition."

The riders are toeing the red party line.

"The title it has to be in red," said Marquez. "Doesn't matter if it is Pecco red or Marc red."

"Pecco is a gentleman, he never raises his voice or anything. But then, on the track, he is the fighter. If he has to put the bike in, as he has to, he's going to put it in."

"My objective is to beat all, and not just team," he said.

"We are quite smart and intelligent to understand how important it is to have a good relationship and atmosphere inside the box and we will do it."

Ducati's dance with Marquez and Martin was part of a particularly vigorous round of MotoGP's annual game of musical saddles.

Financially-troubled KTM promoted rising star Pedro Acosta to the factory team.

Three rookies join the grid. Fermin Aldeguer has taken the place of Marquez at Gresini. Thai rider Somkiat Chantra replaces retired Takaaki Nakagami at Honda. There will still be a Japanese rider on the grid as Moto2 world champion Ai Ogura replaces Miguel Oliveira at US team Trackhouse.

The season is scheduled to extend to a record 22 races with the return of the Czech and Hungarian grand prix.

The struggling Japanese marques Yamaha and Honda, will get help – allowed more engines, tyres and testing – under rules designed to help under pressure teams.

Both were quick in pre-season testing, but not as quick as Marquez who dominated.

MotoGP 2025 calendar

Paris: The 2025 MotoGP calendar ahead of this weekend's season-opener in Thailand (dates are main race):
March 2: Thailand (Buriram)
March 16: Argentina (Termas de Rio Hondo)
March 30: Grand Prix of the Americas (Austin, Texas)
April 13: Qatar (Losail)
April 27: Spain (Jerez)
May 11: France (Le Mans)
May 25: Great Britain (Silverstone)
June 8: Aragon (Alcaniz)
June 22: Italy (Mugello)
June 29: Dutch TT (Assen)
July 13: Germany (Sachsenring)
July 20: Czech Republic (Brno)
August 17: Austria (RedBullRing, Spielberg)
August 24: Hungary (Hungaroring)
September 7: Catalonia (Barcelona)
September 14: San Marino (Misano)
September 28: Japan (Motegi)
October 5: Indonesia (Mandalika)
October 19: Australia (Phillip Island)
October 26: Malaysia (Sepang)
November 9: Portugal (Portimao)
November 16: Valencia (Ricardo Tormo)

FORMULA ONE

Mercedes unveil car ahead of pre-season testing

AFP
London



This handout image released yesterday shows the team's new Mercedes-AMG F1 W16 E PERFORMANCE Formula One racing car. *(AFP)*

Mercedes yesterday unveiled their 2025 F1 car ahead of this week's pre-season testing in Bahrain as they adjust to life without Lewis Hamilton.

The British-based team digitally launched the W16 days after unveiling its livery at Formula One's glitzy season launch in London.

It marks the beginning of a new era for Mercedes following Hamilton's departure to Ferrari, with rookie Kimi Antonelli stepping up to replace the seven-time world champion as teammate to George Russell.

Valtteri Bottas will act as a reserve driver after previously racing for the team between 2017 and 2021.

Mercedes, who won eight consecutive constructors' titles from 2014, won four races in 2024, two each for Russell and Hamilton, the team's first victories since 2022.

But the car was inconsistent and Mercedes finished fourth in the constructors' championship behind McLaren, Ferrari and Red Bull.

"It is going to be a highly competitive season," said team principal Toto Wolff. "We saw last year just how close the field was.

"You couldn't say race-to-race who would be at the front, and I expect this year to be even closer. We will have to be at our very best if we want to challenge for championships this season."

He added: "George has proven that he is one of the very best drivers on the grid, capable of competing for the drivers' championship if we can give him a car capable of doing so."

Russell, 27, said he was eager to take to the track, with pre-season testing taking place in Bahrain from Wednesday until Friday.

"I feel like last year was my strongest in F1," the British driver said.

"This coming season will be my seventh in the sport, and fourth with the works Mercedes team, and I'm working hard to improve year-on-year. As a team, we are incredibly motivated to improve on last season."

Italian Antonelli, 18, said he was excited to make his F1 debut.

"It is a great opportunity, and I am very thankful to everyone at Mercedes for the faith and trust they've placed in me," he said.

The opening race of the season, the Australian Grand Prix, takes place in Melbourne on March 16.

TOTALENERGIES A PARTNER IN FIA WORLD ENDURANCE CHAMPIONSHIP 2025 SEASON OPENER IN QATAR



DOHA: TotalEnergies is delighted to continue its partnership with the FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) as the Multi-Energy Partner and Official Fuel Supplier for all its races including the 2025 season opener, the Qatar 1812 KM, scheduled from February 26 to 28, 2025, at the Lusail International Circuit.
This approximately 10-hour race, named in honour of Qatar's National Day, will feature an exceptional lineup of motorsport talent. As the Multi-Energy Partner and Official Fuel Supplier, TotalEnergies is dedicated to providing innovative solutions that support the sustainability of the sport.
TotalEnergies is also collaborating with Team Peugeot-TotalEnergies and Alpine Endurance Team. For Peugeot Sport, TotalEnergies is involved in Saft Battery co-development, supplying TotalEnergies Quartz Racing Lubricants, and providing EV Fluids. For Alpine Endurance Team, TotalEnergies is the proud partner for ELF Lubricants.
In its commitment to sustainability, TotalEnergies is supplying Excellium Racing 100, a sustainable fuel produced from biomass, which reduces CO2 emissions by at least 65%* over its life cycle. This 100% certified** sustainable fuel was first introduced at the FIA World Endurance Championships in March 2022 and is now used by all competitors in the event. The Qatar 1812 KM marks the start of an exciting year for motorsport in Qatar, showcasing innovation, competition, and sustainability.
TotalEnergies invites all fans to visit its booth in the fan zone on the 27 and 28 of February, for an engaging experience with its simulator and to experience this exciting chapter of motorsport innovation.

TENNIS

Venus says she will not play Indian Wells, despite wild card invite

Reuters
Indian Wells



Former world number one **Venus Williams** will not compete at next month's Indian Wells tournament despite the WTA 1000 event giving the 44-year-old American a wild card.

Williams, who played only two tournaments last season, said at a speaking event in Denmark that she had not been told of the wild-card before the tournament announced it on Wednesday and added that she was unable to compete due to prior commitments.

"I found the announcement super amusing because, I don't know, people seem to be happy, so I was like, 'Maybe I'll just go with it, I don't know'," Williams said at the event in the city of Naestved.

"I'm actually not going. I'm going to be overseas."

Tournament director Tommy Haas later released a statement confirming that Williams would not be playing at the March 2-16 event in Southern California.

"Our team has been informed that Venus is not accepting the wild card this year," it read. "We wish Venus all the best and hope to see her back in Indian Wells in the future."

Williams boycotted the event for 15 years after fans booed and heckled her younger sister Serena during her 2001 final victory over Kim Clijsters, apparently in response to Venus withdrawing injured from their semi-final.

"I love Indian Wells, I would love to be there and if I could have accepted it, I would have been like, 'Yes', but I already made commitments," Williams added.

TSITSIPAS ADVANCES IN DUBAI


Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas celebrates after winning his round of 32 match against Italy's Lorenzo Sonego at the Dubai Tennis Stadium, Dubai, UAE, yesterday. Tsitsipas won 7-6 (4), 6-3 to advance to the second round. *(Reuters)*

FOOTBALL

Hakimi scores twice as PSG sink Lyon to stay unbeaten

'The team has really grown in terms of character. We showed great control'

AFP
Paris

Achraf Hakimi scored twice and Ousmane Dembele kept up his remarkable recent form in front of goal as Paris Saint-Germain won 3-2 away to Lyon on Sunday to maintain their unbeaten record in Ligue 1 this season.

All the goals were scored in the second half, with Hakimi opening the scoring on 53 minutes and Dembele doubling PSG's lead just before the hour mark.

Rayan Cherki pulled one back for the hosts late on to potentially set up a grandstand finish, only for Hakimi to strike again. Corentin Tolisso then grabbed a second for Lyon in stoppage time. PSG have won 18, drawn five and lost none of 23 domestic league outings this season and are a huge 13 points clear of nearest chasers Marseille at the top of the table. They have not lost a domestic game this season and have not been beaten at all by French opposition since a 3-1 defeat at home to Toulouse last May.

"The team has really grown in terms of character. We showed great emotional and physical control," said PSG coach Luis Enrique.

His team next face fourth-tier Saint-Brieuc in Brittany in the French Cup quarter-finals on Wednesday, before hosting Lille in Ligue 1 next weekend.

That will be followed by the home leg of their Champions League last-16 showdown with English Premier League leaders Liverpool on Wednesday, March 5.

Lyon, meanwhile, remain sixth but have now lost two of their four matches under new coach Paulo Fonseca. This result is a blow to their hopes of qualifying for next season's Champions League as they now sit five points adrift of the top four.

"It is not easy against PSG because they are so strong," Fonseca admitted. PSG were fresh from hammering French rivals Brest 7-0 last midweek, a result which saw them win their Champions League knockout phase play-off tie 10-0 on aggregate.


Paris Saint-Germain's Achraf Hakimi (left) celebrates with teammates Ousmane Dembele (centre) and Bradley Barcola after scoring PSG's first goal during the Ligue 1 match against Olympique Lyonnais in Decines-Charpieu, central-eastern France. *(AFP)*

After a goalless first half, they went ahead when Bradley Barcola's cutback came all the way to Hakimi and the Moroccan swept home. The visitors were well on their way to victory soon after that thanks to a magnificent solo effort from Dembele, who foraged a path into the area before firing high into the far corner.

The France forward is PSG's top scorer with 24 goals in all competitions this season, including 19 in 14 appearances since mid-December. He has 12 in his last eight Ligue 1 games. Cherki, preferred to Alexandre Lacazette through the middle of Lyon's attack, reduced the arrears on 83 minutes after good work by Georges Mikautadze.

However, Hakimi made it 3-1, applying the finish to a fine move featuring a brilliant piece of skill by Goncalo Ramos and an assist from Lee Kang-in. It is just the second time Hakimi has scored twice in the same game since signing for PSG in 2021.

Tolisso headed in to make it 3-2, but PSG held on as they stay on course to complete an unprecedented unbeaten season.

Marseille lost 3-0 at Auxerre on Saturday, with club directors later railing against what they considered unfair refereeing decisions.

Club president Pablo Longoria accused match officials of "corruption" and Fabrizio Ravanelli, the Italian former Marseille striker now working in an advisory role, accused referee Jeremy Stinat of "scandalous" officiating.

Marseille were already trailing 1-0 in Burgundy when they had a penalty claim dismissed by Stinat just before half-time.

The visitors then had Canadian defender Derek Cornelius sent off for a second yellow card shortly after the hour mark, before conceding two further goals late on. Nice are now just three points behind Marseille in third after defeating bottom club Montpellier 2-0 on Sunday with goals by Jonathan Clauss and Hicham Boudaoui.

Lille are another two points back, just above Monaco, after beating the principality club 2-1 on Saturday. Elsewhere on Sunday, Strasbourg and Brest drew 0-0, a result which keeps both sides on the fringes of the race for Europe. Nantes boosted their survival hopes by beating Lens 3-1, while Toulouse won 4-1 at struggling Le Havre, who have now lost seven straight home games.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Liverpool's Van Dijk wants Anfield to be 'horrible' during title run-in

AFP
Manchester, United Kingdom

Virgil van Dijk has urged Liverpool's players and fans to make Anfield a "horrible" place for opponents during the Premier League title run-in.

Liverpool are 11 points clear of second-placed Arsenal at the top of the table with 11 games remaining after Sunday's 2-0 win at the home of champions Manchester City.

Arsenal have a game in hand but Arne Slot's men are galloping towards a record-equalling 20th English top-flight title and have seven of their remaining league matches at Anfield.

Liverpool looked nervous during last week's 2-1 home win against Wolves and have also dropped points recently against Everton and Aston Villa.

"I mentioned it after that (Wolves) game, that obviously it's pretty normal, humans, there could be some anxious feelings kicking in," said Liverpool captain Van Dijk.

"And that could still be the case, but I think it only helps us and them as well to make Anfield horrible for the opponent, like most of the time we have been doing that, and obviously the way we play obviously helps with that as well."

He added: "So let's make sure those seven (home games) are going to be amazing, as loud as possible, and I don't think we have to speak about it, because normally that is the case."

Goals from Mohamed Salah and Dominik Szoboszlai gave Liverpool their first top-flight victory at the Etihad for nearly 10 years as they capitalised on Arsenal's defeat by West Ham the previous day.

Liverpool fans chanted "We're going to win the league" in the closing stages of the match, looking forward to celebrating just their second English league title since 1990.

"A couple of days ago there was noise also about other things and it could go the other way," said Van Dijk, who is now preparing for Wednesday's home match against Newcastle.

"Obviously, the result on Saturday and the result (at the Etihad) gives them (the fans) the belief. It's down to us to just keep focusing on the game ahead of us. That's what we do and that's what I told the boys as well. It's all about recovery now and being ready for Newcastle. It will be a big test again and we need our fans to be in great shape."



Marseille chief says 'no corruption' in Ligue 1

MARSEILLE: Marseille president Pablo Longoria said yesterday he regretted his outburst in which he claimed his club were the victims of "corruption" following a 3-0 Ligue 1 loss to Auxerre. Spaniard Longoria launched into a tirade after Saturday's match at the Stade de l'Abbe-Deschamps, shouting "this is real corruption" in response to what he and other Marseille officials felt was unfair treatment by the referee towards their team. "It wasn't appropriate and that word, yes, I regret it," a contrite Longoria told AFP in an interview. "Everyone explained to me what it (corruption) meant in French, because in Spanish it has a broader meaning. Mind you, that doesn't justify anything. But I've never in my life thought of anything like money exchanges or financial transactions, never. I'd like to say that there's no corruption in French football."

RANGERS APPOINT BARRY FERGUSON AS INTERIM BOSS

Scottish Premiership giants Rangers yesterday appointed Barry Ferguson as interim manager until the end of the season following the sacking of Philippe Clement. The Glasgow club announced the Belgian's departure on Sunday, a day after a 2-0 home defeat to St Mirren. Second-placed Rangers are 13 points behind Old Firm rivals Celtic in the Premiership and suffered a shock Scottish Cup defeat to Queen's Park earlier this month. Ex-Scotland midfielder Ferguson, 47, won multiple trophies at Ibrox during his playing career and has managed Clyde, Kelty Hearts and Alloa. Rangers chief executive Patrick Stewart welcomed Ferguson back during a "difficult time". He told the club's website: "Philippe and his team have worked tirelessly during their time at the club and have played an important role in developing the first team's young players. "I want to reiterate, the issues we are facing run deeper than the manager. The ongoing football review seeks to address those issues and we will continue to implement its findings in the coming weeks and months ahead of appointing a new, permanent manager." Clement succeeded Michael Beale in October 2023 and led Rangers to the League Cup trophy two months after his appointment. The former Club Brugge and Monaco boss briefly hauled Rangers into title contention last season but they eventually finished eight points adrift of Celtic. The club are on course for a trophyless domestic season but are in the last 16 of the Europa League, with a two-legged tie against Fenerbahce next month. Former Rangers and Scotland star Ally McCoist believes a "long-term fix" is needed at Ibrox. "I think there has been a weakness on and off the pitch to tell you the truth," he told Talksport radio. "So it is a combination of things. "It is going to be a long-term fix because the difference now between the two clubs (Rangers and Celtic) is as big as it has been in a long, long time."

MOTORSPORT

First round of Qatar Drag Racing Championship concludes

By Sports Reporter
Doha

A week after the conclusion of the Arabian Drag Racing Championship, life returned to the drag strip at Qatar Racing Club (QRC) with the start of the first round of the Qatar Drag Racing Championship for the 2024-2025 season.

The championship is being held under the generous sponsorship of QRC Chairman HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani.

The championship is held over five rounds, spanning five consecutive weeks. This year's championship features a new structure with the introduction of six car categories and two bike categories.

These categories primarily focus on index races, which require intense concentration and rely on exceptional adjustment standards, making the performance of the racer the most critical factor in achieving victory.

Hisham al-Awadi emerged as the winner of the first round in the (INDEX 10.00) category, which made its debut in the club's competitions.

Badr al-Barak, who secured second place, defeated Saad al-Abkal in the semi-final, with Saad settling for third after leading the qualifying trials but failing to reach the final race.



Msbih Ali al-Kaabi combined both the top spot in the qualifying trials and the round title in the (INDEX 9.00) category after defeating Raed Ali in the final, who settled for second place, while Mohamed Zaman took third place on the podium.

Despite finishing 15th in the qualifying trials of the (INDEX 8.50) category, this did not prevent Hamdan al-Kaabi from claiming the first-round title.

He made his way to the final, where he triumphed over Nasser Ghanem, who took second place.

In the quarter-mile bike category (INDEX 8.50), Khaled al-Dousari claimed his first championship title after defeating Saud al-Wahibi in the final, who took second place. Intense battles in the eighth-mile competitions, al-Baloushi claims two titles.

Only racer Rashid al-Baloushi managed to win titles in two categories, making him the biggest winner in the opening round of the championship.

His first title came in the (INDEX 4.80) category. After recording the fourth-best time in the qualifying trials, he made his way through the elimination rounds to reach the final race, where he defeated racer Mustafa Atat, who took second place, while Hussein al-Maqsid claimed third place.



Al-Baloushi's second title came in the (INDEX 4.50) category. After qualifying in seventh place, he advanced to the final to face Shawn Langdon, the 2013 NHRA Top Fuel Champion in the American NHRA. Al-Baloushi triumphed over Langdon, who finished second.

The final and most powerful car category, the Super Street, witnessed Mohamed Kafoud winning the title after recording the second-best time in the qualifying trials and reaching the final to face Jaber Salman, who settled for second place. In a similar way to the (INDEX 9.00) category, the Street Bike category saw the leader of the qualifying trials, Mohamed Bourashed, claiming the opening round title. Despite his final opponent, Mohamed al-Salem, being his runner-up in the trials, al-Salem also finished as the runner-up in the round.

QRC Director-General Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani honoured the podium winners. The second round begins tomorrow, Wednesday with testing, followed by the first and second qualifying trials on Thursday, and the third qualifying session on Friday before the elimination races commence.