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South Africa upstage hapless England to reach semi-finals



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Tsitsipas overcomes Auger-Aliassime, Dubai final jinx

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FIA WORLD ENDURANCE CHAMPIONSHIP

Qatar 1812km concludes with spectacular finale at Lusail Circuit

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GLOBAL CHAMPIONS TOUR

Abdel Said wins successive Grand Prix of Doha title

Belgian rider triumphs again with his horse Bonne Amie; Saudi Arabia's al-Rajhi takes third place



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee and Chairman of Al Shaqab, crowned the winners of the Global Champions Tour Grand Prix Doha at Al Shaqab yesterday. Hamad bin Abdulrahman al-Attiyah, President of the Asian Equestrian Federation, and Jan Tops, Founder of the Global Champions Tour were also present at the ceremony.



Belgium's Abdel Said, astride 12-year-old bay mare Bonne Amie, celebrates after winning the Global Champions Tour Grand Prix Doha 1.60m title.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Abdel Said yesterday became the first rider to win successive Global Champions Tour Grand Prix Doha (1.60m) title at the glorious Longines outdoor arena of Al Shaqab.

The Egyptian-born from Belgian with his trusted ride – 12-year-old bay mare Bonne Amie – swept the jump off in fine style in flawless 38.24secs for a top prize of €189,750 besides the prestigious trophy.

Only Rolf-Goran Bengtsson of Sweden with Casall ASK had earlier won the LGCT Doha Grand Prix twice but not successively. Bengtsson had claimed the titles in 2014 and 2016.

Daniel Desseur of Germany with 14-year-old bay gelding Gangster v/h Noddevelt finished as the runners-up in 39.52secs. The third spot was clinched by Saudi Arabia's Abdulrahman al-Rajhi, who combined with 12-year-old bay gelding Ventago to clock 40.35secs.

HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee and Chairman of Al Shaqab, crowned the winners.

Speaking of his triumph, the 35-year-old Abdel Said, said, "I am super happy with Bonne Amie. When I went out for the jump-off, I knew it would be tough but she used the strides well. She's come along very well and I am so happy."

He added: "I have been jumping with Bonne Amie since she was nine years old. I just want to tell the young riders that that's how long it takes to combine well with your horse. So they should be patient for the best results to come. I also want to thank the excellent organisation in Doha. Everything was perfect and thanks to everyone for hosting us."

Runner-up Desseur said European riders should now know that the competition is heating up and that the standards here is also the same as that in Europe. Al-Rajhi sent across a message to Said, saying, "Me being on the podium is a clear message to Abdel. Be careful, I am coming."

Al-Rajhi also praised the organisation of event in Qatar, saying: "They are clearly building the sport to the highest level. What we have achieved here is unbelievable. The course is tough and there are these many top riders with all the good horses. The sport is reaching the top level in Doha."

Earlier in the day, the Netherlands' Sanne Thijssen took the CSI5* class Against the clock (1.45m) title. Riding bay mare Cupcake Z, Thijssen clocked a flawless 57.68secs.

French Alexa Ferrer took the second podium place clocking 60.38secs with chestnut mare Vitalhorse Fleur d'Oz, while German Kendra Claricia Brinkop finished third on chestnut gelding Surprising Dream S.H.O.Z (61.63secs). The winners were awarded by Mohammed Jaber al-Khayarin, the Event Director.

Later addressing the media along with the LGCT GP of Doha winners, al-Khayarin, revealed the most important figures and statistics of the championship. Jan Tops, President of the Longines Global Champions Tour was also present.

Al-Khayarin praised the great success achieved of the event, noting that the Longines Global Champions Tour is the most prominent and strongest showjumping competition in the world. "We are here today to celebrate the winners and participants of this distinguished event, which witnessed the brilliance of a group of the best riders who competed at the Longines Arena at Al Shaqab, which has always been the stage for major equestrian championships in Qatar and the region. These competitions have played an important role in enhancing the equestrian culture in Qatar and promoting it as a capital of sports, and I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the winning local and international riders who demonstrated strong determination and world-class competitive spirit over 4 consecutive days," he said.

"I express our deep gratitude to all the sponsors and partners who played a major role in the success of this championship. I would also like to thank the media for their continuous support and tangible efforts in highlighting this championship, and the members of all committees and volunteers for their dedication and tireless efforts in providing an exceptional experience for the participants and the public," he added.

He also noted: "We are proud of our partnership with the Champions Tour; this partnership expresses our firm commitment to providing an ideal environment for riders and horses. Organising such global events is an opportunity to present show jumping at its best and enhance our distinction as a major supporter of this Olympic sport in the Middle East and the world. Longines competitions play an important role in promoting the equestrian culture in Qatar and promoting Doha as a capital of sports. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the winning local and international riders who demonstrated strong determination and world-class competitive spirit over four consecutive days."



The Netherlands' Sanne Thijssen, riding bay mare Cupcake Z, took the CSI5* class against the clock (1.45m) title.

SPOTLIGHT

Marquez wins sprint at Thailand MotoGP on Ducati debut

Reuters
Buriram, Thailand

Six-times MotoGP champion Marc Marquez made a dream start to life at factory Ducati when he led from lap one to the chequered flag to win the sprint at the season-opening Thailand Grand Prix yesterday, as his younger brother Alex Marquez came in second.

Twice MotoGP champion Francesco Bagnaia, Marquez's new teammate, finished third to complete an all-Ducati podium. "It was a perfect Saturday," Marquez said. "The feeling is great with the bike. I got out and I was consistent and then I saw that the gap was already there and then I tried to manage. Happy to start my new journey with Ducati Lenovo. In this way, tomorrow will be the most important but already we achieved the first point of a sprint race victory. So let's see if tomorrow, minimum, we need to be on the podium. But if we can, we will try to fight for the victory."

The Buriram International Circuit pole-sitter rocketed off the line as Alex struggled to match his pace, and never looked in danger of losing the top spot in the 13-lap sprint.



Marc Marquez celebrates on the podium after winning the Sprint race of the MotoGP Thailand Grand Prix. *(AFP)*

It was just the second time in his career that Marquez had won a sprint, with the first coming at the Aragon MotoGP in August. The 32-year-old Spaniard now leads the championship for the first time since 2019 after collecting 12 points, three more than Alex and five ahead of Bagnaia in third, and will have the opportunity to stretch the gap further in today's race.

"I'm super happy today, this was our maximum target," Alex said. "Everything depends on the start, and especially Marc – he pushed quite hard today. He did a really good start... So I said, okay, I need to wait here, I need to finish the race. Super happy, like I said, it was our target so now we need to study a little bit Marc's lines and all that. Tomorrow will be a little bit more ready, but (it) will be difficult to really reach Marc."

Trackhouse's 24-year-old Japanese rider Ai Ogura had a promising MotoGP debut, making up one place from qualifying to come fourth. Franco Morbidelli was fifth, ahead of Pedro Acosta and Fabio Quartararo. Australian Jack Miller of Prima Pramac Yamaha crashed out at turn eight, having qualified fourth on the grid.

Local hero Somkiat Chantra finished outside the points in 19th place.



Thailand MotoGP sprint winner Marc Marquez (right) of Spain celebrates with his brother and second-placed Alex Marquez of Gresini Racing at the Buriram International Circuit in yesterday. *(AFP)*

CRICKET

CHAMPIONS TROPHY

South Africa thrash England by 7 wickets to enter semis

Van der Dussen gets unbeaten 72 for South Africa, Buttler scores 21 in final game as England captain

AFP
Karachi

South Africa qualified for the semi-finals of the Champions Trophy yesterday with a convincing seven wicket win over a hapless England in a Group B match in Karachi.

Wiaan Mulder (3-25) and Marco Jansen (3-39) bowled out England for a paltry 179 in 38.2 overs before South Africa chased down the target for the loss of three wickets in 29.1 overs.

The victory means South Africa, who topped Group B with five points, a point more than Australia, join the Aussies in the semi-finals while India and New Zealand – who meet in Dubai today – are in the last four from Group A.

As for England, they have endured a wretched tournament, with this their third loss coming after defeats to Australia and then to Afghanistan which ended their interest in the tournament with a game to spare.

The India-New Zealand clash will determine the semi-final line-ups, the first in Dubai on March 4 while the second is in Lahore a day later.

India, whose government refused to send its national team to Pakistan over political tensions, will play their semi-final in Dubai irrespective of where they finish in the Group.

If India qualify for the final it will be played in Dubai on March 9. If not, Lahore will stage the final.

Stand-in skipper Aiden Markram praised Jansen.

"He's (Jansen) been huge for us," said Markram of the left-arm-



South Africa's Rassie van der Dussen plays a shot during the ICC Champions Trophy match against England at National Stadium in Karachi yesterday. *(AFP)*

er. "We all know in the powerplay, especially in conditions like this, you need to be taking wickets up front. He's been peaking at the right time for us."

Outgoing England skipper Jos Buttler rued another poor show.

"A really disappointing performance," said Buttler. "We're not going on and making those big, telling contributions which has been a story of this side for some time now with the bat."

Fast bowler Jofra Archer dismissed Tristan Stubbs (nought) and Ryan Rickelton (27) with the score on 47 but Rassie van der Dussen and Heinrich Klaasen kept South Africa on track with a 127-run stand for the third wicket.

Klaasen, who scored a 56-ball 64 with 11 boundaries, fell to spinner Adil Rashid with just five needed for victory which David Miller completed with a six.

Dussen hit three sixes and six boundaries in his unbeaten 87-ball 72. Archer had figures of 2-55 while Rashid took 1-37.

Earlier, Mulder and Jansen destroyed the top-order after England won the toss and batted.

Spinner Keshav Maharaj had figures of 2-35 as England's batting chart presented a sorry picture with Joe Root the highest scorer with 37.

The fact that England were already out with two defeats in as many games and Buttler having stepped down after this match left them dispirited.

Jansen removed opener Phil Salt (eight), Jamie Smith (nought) and Ben Duckett (24) in an incisive first spell of five overs.

He then took a brilliant diving catch at long-on off Maharaj to send Harry Brook back for 19, ending a 62-run fourth-wicket stand with Root. Just four runs later, England suffered a massive blow when Root was bowled by Mulder and the problems worsened with Liam Livingstone dismissed by Maharaj for nine. Root's 44-ball knock had one six and four boundaries. Buttler (21) and Archer (25) added 42 runs for the eighth wicket but once Archer was dismissed by Mulder the last two wickets fell with the addition of just eight runs. South Africa had to leave out regular skipper Temba Bavuma and Tony de Zorzi who were both unwell while Markram was also forced to leave the field with a hamstring problem.

BRIEF SCORES

England 179 in 38.2 overs (J. Root 37, J. Archer 25, B. Duckett 24, J. Buttler 21; W. Mulder 3-25, M. Jansen 3-39, K. Maharaj 2-35)
lost to South Africa 181-3 in 29.1 overs (Rassie van der Dussen 72 not out, Heinrich Klaasen 64; J. Archer 2-55)
Result: South Africa won by seven wickets
Next game: India v New Zealand in Dubai today.

PREVIEW

Kohli gets set for another landmark in NZ clash

AFP
Dubai

Virat Kohli is set for his 300th ODI today in the latest landmark for the Indian batting great after silencing doubts over his form and future with a match-winning Champions Trophy century.

India face New Zealand in their last group match in Dubai with both teams already into the semi-finals of the 50-over tournament.

Called "King Kohli" for his prolific run-scoring, the batsman went through an extended lean patch with speculation swirling that he and skipper Rohit Sharma could soon retire. They have already quit T20Is.

But Kohli roared back with an unbeaten 100 in their win over arch-rivals Pakistan to take them to the brink of the semi-finals, which they reached after a New Zealand win.

Kohli, 36, rolled back the years with his first ODI century since November 2023 as he took his time before bossing the opposition bowlers.

Teammate KL Rahul said the veteran has still a lot left in the tank.

"That (300) is a lot of ODI games and a lot of international games and he's been... I mean words fall short to express how good a player he's been and what a great servant of Indian cricket



India's Virat Kohli during a team training session in Dubai, UAE, yesterday. *(@BCCI)*

he's been," Rahul told reporters on Friday in Dubai. "Really happy to see that he got the 100 last game as well and he's been batting really well. For a player of his calibre it was about time that he scores that big century and a match-winning century."

Rahul added: "Virat and Rohit, they are the senior players and you are always looking up to them to step up and score when the big games come.

"Hopefully there's many more hundreds left for him (Kohli) and many more games of international cricket."

Both Kohli and Rohit retired from T20 internationals after India's triumph in the World Cup last year.

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

The knock was Kohli's 51st ODI ton in 299 matches since his debut in 2008. He has 82 hundreds across the three international formats.

Kohli is the 22nd player in history and seventh Indian to enter the 300 club.

Tendulkar tops the list with 463 ODIs.

"I think that's obviously a massive achievement," New Zealand all-rounder Michael Bracewell said of Kohli's longevity.

"Three hundred games across a career is very impressive and then to put that in just one format is amazing.

"I think it's a testament to the way that he's gone about his career."

Bracewell played with Kohli at Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the Indian Premier League and said he was looking forward to facing him today.

"I saw it first hand at RCB how he sort of prepared for each match and it's very impressive," said Bracewell. "He's one of a number of class players in the Indian line-up and they've all played a lot of cricket now."

Kohli has endured plenty of bumps along the way.

He won the 2011 ODI World Cup under MS Dhoni and then took over as captain.

Kohli helped India get back to the top of the Test rankings but he was unable to deliver the cricket-crazy nation a global title.

That drought, combined with his runs drying up, saw Kohli removed as ODI captain after giving up the T20 job.

Kohli gave up leading the Test side too and later talked about his mental struggles during his dry phase, including how he had been "snappy" around wife Anushka Sharma.

Known to wear his heart on his sleeve, Kohli has never shied away from a battle on the field and despite the odd controversy, is a hero to Indian fans.

Supporters invading the pitch to touch his feet and take selfies are regular occurrences at Indian venues.

FOCUS

Captain Sharma is fine after hamstring injury

Reuters
Dubai

India captain Rohit Sharma is fine after picking up a hamstring injury during last Sunday's win over Pakistan in the Champions Trophy, Indian team assistant coach Ryan ten Doeschate said in Dubai.

Sharma, 37, briefly left the field after picking up an injury while fielding as Pakistan batted first. He later scored a quick 20 as India won by six wickets to reach the semi-finals. "He's all right. It's an injury he's had before, so he knows how to manage it really well," Ten Doeschate told reporters on Friday.

Hamstring injuries had forced Sharma to miss the start of India's tour of Australia in 2020 and the entire tour of South Africa in 2021-22. India will play their final group stage game on Sunday against New Zealand, who have also qualified for the semis.

Meanwhile it was said that Australia's Matt Short looks set to miss the Champions Trophy semi-finals after suffering a thigh injury during Friday's abandoned Group B match against Afghanistan in Lahore.

Skipper Steve Smith said the opener, who suffered the quad injury while fielding but struggled on to make 20 runs from 15 balls before the game was washed out, was unlikely to be fit to face India or New Zealand on Tuesday or Wednesday. "I think he'll be struggling," Smith said. "I think we saw tonight he wasn't moving very well. I think it's probably going to be too quick between games for him to recover."

England's Buttler proves great players are not always best captains



Karachi: Jos Buttler made an unceremonious exit as England's white-ball captain on Friday, endorsing the popular perception that great players do not always make great captains.

Buttler is arguably England's greatest white-ball batter and was tipped to scale similar heights as skipper after he led the side to the T20 World Cup title in Australia in 2022.

Since then, England have instead made a steady decline.

In the last 16 months, England have failed to defend either of their World Cup titles and on Wednesday were sent packing from the Champions Trophy by Afghanistan.

As the captain of England's short-format teams, Buttler compiled a win-loss record of 18-15 in one-day internationals and 26-22 in Twenty20s.

The 34-year-old joins India's Sachin Tendulkar and West Indian Brian Lara as players who failed to translate their many individual triumphs into success as captains.

Despite being blessed with outrageous talent, those two greats of the game lacked the tactical acumen to outsmart their rivals and the man-management skills to get the best out of their teammates.

Former England captain Mike Brearley is often cited as a captain who got the best out of his talented team mates, Ian Botham in particular, despite being a modest player himself.

"The good captain enables talents to flower," Brearley wrote in his seminal book *The Art of Captaincy*.

"Like a gardener, he must not prune too hard; but nor can he leave all to nature."

West Indies and Australia enjoyed sustained success under the leadership of two other greats of the game, Clive Lloyd and Ricky Ponting respectively.

Considering the remarkable wealth of talent both had at their disposal, however, many wonder how much actual captaincy was required. Brearley, who became a psychoanalyst after retiring from cricket in 1983, offered an explanation as to why some gifted players struggled to lead.

"Certainly the best player is not necessarily an adequate captain," he wrote. "Indeed, the outstandingly gifted may well find it difficult to understand the problem of the average performer in their field."

THE DHONI TEMPLATE

Questions were raised when Australia chose a fast bowler, Pat Cummins, as their Test captain in late 2021 and put him in charge of the ODI squad as well the following year.

Those were duly answered when Australia went on to win the World Test Championship and the ODI World Cup, while also reclaiming the Border-Gavaskar Trophy under Cummins.

Theoretically, a wicketkeeper like Buttler is the ideal captain because, standing behind the stumps, he is naturally the best judge of the pitch and often the co-conspirator in a dismissal.

Unlike a batsman-captain, a wicketkeeper-captain develops great insight into bowling because of his constant communication with the pacers and spinners.

Buttler probably had the best template to follow in India's Mahendra Singh Dhoni.

Known for his astute match-reading, out-of-the-box field placement and inspired bowling changes, Dhoni captained India to World Cup titles in both formats.

Buttler was hampered by seldom having a full-strength squad at his disposal with the England & Wales Cricket Board (ECB) deciding to manage the workload of England's all-format players.

Harry Brook, currently the vice captain and a generational talent with the bat, is favourite to succeed Buttler as England's white-ball captain although coach Brendon McCullum has not confirmed an appointment.

ATHLETICS

Star act Duplantis breaks his own pole vault world record with leap of 6.27m

AFP
Clermont-Ferrand, France

Swedish Olympic champion Armand Duplantis broke his own world record on Friday at the All Star Pole Vault in Clermont-Ferrand, France, and then promoted another type of record.

After securing victory in the competition by clearing a bar at 6.07m, Duplantis then took aim at the world record, raising the bar to 6.27m and clearing it at the first attempt. "I just felt really good," the vaulter known as "Mondo" said after the competition.

"What can I say, I came here to do it. I put everything in place to do it.

"The run-up worked really well. I just did it."

"Sometimes it's easy, sometimes it's not, but there's a lot of hard work, hardship, bad days, good days, everything in between that gets you to the easier moments," he said, adding that breaking the world record remained exhilarating.

"It's always special. It's a crazy feeling every time. It's like a feeling of euphoria. It's hard to explain."

It was the 11th time he had broken the record by one centimetre since first claiming it with a leap of 6.16m in February 2020.

Duplantis made sure that his song "Bop" - released just in time for the meet - was playing in the arena.

"That was my song that was playing," the breathless Duplantis said immediately after the jump. "When I made this song a couple of months ago, I thought this wold be a perfect song to jump to here. That's why I rushed it out."

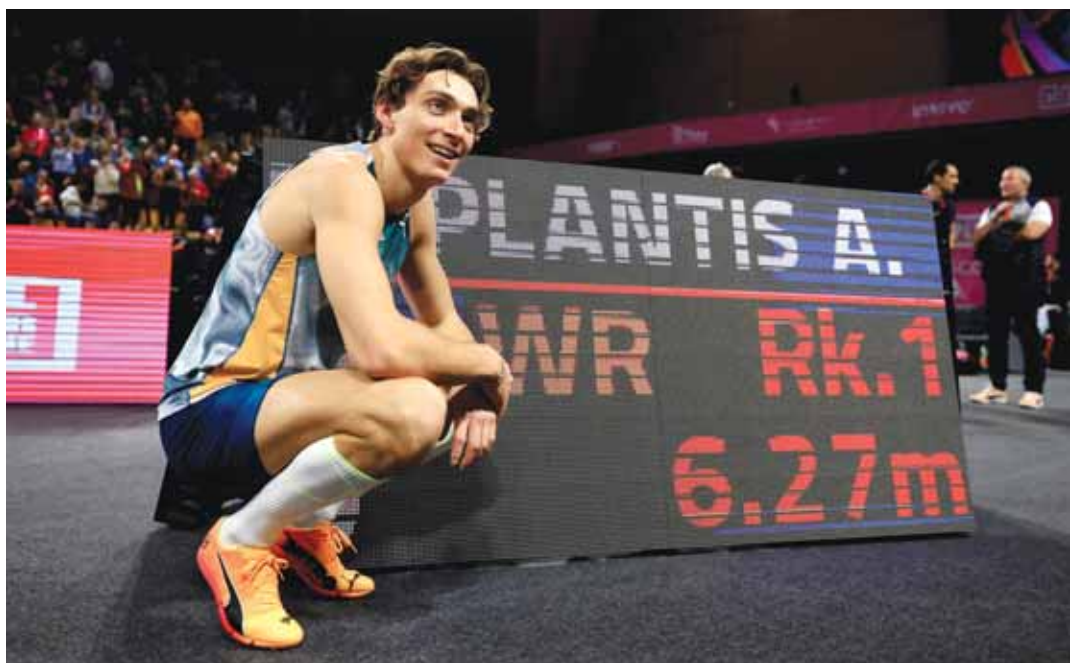
It was "playing in the background, everything, exactly as I'd imagined it in my head, so we can't complain," he said.

"I thought maybe I wasn't going to be serious about jumping on my own song. It seemed almost funny to me. But when I heard it on the speakers, I thought it sounded good. I thought it sounded really good and it put me in a good frame of mind,' he added at the press conference.

But the Louisiana-born athlete declined to sing.

"Now my voice is messed up because I've been yelling," he said

This is the second time that Duplantis, 25, has improved his mark in Clermont-Ferrand. He jumped 6.22m in the event in February 2023. "I'm going to enjoy this right now I'm going to have a good time tonight and enjoy it," he said.



Sweden's Armand Duplantis celebrates after setting a new world record to win the men's pole vault at the All Star Perche - Maison des Sport, Clermont-Ferrand, France, on Friday night. *(Reuters)*

Duplantis had set the previous record of 6.26m at a Diamond League meeting in Chorzow, Poland on 25 August 2024.

That was just a few weeks after he earned Olympic gold in Paris with his ninth world record of 6.25m.

On Friday, Duplantis and Emmanouil Karalis, the Olympic bronze medallist, both cleared 6.02m.

The Greek jumper then decided "not to take risks" after feeling cramps and withdrew.

Duplantis broke the tie by clearing 6.07m and immediately raised the bar 20cm.

The All Star Pole Vault meeting was the second of the season for Duplantis, who made his return to competition in Berlin on 14 February by jumping 6.10m.

He had opted to compete in Clermont and skip the European Indoor Championships in Apeldoorn in the Netherlands on March 6-9.

"I just love it here," Duplantis said.

"I love the atmosphere here. I jump really well here. Everyone jumps really well here. This is why I didn't go to Europe."

He will jump again on March 13 in Uppsala, Sweden, in a meeting he is organising, before going to the World Indoor Championships in Nanjing in China on March 21-23.

Asked when he'll break 6.30, Duplantis answered "28, 29" first.

TENNIS

Tsitsipas beats Auger-Aliassime to lift Dubai title

'There is nothing that ensured the win today, it was just pure fighting'

AFP
Dubai

Stefanos Tsitsipas won his first title in almost a year and broke a finals hoodoo as he cruised past Felix Auger-Aliassime 6-3 6-3 in the Dubai final yesterday.

"There is nothing that ensured the win today, it was just pure fighting," said Tsitsipas after winning in one hour and 28 minutes.

The victory ended a losing streak in ATP 500-level finals for the Greek.

He has won the season-ending ATP Finals and at the tour's top-level 1000 events, but had lost all of his previous 11 finals at 500 tournaments.

Those defeats included two losses in Dubai - to Roger Federer in 2019 and Novak Djokovic in 2020.

"It's a big relief that I'm able to hold that trophy after the third attempt," the fourth-seeded Tsitsipas said on court.

"It's something that I had in the back of my mind, and I'm happy to say I accomplished it."

Auger-Aliassime, an unseeded Canadian, had made a strong start to the season, winning tournaments in Adelaide in January and Montpellier in February.

"I had a great opponent on the other side of the net, I knew it was a difficult task," said Tsitsipas.

"I'm just proud of the way I managed the pressure and was able to perform in those crucial moments." Tsitsipas dominated from the baseline. He did not drop serve, despite facing break points twice in each set. In the first set he broke the Canadian in the seventh and ninth games and in the second took the decisive break in the eighth game.


Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas celebrates with trophy after winning the Dubai Championships final against Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime in Dubai yesterday. *(Reuters)*

Tsitsipas, who was ranked No 3 in the world in early 2023 but had slipped to 11th, will move up to ninth when the updated ATP rankings are released tomorrow.

"These are the things we are fighting for as professional tennis players," said Tsitsipas.

"To be owning a spot in the top 10 is definitely one of the greatest feelings a tennis player can experience," Tsitsipas said.

"It comes with hard work and sacrifices, but I'm happy that I'm in a position where I can really celebrate," he added.

Sabalenka praises WTA's new mission, welcomes Saudi investment


Aryna Sabalenka (centre) speaks, as Ava DuVernay and CEO of WTA Ventures Marina Storti look on, during a special WTA event celebrating "Female Trailblazers On and Off the Court" at the Sunset Tower Hotel, in West Hollywood, California, US, yesterday. *(Reuters)*

Los Angeles: World number one Aryna Sabalenka praised yesterday the WTA's mission to highlight the personalities of its athletes and called Saudi Arabia's investment in the women's tennis tour an important part of growing the game.

The WTA rebranding, complete with a new logo and "Rally the world" tagline, comes amid a rise in global viewership and a record $4.8mn prize awarded last year to Coco Gauff for winning the WTA Finals in Riyadh, a tournament sponsored by Saudi's Public Investment Fund (PIF).

"It means a lot. We needed this refreshing moment for so long," Sabalenka told Reuters at a WTA-hosted party in Hollywood celebrating the tour's new look and mission.

"It's a big move and I hope it's going to help our sport to get better."

Sabalenka, a big-serving Belarusian who grew up admiring the power games of Serena Williams and Maria Sharapova, said giving fans a more intimate look at the stars of the tour would pay off.

"The WTA should show our personalities and what it takes to become a top athlete," she said. "We all have to be an inspiration for the younger generation."

Announced in May, the multi-year partnership with PIF marked the latest move in a dramatic shift by the women's tour, which was previously reluctant to embrace Saudi partnership. "I've been there a lot and they have passion for sport. Their help means a lot for us," Sabalenka said.

'Support vey important'

"Their support is very important for the WTA. I think all of us will be very grateful for their support."

The men's ATP Tour also signed a multi-year "strategic partnership" last year with PIF, which has pumped huge amounts of money into soccer, Formula One and the LIV Golf circuit.

"Our players are very excited to be in a country where they could be inspirational role models," WTA Ventures CEO Marina Storti said at the event.

"It was fantastic to see Coco Gauff as our champion, playing in a full house in front of boys and girls, men and women of Saudi Arabia, who can look to her as an inspirational figure.

"So we believe that is very much part of our mission, this idea that we want to be in new markets, we want to inspire fans wherever they are."

North Jeolla chosen as South Korea's candidate to host 2036 Olympics

Lausanne: South Korea's North Jeolla province was chosen as the country's candidate in the bid to host the 2036 summer Olympics yesterday, beating capital Seoul 49-11 in a vote by representatives from the national governing bodies of summer and winter Olympic sports.

The self-governing province in the Honam region will compete with Turkiye's Istanbul, Chile's Santiago, Indonesia and India to win the hosting rights for the 2036 Games, with others including Egypt expected to join the race as well. "We've done it. We've created a miracle," North Jeolla governor Kim Kwan-young said in a statement to local media.

The province's Olympic bid strategy would be to pursue the most cost-efficient and eco-friendly games, Kim told reporters.

"We will offer our full support to help North Jeolla win the bid and build plans for further cooperation," Korean Sports and Olympic Committee president Ryu Seung-min said.

North Jeolla was the host for the 2023 World Scout Jamboree that was marred by widespread mismanagement, with the event's organisers facing criticism over poor living conditions for thousands of participants from 155 countries.

CYCLING

Waerenskjold wins the season-opening classic

AFP
Ninove, Belgium

Norway's **Soren Waerenskjold** won the season-opening Omloop Het Nieuwsblad Belgian cycling classic yesterday when the 197km race over 11 hills came down to a bunch sprint.

Uno-X Mobility's 24-year-old had been entirely under the radar but beat off Jasper Philipsen and needed a photo-finish to get ahead of Quick-Step's French tyro Paul Magnier, with Philipsen third.

Pre-race favourite Wout Van Aert of the Visma-Lease a Bike team finished in 11th but was unable to produce a sprint to rival the strong Waerenskjold.



Van Aert, who registered the same time as the winner on a day featuring 35kph winds, can try his luck again today at Kuurne-Brussels-Kuurne. "I'm pinching myself, I came to Belgium for Sunday's race and this one rarely ends in a sprint," said the 6ft 2in (191cm) winner.

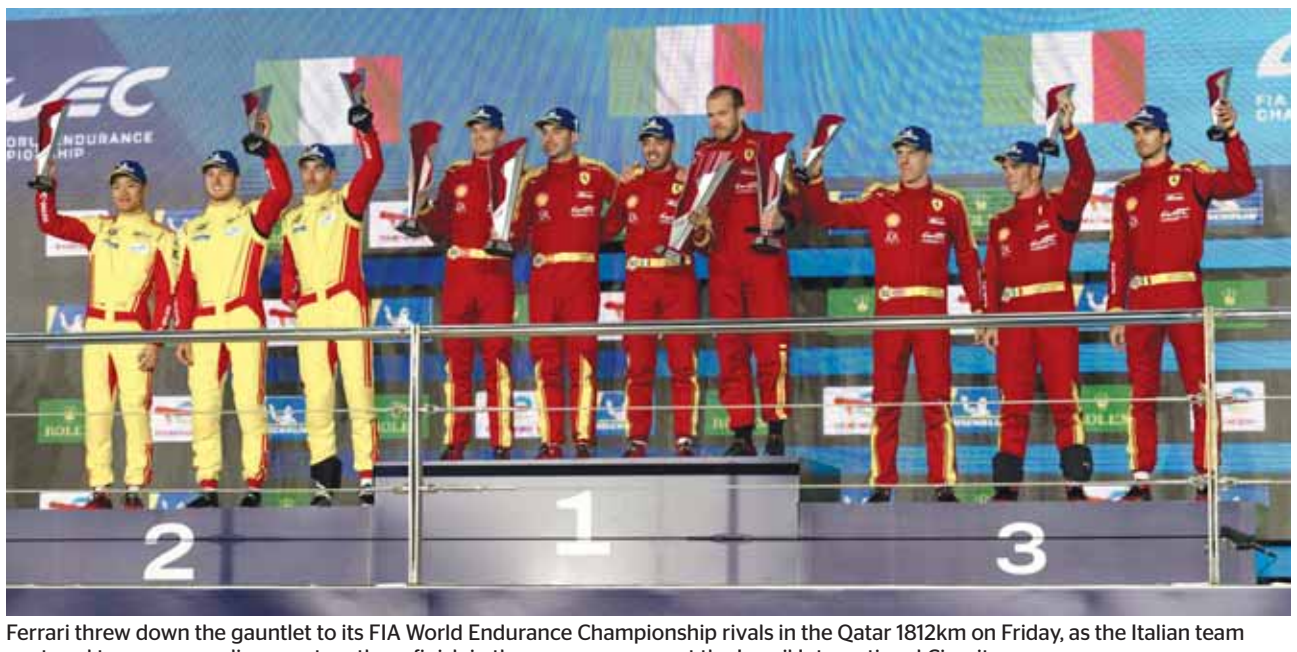
The East Flanders classic named after the Belgian newspaper Het Nieuwsblad was won in the past three years by Visma, with last year's champion Jan Tratnik now with Bora getting caught out in a split yesterday.

A seven-rider break made up of minor figures took a lead of over five minutes as the peloton rushed out of Gent towards Ninove along a route scattered with cobbled sections before the bunch sprint finish.

FIA WORLD ENDURANCE CHAMPIONSHIP

Qatar 1812km concludes with spectacular finale in Lusail

Victory was secured by Antonio Fuoco, Miguel Molina, and Nicklas Nielsen in the number 50 499P



Ferrari threw down the gauntlet to its FIA World Endurance Championship rivals in the Qatar 1812km on Friday, as the Italian team cantered to a commanding one-two-three finish in the season-opener at the Lusail International Circuit.



Following the conclusion of the Qatar 1812km race, the Lusail sky lit up with a spectacular fireworks display, celebrating the end of an exhilarating competition.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Qatar 1812km – FIA World Endurance Championship concluded in spectacular fashion on Friday night at Lusail International Circuit (LIC), drawing motorsport enthusiasts and officials from around the world to witness the thrilling season opener.

The circuit was packed with enthusiastic fans throughout the three-day event, marking a significant milestone for endurance motorsport in Qatar with the second edition of this sub 10-hour race.

The official opening ceremony commenced with the Qatar national anthem, followed by the traditional Qatari folk performance, Ardha.

The spotlight of the day was the Qatar 1812km, featuring 36 cars split evenly across Hypercar and LMGT3 categories. The sub 10-hour endurance race showcased the peak of motorsport engineering and driver skill, with leading manufacturers battling for a headstart in this opening round of the 2025 FIA World Endurance Championship season. The event also featured a special visit by QMMF & QMA drivers exploring the Peugeot team garage during the Qatar 1812km FIA WEC 2025.



Abdulrahman al-Mannai, President of Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation and Lusail International Circuit, greets the winners during the podium ceremony.

Ferrari set the benchmark with a commanding one-two-three finish, while Corvette kicked off the LMGT3 battle with a hard-fought victory

The victory was secured by Antonio Fuoco, Miguel Molina, and Nicklas Nielsen in the number 50 499P, crossing the line ahead of the number 83 car of AF Corse, driven by Yifei Ye, Robert Kubica, and Phil Hanson. Third place went to the other official Ferrari – AF Corse crew of Alessandro Pier Guidi, James Calado, and Antonio Giovinazzi.

The LMGT3 category also witnessed intense competition, with TF Sport securing the win as drivers Ben Keating, Daniel Juncadella, and Jonny Edgar piloted the #33 Corvette Z06 to victory with a time of 9 hours, 2 minutes, 1.284 seconds. United Autosports' #59 McLaren 720S finished a mere 0.991 seconds behind in second place, while the #21 Vista AF Corse Ferrari 296 completed the podium in third.

Abdulrahman al-Mannai, President of Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) and LIC, expressed his satisfaction with the Qatar 1812km, stating: "We are delighted with the success of the second edition of the Qatar 1812km across organisational and technical levels. We were particularly pleased to host all teams, drivers, and fans who joined us at LIC in a wonderful gathering that embodies and reinforces our position as a comprehensive centre for motorsport development in the region.

"We take pride in these achievements as they are the result of diligent efforts from various parties, whether at LIC, QMMF, or all volunteers who worked tirelessly in cooperation with numerous authorities and ministries within Qatar."

He added: "We are particularly proud of the strong local presence in this race, with Qatari drivers showcasing their talents in the support races held alongside the Qatar 1812km.

Developing local motorsport talent remains one of our top priorities, with championships such as the F4 Middle East Championship providing a valuable opportunity for our rising stars to gain experience. As our Qatari drivers compete alongside international contenders, our commitment to nurturing local talent and building a sustainable motorsport ecosystem for future generations is clearly reflected."

Following the conclusion of the Qatar 1812km race, the Lusail sky lit up with a spectacular fireworks display, celebrating the end of an exhilarating competition.

A podium ceremony honoured the winning drivers in both categories, marking a fitting conclusion to the 2025 Qatar 1812km – FIA World Endurance Championship. With another successful motorsport event at LIC, fans now turn their attention to the highly anticipated MotoGP weekend, set to take place from April 11-13, 2025, at Lusail International Circuit.

FOOTBALL

Billing saves Napoli in draw with title rivals Inter Milan

AFP
Milan

Philip Billing kept Napoli right on Inter Milan's tail at the top of Serie A after scoring a late equaliser in yesterday's exciting 1-1 draw in Naples. Denmark midfielder Billing tapped home his first Napoli goal three minutes from the end at the Stadio Diego Armando Maradona to keep second-placed Napoli one point behind Inter.

The 32-year-old, on loan from Bournemouth, scored after a driving run from Stanislav Lobotka, pouncing on the rebound when his first effort was saved by Inter goalkeeper Josep Martinez.

Up to that point, it had looked like Federico Dimarco's stunning free-kick in the 22nd minute would be enough for Inter to strike a huge blow in their bid to retain the Scudetto. Simone Inzaghi's Inter were on the back foot for much of the match and needed some desperate defending as they tried to escape Naples with all three points. But Inzaghi will again be frustrated by his team failing to win a big match, something that his players have struggled to do this season after dominating the division from start to finish last term.



Napoli's Philip Billing celebrates scoring his team's first goal during the Serie A match against Inter Milan in Naples yesterday. *(AFP)*

They could not have met Napoli at a better time, as Antonio Conte's team had conceded the initiative with three points from their four matches in February after previously looking like storming to a second title in three seasons.

Inter's dogged rearguard action, which had featured a series of last-ditch lunging tackles and hefty clearances, was finally broken by Billing, who saved his new team in his second appearance since signing in January.

Billing's late leveller also gave a reprieve to Atalanta who failed to win at home for the fifth straight time in Italy's top flight and stay third, three points behind Inter.

Gian Piero Gasperini's side are still in the fight but have not won in front of their own fans in domestic competition since the turn of the year. Atalanta's form on home turf is threatening their unprecedented Scudetto bid.

"When we play at home against these kinds of teams when always have to deal with packed defences," said Gasperini.

"We were hoping to be first and the boys gave everything but this is a difficult period for everyone, you can see that with how the other teams (at the top) are doing."

Davide Zappacosta went closest to breaking the deadlock five minutes before half-time when he clipped the outside of the post after great work from Ademola Lookman.

MAN CITY SURVIVE FA CUP SCARE AS O'REILLY SINKS PLYMOUTH

Nico O'Reilly spared Manchester City's blushes as the teenager's double inspired a comeback 3-1 win over giant-killers Plymouth in the FA Cup fifth round yesterday. Languishing in the Championship relegation zone, Plymouth had stunned Premier League leaders Liverpool in the fourth round after beating top-flight side Brentford in the third round. Pep Guardiola's men were in danger of becoming Plymouth's latest famous scalp when Maksym Talovierov gave the visitors the lead in the first half at the Etihad Stadium. But Manchester-born O'Reilly, making just his sixth start for City, emerged as the unlikely hero with a brace that ensured his troubled team would avoid their lowest moment in a turbulent season. Kevin De Bruyne was also on target for City, who are hoping FA Cup glory can salvage a woeful campaign that sees them fourth in the Premier League and eliminated from the Champions League and League Cup. Beaten by Manchester United in last season's FA Cup final, City are through to the quarter-finals as they look to win the competition for the third time in the Guardiola era. The Spaniard still changed his entire starting line-up from Wednesday's league win at Tottenham. Liverpool had paid the price for fielding a weakened team in their 1-0 loss at Plymouth and City found themselves in peril as well. City forward Phil Foden's deflected strike tricked just wide before Conor Hazard saved Ilkay Gundogan's header. Plymouth sat deep in a bid to frustrate City, who were inches away from ending the visitors' resistance when Gundogan fired against the post from 10 yards after Jack Grealish's cross found the German midfielder. Argyle's plan was working perfectly as Guardiola's team laboured to make headway before falling behind to a 38th minute sucker punch. Ukraine defender Talovierov rose above the flat-footed City defence to meet a corner with a superb header that gave Stefan Ortega no chance as it arrowed into the far corner. Vitor Reis thumped a header just wide as shell-shocked City tried to climb off the canvas.

LA LIGA

Isco's Betis upset champs Real Madrid

AFP
Seville

La Liga champions Real Madrid suffered a dent to their title defence with a 2-1 defeat at Real Betis yesterday.

Isco scored the winner from the penalty spot against his former side, who are level on points with league leaders Barcelona, who face Real Sociedad today.

Atletico Madrid, third, host Athletic Bilbao later yesterday and can move top with a victory.

The visitors took the lead at the Benito Villamarin stadium through Brahim Diaz but Betis struck back with a Johnny Cardoso header.

Isco secured the Andalusian side a deserved victory with a penalty early in the second half.

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti picked a strong line up, with no breathing room in the title race, despite Tuesday's impending Champions League clash against city rivals Atletico.

Madrid started the stronger and opened the scoring after just 10 minutes, putting together a fine team move with 19 passes before Diaz tucked home.

Kylian Mbappe sliced open the Betis defence with a ball to Ferland Mendy in front of goal and the defender squared for Diaz to convert.

Betis found their footing and neither team were able to create danger until the hosts levelled midway through the first half.

Cardoso powered a header past Thibaut Courtois from Isco's corner after escaping the attention of Madrid's defence.

Manchester United winger Antony, on loan at Betis, was sent off last weekend but his red card was revoked enabling him to face Madrid and he was increasingly involved.



Real Betis' Isco celebrates scoring his team's second goal during the match against Real Madrid in Seville yesterday. *(AFP)*

Courtois pulled off a superb save after a ball bounced towards his goal off the back of Aurelien Tchouameni.

Betis were in the ascendency and took the lead early in the second half from the penalty spot when Antonio Rudiger crashed into Jesus Rodriguez as he ran in on goal. Isco, enjoying a renaissance at Betis, smashed home from the spot against his former side for his sixth goal across all competitions.

Tchouameni was fortunate to get away with clipping Ricardo Rodriguez inside Madrid's area and Cucho Hernandez dragged a shot wide of Courtois' far post when well placed.

For the final 15 minutes, Ancelotti replaced Mbappe, who had dental trouble ahead of the game, with Brazilian teenager Endrick who had scored in the Copa del Rey in midweek.

Endrick fired wide and Betis goalkeeper Adrian kept out a stinging drive from range by Vinicius as Madrid came up short.