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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Sadd face Shahania, aim to extend winning streak

Reigning champions Sadd are one point behind league leaders Duhail, who face Ahli tomorrow

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Exciting matches are set to unfold in the Qatar Stars League this weekend, with clubs battling to secure valuable points as the season enters its crucial stages.

The first of these matchups sees newly-promoted Al Shahania facing the reigning champions Al Sadd at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium. The game kicks off at 9:30pm, and both teams come into the match with contrasting ambitions.

Al Sadd, currently second in the league with 37 points, trail league leaders Al Duhail by just a point. They are in the midst of a strong winning run, having secured victories over Al Arabi, Umm Salal, Al Duhail, and Al Gharafa. They are also coming off a 1-1 draw against Al Wasl of the UAE in the AFC Champions League Round of 16.

Coach Felix Sanchez made it clear how crucial this match is in their push to catch Al Duhail. "We are approaching the end of the season, and we are now in the last five matches. This is another big match for us, like a final. If we want to get closer to Al Duhail, we have to win. It is the only result that will help us, and we are well aware of that," Sanchez said ahead of the match.

The Spaniard also acknowledged the challenge posed by Al Shahania, who have had an impressive season since their promotion. "Al Shahania are a team that is having a distinguished season, and in the Second Division, they were even more distinguished. It will not be easy to beat them, but at this stage of the season, we are in a good position, and we will seek to continue performing in the same manner," Sanchez added.

Sadd will be missing Moroccan defender Romain Saiss, who is out for three months following ankle surgery. However, the team boasts an array of talented players such as Akram Afif, Rafa Mujica, and Boualem Khoukhi, all of whom will be crucial in leading the team to victory.

Al Shahania, on the other hand, have had an impressive season after their promotion from the Second Division. Although they are in seventh place with 23 points, they have shown they can compete at the top level. They will be looking to bounce back from a narrow 1-2 loss to league leaders Al Duhail.

Key players such as Dutch striker Pelle van Amersfoort, who has netted 10 goals this season, will be pivotal to their chances.



Al Sadd's Akram Afif trains with teammates ahead of the Qatar Stars League match against Al Shahania.

es. However, they will be without Francesco Antonucci due to suspension after a red card in their last match.

Al Shahania's coach, Jose Murcia, acknowledged the challenge of facing Al Sadd but remains confident in his team's ability to compete. Murcia pointed to the team's resilience despite missing key players like Antonucci and Marc Muniesa, and he remains focused on their collective team effort.

"I have confidence in the players who will replace them, and for me, all the players are essential. We will play in our style and plan, and we will rely on my players to appear strongly against an integrated team," Murcia said.

UMM SALAL FACE AL GHARAF

At the Thani Bin Jassim Stadium, Umm Salal will face Al Gharafa in another crucial fixture. Umm Salal, sitting 11th with 15 points, are still battling to avoid relegation and come off a 2-2 draw against Qatar SC. A win here would give them a vital boost in their bid for survival. However, they will be without defender Marouane Louadni due to a suspension, which could leave them with a weakened defence.

Al Gharafa, who are in third place with 34 points, are looking to recover from a heavy 0-4 defeat to Al Sadd. This loss has hurt their momentum, and they will be eager to get back to winning ways. Coach Pedro Martins will have to ensure that his

players respond positively, as a win could help them keep in touch with the title race, with only a few points separating them from the top two teams.

The contest between these two teams is always intense, and this match will likely continue that trend. With both teams needing points for different reasons, this could be a high-energy affair. The absence of key players like Louadni for Umm Salal and Seydou Sano for Al Gharafa could play a significant role in shaping the outcome.

AL RAYYAN TAKE ON AL KHOR

Finally, at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium, Al Rayyan will host Al Khor in a match that holds great significance for both teams.



Al Shahania coach Jose Murcia at a press conference yesterday.

Rayyan are in fifth place with 24 points and are coming off a solid 2-1 victory over Arabi and will be looking to build on that momentum as they aim for a top-four finish.

Al Rayyan's coach, Artur Jorge, has instilled a strong sense of discipline and fighting spirit in the squad, and fans are optimistic that the team will continue their good form despite a loss to Al Ahli in the AFC Champions League Round of 16.

Al Rayyan will need to stay focused on their domestic goals and continue to push for a top-four spot.

For Al Khor, who are in 12th place with just seven points, this match is a must-win. They are currently in danger of relegation and need to pick up points to avoid falling further behind. Coach Mehdi Nafti will rely on his attacking players, including Ricardo Gomes and Sofiane Hanni, to secure a vital win.

The team will be looking to exploit Al Rayyan's potential distractions with their upcoming AFC match and take advantage of any lapses in focus.

FIXTURES (9:30PM KICK OFF TIMES)

Today: Al Rayyan vs Al Khor at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium; Al Shahania vs Al Sadd at Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium; Umm Salal vs Al Gharafa at Thani Bin Jassim Stadium
Tomorrow: Al Wakrah vs Qatar SC at Stadium 974; Al Arabi vs Al Shamal at Al Thumama Stadium; Al Duhail vs Al Ahli at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium

SPOTLIGHT

Olympic boxing champion Khelif launches training camp at Aspire

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Algeria's Olympic boxing champion Imane Khelif is embarking on an intensive training camp in Qatar at Aspire Academy. She announced at a press conference yesterday that she will be training at the Academy until March 29th as she prepares for the 2025 World Boxing Championships in Liverpool, UK.

In addition to Khelif, the press conference was addressed by Ahmed Anani, Vice-Chairman and CEO of Kotinos - Aspire Sports Consulting and Management company and Aspire Academy's Deputy Director General, Ali Salem Afifa. Sheikh Fahad bin Khalid al-Thani, President of the Qatar Boxing Federation, and senior officials from Aspire Academy were also in attendance.

During her time at the academy, Khelif is seizing the opportunity to refine her technique, enhance her endurance, and sharpen her strategic approach in a world-class training environment.

The training camp, which is being supported by Aspire Academy and the Qatar Boxing Federation, will provide Khelif with state-of-the-art facilities and



Algerian boxer Imane Khelif, Vice-Chairman and CEO of Kotinos - Aspire Sports Consulting and Management company Ahmed Anani, Aspire Academy's Deputy Director General Ali Salem Afifa, Qatar Boxing Federation President Sheikh Fahad bin Khalid al-Thani pose after a press conference yesterday.

expert coaching to ensure she is ready to perform at the highest level in Liverpool. Khelif is looking to go one better than the silver medal that she won at the 2022 World Championships in Istanbul, Türkiye.

Ivan Bravo, Director General of Aspire

Academy, welcomed the Olympic champion to the Academy: "It's a privilege to host an athlete of Imane's calibre. Our team is committed to providing her with the best possible resources to support her journey to the top."

Anani emphasised the significance of this training camp: "We are honoured to welcome Imane to Qatar. Training at Aspire Academy's world-class facilities reaffirms Qatar's position as a premier destination for elite athletes and a global

hub for sports excellence."

Khelif echoed those sentiments: "I am truly honoured to be here at Aspire Academy and in Qatar, and I deeply appreciate the incredible support I have received - especially during the holy month of Ramadan. This experience is unlike any other, allowing me to elevate my journey in the sport further and proudly represent Arab women in boxing. A heartfelt thank you to Kotinos - Aspire Sports Consulting and Management for making this opportunity possible."

Khelif is the latest world-class athlete to choose Aspire Academy as their base for a training camp. Polish hammer-thrower Anita Wlodarczyk, who is the world record holder and a three-time Olympic Champion, is a regular visitor. At the same time, major football teams including Paris Saint-Germain and Bayern Munich have also spent time at Aspire Academy.

This training camp also serves as a powerful message to aspiring athletes worldwide that success is not just about reaching the pinnacle, but about continuously striving for greatness. With meticulous planning, cutting-edge resources, and an unwavering pursuit of excellence, Khelif's journey in Qatar is set to inspire the next generation of champions.

SPOTLIGHT

Key says England could consider Test skipper Stokes for white-ball captaincy

AFP
London

England cricket supremo **Rob Key** said yesterday "it would be stupid" to rule Test captain Ben Stokes out of consideration for the role of skipper of the struggling white-ball team.

Jos Buttler stood down last week following a poor display by the side at the ongoing 50-over Champions Trophy tournament in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates, where his team lost all three of their group games.

England have now suffered 10 defeats in 11 white-ball fixtures this year.

Vice-captain Harry Brook had appeared to be the heir apparent to Buttler but he is likely to be a mainstay in all three international formats, meaning a formidable workload.

England and Wales Cricket Board managing director for men's cricket Key is considering his options, which include expanding Stokes's remit.

The 33-year-old Durham all-rounder has proved himself an in-



spirational captain since succeeding Joe Root as Test skipper. But his age and injury problems mean he has largely operated as a Test specialist for 16 months.

Appointing Stokes as limited-overs captain would mean extending his "Bazball" alliance with Brendon McCullum, now

the coach of England's white-ball teams as well as being in charge of the Test side.

"I think nothing's off the table really," Key told reporters at Lord's.

"Ben Stokes is one of the best captains I've ever seen. It would be stupid not to look at him. It's just the knock-on effect of what that

means." Stokes, currently sidelined with a hamstring injury, has not played a Twenty20 international since the T20 World Cup final in November 2022, and has not featured in a one-day international since the 2023 50-over World Cup in India.

Former England batsman Key

acknowledged England's limited-overs form had declined sharply and their batting had "fallen off a cliff".

England won the 50-over World Cup under the captaincy of Eoin Morgan in 2019 and triumphed at the T20 World Cup under Buttler three years later.

But they have slumped to seventh in the one-day international rankings and are third in the T20 rankings.

"We were very poor in the Champions Trophy," said Key. "But the truth is, we haven't been particularly good in white-ball cricket, probably since the last era when (retired captain) Eoin Morgan did it."

England have been criticised for pursuing an ultra-aggressive approach under McCullum, regardless of the match situation, but Key said the former New Zealand captain's coaching methods were more nuanced.

"It's not true that the only thing he (McCullum) says is go harder, go harder, go harder," said Key. "He speaks all the time about soaking up pressure as well."

"And you've got to trust that players can make those decisions



Robert Key

at the right time." Key also warned against assuming England players do not care when they fail.

"Sometimes they're reckless, sometimes they make the wrong decision at the wrong time," he said. "But that's the game, right?"

"But it's not a case that all we think is you go out there and play one way... "You've got to be able to put bowlers under pressure, and good bowlers under pressure, and you've got to be able to soak it up and you've got to be able to make that decision at the right time," he said.

PREVIEW

New Zealand set for 'scrap' with India in the final

'Obviously the surface will dictate a little bit of how we want to operate'

AFP
Dubai

New Zealand skipper Mitchell Santner yesterday said a slower pitch in familiar territory for India in Dubai will make for a tight contest in the Champions Trophy final.

The two teams clash on Sunday to decide the winner of the eight-nation tournament held in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

Rohit Sharma's India are playing all their games at the Dubai International Stadium after they refused to tour hosts Pakistan because of political tensions.

They beat Australia in the first semi-final.

New Zealand defeated South Africa in the second semi-final in Lahore on Wednesday and now move back to Dubai where they lost the last group match to India by 44 runs.

"I guess finals cricket is different, but for us what we have been doing to get us to this point has been good," Santner said on his arrival in Dubai.

"But obviously we have come against a good side, who have played all their games in Dubai and know that surface and we will be better for the run we had the other day against them," he said.

"Obviously the surface will dictate a little bit of how we want to operate. Will be slower than what we got in Lahore, might be more of a scrap."

The tournament's tangled schedule, with teams flying in and out of the UAE from Pakistan while India have stayed put, has



New Zealand's Tom Latham (left) attempts to run out South Africa's Aiden Markram during the Champions Trophy semi-final at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore yesterday. (AFP)

been hugely controversial. The pitches have been vastly different in the two countries.

Pakistan tracks produced big totals - the Black Caps posted a Champions Trophy record 362-6 before restricting South Africa to 312-9 in the semi-final in Lahore, in contrast to the slow and turning decks of the Dubai stadium.

But Santner said the team has taken the challenge.

"It's all part of the challenge," said Santner. "We have been to every place here obviously into

Pakistan and Dubai. But I think the guys understand that it's part of it these days."

New Zealand won a tri-series tournament in Pakistan with South Africa as the third team and had many of their players in top form getting into the 50-over tournament.

Left-hander Rachin Ravindra hit his second century of this tournament in the semi-final clash and put on 164 runs with in-form Kane Williamson, who hit 102.

"Obviously that tri-series before - the tournament was handy in guys getting in form, especially into one of these tournaments which are quite short, three games and you're into the semis," said Santner.

"We have had a bit of a roll on and hopefully it continues."

The captain added: "We are here now and boys are pretty excited for the challenge ahead. One day off at training but the boys be fizzing and ready for the main event."

the Indian Premier League side said yesterday.

Hyderabad said that Carse, who aggravated a left toe injury last month and was ruled of England's Champions Trophy campaign, would also miss the 2025 edition of the Twenty20 league.

The 2016 IPL champions added that Mulder, who has played 11 T20 internationals, 18 Tests and 25 one-day internationals, would join the team for \$86,136. The IPL will run from March 22 to May 25.

Injured Carse ruled out of IPL, Hyderabad sign Mulder
Sunrisers Hyderabad have replaced injured England fast bowler Brydon Carse with South African all-rounder Wiaan Mulder,

Plunket Shield contest in Auckland and brought up the triple century with a tight single off his 379th delivery. "I don't think it's really sunk in, to be fair, at the moment," Bruce said at the end of play. "It's obviously pretty special and something I'm incredibly proud of, and will certainly look back, probably after this game and probably once I've done my career, to think that it was pretty special and yeah, pretty proud of that achievement." The 33-year-old finally fell after

Bruce hits 345 for third-highest score in NZ first-class game

Auckland: Big-hitting batsman Tom Bruce recorded the third-highest score in New Zealand first-class cricket yesterday with a superb 345 for Central Stags against Auckland Aces. Only Bert Sutcliffe has made higher scores in a single first-class innings in New Zealand, notching 355 during the 1949-50 season and a national record 385 during the 1952-53 season for Otago. Bruce, who has played 17 Twenty20 International matches for New Zealand, resumed his knock on 212 on day two of the

FOCUS

Former Pakistan coach Gillespie labels his successor Javed a 'clown'

Reuters
Sydney

Former Pakistan test coach Jason Gillespie labelled his successor Aaqib Javed a "clown" and accused the former fast bowler of undermining him and ex-white-ball coach Gary Kirsten in order to take charge of the national team across all formats. Gillespie's comments were in reply to a social media post containing quotes from Javed a few days after hosts Pakistan had crashed out of the Champions Trophy without a win.

Javed told reporters on Tuesday that Pakistan had changed 16 coaches and 26 selectors in around two years and any side would struggle in such circumstances.

"This is hilarious," Australian Gillespie said on social media.

"Aaqib was clearly undermining Gary and I behind the scenes campaigning to be the coach in all formats. He is a clown."

Reuters has contacted the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) requesting comment.

Kirsten resigned as white-ball coach in October barely six months after taking the job, with Gillespie filling in for the South African during a limited-overs tour of Australia. Javed was then named Pakistan's interim white-ball coach until the Champions Trophy and his assignment has now been extended to their tour of New Zealand for five T20s and three ODIs starting March 16.

Gillespie, who had also signed a two-year contract with the PCB last April, quit as red-ball coach in December amid media reports of a breakdown in relations with the board. He was replaced by Javed.



Pakistan's head coach Aaqib Javed (left) and captain Salman Agha address a press conference at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore on Tuesday. (AFP)

BOTTOMLINE

Cricketers' union warns over widening Hundred gender pay gap

AFP
London

Players' union chiefs say the growing gender pay gap in English cricket's newly cash-rich Hundred competition "cannot be allowed to continue".

While the overall pay pot for the eight-strong franchise competition, which features both men's and women's teams, has grown by 25 percent, the gulf between the earning potential of leading men and women is also increasing.

The top salary band in the men's squads is now £200,000 (\$258,000) compared with £65,000 in the women's game, taking the differential at the highest level from £75,000 in 2024 to £135,000.

The Professional Cricketers' Association (PCA) said the current situation was indefensible at a time when the Hundred has been valued at nearly £1bn following a huge cash injection from private investors.

The Women's Cricket Impact

Report, published ahead of International Women's Day on March 8, said: "The association is concerned that the disparity between the men's and women's top salaries has increased - this cannot be allowed to continue."

"Considering the tournament is marketed equally amongst the men's and women's squads with the two teams, one club mantra, which is to be applauded, it is more than disappointing to see the gender pay gap increase."

The PCA said stakeholders should be working hard to close the gap "especially considering the increased interest, viewership and ticket sales for women's Hundred matches".

England women's captain Heather Knight, while noting the progress made, reinforced the point in a foreword to the report.

"It's imperative that progress continues as there's still a lot of catching up required, as we've seen recently with the disparity in the Hundred salaries, as we look to secure an equitable game in England and Wales," she said in her report.

SPOTLIGHT

Aspetar signs MoU with International Padel Federation and Premier Padel

Aspetar, Orthopaedic and Sports Medicine Hospital, has signed a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the International Padel Federation (FIP) and Premier Padel, the leading official professional padel tour worldwide to conduct a series of research initiatives aimed at enhancing player safety and performance in professional padel.

The collaboration will focus on the following key areas:

- Injury and illness observation: This will focus on injury patterns, common health concerns, and assess potential gender-related differences in injury rates across both the Premier

Padel and FIP CUPRA Tour's

- Measuring and quantifying physiological demands of professional padel: Leading efforts to analyse the physiological demands of professional players by using state of the art and non-intrusive technology.

- Comparative insights of professional padel vs other racket sports: Partnership will include a study which evaluates the competitive demands of professional padel in comparison to other racket sports including tennis, badminton and squash.

Khalid Ali al-Mawalawi, Aspetar acting Director General, stated: "We are pleased to announce this important partnership with the



International Padel Federation and Premier Padel, which comes within the framework of Aspetar's keenness to provide a healthy and safe environment for athletes and padel enthusiasts, a sport that is gaining increasing popularity around the world." He added: "Player safety is paramount at Aspetar, and we always strive to provide the best medical and treatment services to help them compete to their fullest potential."

Luigi Carraro, President, International Padel Federation and Vice-Chairman, Premier Padel commented: "We are committed to the safety and well-being of all athletes competing at the highest level of our professional sport.

Investing in research on injury prevention is not just a responsibility – it is a necessity to ensure the future of our sport remains safe, competitive, and sustainable."

David Serrahima, General Manager, Premier Padel commented: "The players are at the centre of our professional tour, and we are continuously looking at ways to support player well-being and performance. This partnership – focused on research from world leading sports scientists – will provide deeper insights into the physical requirements of professional padel players and help to improve strategies for managing player workloads during the season."

TENNIS

Osorio upstages Osaka as Kvitova falls in first round

'IT JUST FEELS LIKE A LITTLE BUMP IN THE ROAD'

AFP
Indian Wells, United States

Naomi Osaka was bundled out of the first round at Indian Wells on Wednesday, falling 6-4, 6-4 to Camila Osorio in the Japanese star's first tournament since injury forced her out of the Australian Open.

Former world number one Osaka, now ranked 56th in the world, looked rusty against the 52nd-ranked Colombian, struggling to find the range on her powerful groundstrokes on a chilly night in the California desert.

"There were certain things that felt extremely off because I could only start to practice serving after a certain amount of time and stuff like that," said Osaka. "So I think given the situation, it wasn't that terrible."

"I don't feel like I played well at all, but I had chances to be in the match."

Osorio, making a return from a lengthy injury break herself, challenged Osaka with an array of drop shots and slices and gained the lone break of the opening set for a 5-4 lead.

She served it out without a hitch then broke Osaka to open the second.

The Japanese star immediately broke back, but Osorio gained the upper hand with a break in the seventh game. After Osaka fought off a match point against her own serve Osorio served it out, fighting off four break points to seal it with a stinging forehand winner.

"It's crazy for me, a dream come true," said Osorio, who pulled out of last week's event in Merida, Mexico, with an abdominal injury. She had never won a match at Indian Wells, and became the first Colombian woman to beat a former world number one.

Osaka, who returned from a 15-month break last year after giving birth to daughter Shai in



Camila Osorio of Columbia celebrates a point against Naomi Osaka of Japan in their first round match during the BNP Paribas Open at Indian Wells Tennis Garden in Indian Wells, California. (AFP)

2023, reached her first final since 2022 in Auckland, but retired from the title match with an abdominal injury.

Back for the Australian Open, she was forced to retire from her third round match with an abdominal strain.

"It just feels like a little bump in the road," Osaka said.

"I'll be back in Miami and hopefully I'll have way more serve practice under my belt and things like that."

Two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova, on the comeback trail seven months after giving birth to her son Petr, also fell in the first round.

France's 70th-ranked Varvara Gracheva beat the Czech 4-6, 6-3, 6-4, but the 24-year-old was full of admiration for her 34-year-old opponent, who lifted the trophy at Wimbledon in 2011 and 2014.

"If you let me step back a little

bit, I really want to congratulate her," Gracheva said. "Because she had a child quite recently, and I'm so happy that she now has the role of a mother and a tennis player, which is very demanding. It's very inspiring for sports, athletes, women – it's just amazing."

All 32 men's and women's seeds have first round byes in this combined ATP Masters and WTA 1000 tournament.

Gracheva lined up a second-round meeting with ninth-seeded Mirra Andreeva, the 17-year-old Russian who became the youngest ever WTA 1000 champion in Dubai last month.

In other matches, French veteran Caroline Garcia beat US wild card Bernarda Pera 6-3, 6-4 to line up a second-round meeting with second-seeded defending champion Iga Swiatek.

Nishikori battles through
In men's action, Tallon Griek-

spoor of the Netherlands beat Miomir Kecmanovic of Serbia 6-7 (5/7), 6-4, 6-3 to book a second-round meeting with top-seeded German Alexander Zverev, who heads a field missing world number one Jannik Sinner of Italy as he serves a three-month drugs ban.

China's Bu Yunchaokete defeated American Nishesh Basavareddy 7-5, 6-4 to book a second-round match against Russian fifth seed Daniil Medvedev, runner-up the past two years to Carlos Alcaraz – who is seeded second as he chases a rare three-peat.

Japanese veteran Kei Nishikori, who revealed during the Australian Open that he almost quit tennis last year after lengthy battles with injury, defeated Spain's Jaume Munar 6-2, 5-7, 7-6 (7/3) to line up a second-round match against 18th-seeded Ugo Humbert of France.

Second edition of Al Thumama Ramadan Championship creates buzz among youngsters



Doha: The second edition of the Al Thumama Ramadan Championship, in collaboration with the Qatar Sports for All Federation, has been nothing short of exhilarating at Al Furjan Stadium in Al Thumama. In an exciting series of matches, the young footballers showcased their immense talent and passion for the game.

In a stunning result, Al Adaaam pulled off a surprising 2-1 victory against the Palestine team. Despite the challenges of travelling from Gaza to Doha in recent days, the Palestine team displayed great resilience and skill but ultimately fell short. To recognise their efforts, the organising committee presented an appreciation award to Palestine's Abdullah al-Khatib.

Meanwhile, Mohammed al-Obaidli of Al Adaaam was awarded the best player of the Match for his exceptional performance. The second match saw Al Zaeem and Al Janoub end in a 1-1 draw. Faisal al-Marri from Al Janoub was named best player for his influential performance, continuing his strong showing from the first edition of the championship, where he also won the best player award.

Abdul Qader a-Nahari of Al Zaeem earned the best goalkeeper award for his outstanding defensive display.

Tonight, the tournament will con-



tinue with three exciting matches starting at 8:30pm. Al Janoub will face Al Adaaam in the first match, followed by Al Zaeem taking on Al Yarmouk. The final match will feature Palestine against Tariq bin Ziyad.

Youssef bin Ali Abdul Nour, the tournament director, expressed his enthusiasm about the high level of competition displayed in the second edition of the championship.

"The matches have been filled with excitement, intensity, and fierce rivalry between all teams," Abdul Nour said.

"Each team is eager to win and compete for the title, and the introduction of the Best Player award has motivated players to showcase their best technical abilities."

"We're seeing some incredible performances as a result."

GOLF

PGA-LIV deal 'doesn't feel' closer: McIlroy

AFP
Miami

Rory McIlroy said yesterday that a deal to reunify golf does not feel any closer despite a flurry of recent meetings between the rival PGA Tour and Saudi-backed LIV Golf.

Hopes of a breakthrough in negotiations between the two circuits had risen after President Donald Trump hosted PGA and LIV golf leaders at a White House meeting last month.

However despite optimism following that meeting and an earlier White House summit, McIlroy said that a deal did not feel imminent.

"I don't think it's ever felt that close, but it doesn't feel like it's any closer," McIlroy told a press conference yesterday ahead of this week's Arnold Palmer Invitational at Bay Hill in Florida.

McIlroy had been one of the staunchest critics of LIV Golf after it was launched in 2022, luring a slew of star names from the PGA Tour with lavish signing fees and tournament purses.

The Northern Irishman's attitude has softened since the PGA unveiled a framework agreement

with LIV's Saudi financiers in 2023, with McIlroy saying recently that PGA Tour players need to "get over it" for the good of golf.

However yesterday, McIlroy suggested the progress towards reunification had reached an impasse in recent weeks.

"Look, I think it takes two to tango," McIlroy said. "So if one party is willing and ready and the other isn't, it sort of makes it tough."

McIlroy was also adamant that the PGA Tour could continue to operate successfully even without a deal that would bring the sport's top players together outside of majors.

"I think the narrative around golf, I wouldn't say needs a deal, I think the narrative around golf would welcome a deal in terms of just having all the best players together again," McIlroy said.

"But I don't think the PGA TOUR needs a deal. I think the momentum is pretty strong...the landscape might have looked a little different than it does now over these past couple of weeks, and I think a deal would still be the ideal scenario for golf as a whole."

"But from a pure PGA Tour perspective, I don't think it necessarily needs it."

Saudi PIF to pay 'up to 12 months maternity leave' for tennis players

Indian Wells, United States: Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) is to finance a joint initiative with the WTA for paid maternity leave of "up to 12 months" for players on the women's tennis circuit, it was announced yesterday.

The PIF WTA Maternity Fund Program "will offer benefits to more than 320 eligible WTA players", the Women's Tennis Association said in a statement.

"WTA players will for the first time receive paid maternity leave up to 12 months, and have access to grants for fertility treatments to build families, as well as other benefits," it read.



Victoria Azarenka

ments in a window of time" to benefit from the payments. Two-time Grand Slam winner Victoria Azarenka, a WTA players' council representative, welcomed "the beginning of a

meaningful shift in how we support women in tennis, making it easier for athletes to pursue both their careers and their aspirations of starting a family." "Ensuring that programmes like this exist has been a personal mission of mine," the Belarusian former world number one, who gave birth to a son in 2016, was quoted in the statement as saying. For WTA CEO Portia Archer "this initiative will provide the current and next generation of players the support and flexibility to explore family life, in whatever form they choose." Several top players have taken a break from their careers to give birth, with varying degrees of impact on their subsequent

careers. Belgian Kim Clijsters won three majors – the US Open in 2009 and 2010 and the Australian Open in 2011 – after giving birth to her daughter in 2008, following in the footsteps of Australians Margaret Court and Evonne Goolagong, who triumphed at Grand Slams as mothers. However, 23-time Grand Slam winner Serena Williams did not win any after the birth of her first child in September 2017, even though the American reached four finals at Wimbledon and the US Open. Four-time Grand Slam winner and former world number one Naomi Osaka of Japan returned to the courts in early 2024 after giving birth to a daughter.

HORSE RACING

Al Muthqafah clinches Al Wakra Cup after nail-biting finish

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari-owned Al Muthqafah claimed the Al Wakra Cup in a nail-biting finish at the Racing and Equestrian Club's (QREC) Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.

The Zuhair Mohsen-trained four-year-old filly was expertly ridden by jockey Soufiane Saadi as he patiently waited before unleashing her blistering speed in the final 100m, overtaking the leaders and clinching the victory by a head landing the Al Wakra Cup, Purebred Arabian Fillies over 2100m. This is the second career win for the four-year-old filly in her third career start. Wasmiyah Farm's Ghara, trained by Hamad al-Jehani came second.

The four-year-old filly claimed her second career win in her third career start, Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi, QREC Racing Manager, crowned the winners.

Earlier, Wathman Racing's Jeff Koons won the thoroughbred conditions for the four-year-old+ in the 2300m contest. The Hamad al-Jehani-trained horse was superbly guided by jockey Pierre Charles Boudot to win the race by a margin of length and a quarter. It was also a double for the jockey Charles Boudot.

Charles Boudot also rode the Ahmed Hassan al-Malki al-Jehani-owned and Hamad al-Jehani-trained Shuaa Bu Thaila to a thrilling victory in the In the card opener - 1400m Local Thorough-



Connection of Al Muthqafah celebrate after the filly won the Al Wakra Cup at the Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim

bred Maiden Plate for 3-6-year-olds. The four-year-old filly finished a nose ahead of Ahmed Hassan al-Malki al-Jehani's Madinat Bu Thaila.

Meanwhile, jockey Olivier d'Andigne also notched up a double piloting Dubai Hills (Thoroughbred Handicap 55-75) and Malath to wins.

In other races, Gubbass under Lukas Delozier emerged victorious in the Thoroughbred Conditions, while Wise Men Say stormed to win in Thoroughbred Handicap 0-90 under Faleh Bughanaim.

JUNGLE MATE POWERS TO VICTORY IN FUWAIRIT CUP

Ibrahim Saeed Ibrahim al-Malki-owned and trained Jungle Mate returned to win-

ning form in the Fuwairit Cup, a Thoroughbred Open Handicap over 1100m on Wednesday night at Al Rayyan Racecourse. Building on his runner-up finish last time, the four-year-old gelding showed his class by running prominently throughout the race. Once in the home straight, he kicked clear to win comfortably by one and a half lengths. The victory also completed a double on the evening for both his trainer and his jockey Tomas Lukasek.

RESULTS 32ND AL RAYYAN RACE MEETING - AL WAKRA CUP

WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1 - Al Wakra Cup - Purebred Arabian (Fillies Only) (Class 2)
Al Muthqafah, Zuhair Mohsen, Soufiane



Jockey Tomas Lukasek guided Jungle Mate to Fuwairit Cup victory.

Saadi
2 - Thoroughbred Conditions (Class 2)
Jeff Koons, Hamad al-Jehani, Pierre Charles Boudot
3 - Thoroughbred Conditions (Class 2)
Gubbass, Georges Mikhalides, Lukas Delozier
4 - Thoroughbred Handicap 0-90 (3yr Only) (Class 3)
Wise Men Say, Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, Faleh Bughanaim
5 - Purebred Arabian Handicap 75-95

(Class 3)
Sheteer, Rudy Andre Nerbonne, Pierre Charles Boudot
6 - Thoroughbred Handicap 55-75 (Class 5)
Dubai Hills, Jassim Ghazali, Olivier d'Andigne
7 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate (Class 6)
Malath, Jean de Mieulle, Olivier d'Andigne
8 - Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate (Class 6)
Shuaa Bu Thaila, Hamad al-Jehani, Pierre Charles Boudot

EUROPA LEAGUE

Sociedad fight back to earn Man United draw

Hosts came close to snatching a winner late on but Oskarsson twice failed to finish

AFP
San Sebastian, Spain

Real Sociedad's Mikel Oyarzabal coolly netted a penalty to hold Manchester United to a 1-1 draw in a Europa League last 16 first leg clash yesterday.

The Red Devils are enduring a woeful season and winning the competition offers their only realistic route to Champions League football, but they could not protect their lead in San Sebastian. Dutch forward Joshua Zirkzee netted his first goal in five games to send Ruben Amorim's side ahead at the Reale Arena before the hour mark but Bruno Fernandes conceded a penalty for handball, which Oyarzabal dispatched in the 70th minute.

The hosts came close to snatching a winner late on but Orri Oskarsson twice failed to finish and the match is evenly poised ahead of the second leg at Old Trafford next Thursday. Amorim was left with just 18 players to call on because of an injury crisis, with Harry Maguire and Manuel Ugarte joining the likes of Amad Diallo, Kobbie Mainoo and Luke Shaw on the sidelines.

Up front the coach started with Rasmus Hojlund, who extended his barren run without a goal to 19 matches, while strike-partner Zirkzee now has two in his last 17 games. The first half was a drab affair with neither side attacking with confidence or edge, although the Premier League giants came closest. Real Sociedad defender Aritz Elustondo blocked Fernandes and Zirkzee shots as United shaded the first 45 minutes in San Sebastian.

Real Sociedad have endured a tough domestic campaign too, sitting ninth in La Liga, but with the Europa League final at the home of rivals Athletic Bilbao, they would dearly love to win it at the San



Real Sociedad's Mikel Oyarzabal (second right) celebrates converting a penalty during the Europa League Round of 16 match against Manchester United in San Sebastian. (AFP)

Mames. Imanol Alguacil was able to bring back Takefusa Kubo, Oyarzabal and Luka Sucic after suspension and injury ruled them out of the 4-0 thrashing by Barcelona in La Liga last weekend, but La Real struggled without injured midfield conductor Martin Zubimendi.

Fernandes sent a free-kick wide as United started the second half with more vim and Alejandro Garnacho fired into the side-netting when well placed. The visitors

made the breakthrough after 58 minutes when Zirkzee bundled home from Garnacho's pass across the area, with Real Sociedad goalkeeper Alex Remiro disappointed not to keep his effort out.

Brais Mendez fired wide from long range with Real Sociedad's first menacing effort midway through the second half. A few minutes later the Basque side won a penalty when United captain Fernandes was adjudged to have handled in the area as he tried

to clear a corner. Oyarzabal, who scored the winner for Spain in the Euro 2024 final against England, dispatched it clinically, sending Man United goalkeeper Andre Onana the wrong way with his side's first shot on target. The Cameroon international then made a good save from Mendez's long-range curler as La Real hit their stride.

Oskarsson should have won the game for Real Sociedad but poked a fine chance wide and had another effort well saved by Onana in the final stages. The winner of the tie will face French side Lyon or Romanian outfit FCSB in the quarter-finals.

SPURS LOSE 1-0 AT ALKMAAR

Meanwhile, Tottenham Hotspur suffered a 1-0 defeat at AZ Alkmaar. Rangers won 3-1 at Fenerbahce with Vaclav Cerny scoring twice, and Olympique Lyonnais secured a 3-1 victory at Romanian side Steaua Bucharest thanks to two late goals from Malick Fofana.

Spurs went behind in the 18th minute when Lucas Bergvall put the ball into his own net from a corner and the visitors failed to register a shot on target in the opening half. Bergvall tried to make amends after the break, hitting a shot from distance just wide but that was as close as Tottenham came to an equaliser.

Rangers went ahead through Cyriel Dessers in the sixth minute and substitute Alexander Djiku pulled Fenerbahce level on the half hour mark but the visitors were back in front three minutes from the break through Cerny.

Dessers had two goals ruled out for offside in the second half before Cerny wrapped up the win nine minutes from time. Nicolas Tagliafico put Lyon ahead after half an hour in Romania and Alexandru Baluta levelled for the hosts with 22 minutes left but Fofana netted twice in the final four minutes to give the French side a two-goal cushion.

FIFA to consider one-off expansion to 64 teams for 2030 World Cup

Paris: Football governing body FIFA will review a proposal to expand the 2030 World Cup to 64 teams to mark the centenary of the sport's marquee event, it said. The 2030 World Cup will be held in Morocco, Spain and Portugal, with Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, where the inaugural edition was staged, set to host three games. The World Cup has already been expanded from 32 to 48 teams for next year's edition in the US, Mexico and Canada.

"A proposal to analyse a 64-team FIFA World Cup to celebrate the centenary of the FIFA World Cup in 2030 was spontaneously raised by a FIFA Council member in the 'miscellaneous' agenda item near the end of the FIFA Council meeting held on March 5 2025," a FIFA spokesperson said. "The idea was acknowledged as FIFA has a duty to analyse any proposal from one of its Council members."

Earlier, the *New York Times* said the proposal was made by Ignacio Alonso, a delegate from Uruguay. The newspaper, which did not name its sources, said the proposal was met with 'stunned silence' by the participants. It added that according to three people in the meeting, "FIFA was likely to be guided by financial and political benefits as much as sporting ones when it came to taking a decision on the matter." (FIFA president) Mr Infantino ... described the proposal as an interesting one that should be analysed more closely," the *New York Times* added, according to "four people with direct knowledge of the discussions."

NEYMAR BACK FOR BRAZIL AFTER 16-MONTH ABSENCE FOR WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Neymar was recalled by coach Dorival Junior to the Brazil team after almost a year and a half out injured for upcoming 2026 World Cup qualifiers against Colombia and Argentina.

Neymar started Brazil's first four qualifying games but went off injured in a defeat to Uruguay in October 2023, his last appearance for the five-time world champions.

Brazil have struggled in South American World Cup qualifying. After 12 of the 18 rounds, they are fifth in the 10-nation group. But the top six are guaranteed places in the World Cup and Brazil are five points ahead of Bolivia in seventh.

Neymar returns for qualifiers against Colombia on March 21 and world champions Argentina five days later. Brazil's top scorer with 79 goals said last month next year's World Cup is going to be his last. He will be 34 by the time the competition in the USA, Canada and Mexico, kicks off.

Neymar scored for the first time in over 14 months last Sunday with his first goal for Santos since his return to his boyhood club at the start of the month. The 33-year-old helped Santos beat fourth division Agua Santa 3-1 in a Sao Paulo state championship match. Neymar spent 18 months with Al Hilal after joining from Paris Saint-Germain.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Liverpool must be ready to 'suffer' in PSG return leg: Van Dijk

AFP
Paris

Virgil van Dijk believes Liverpool's Champions League suffering at the hands of Paris Saint-Germain is not yet over despite surviving an onslaught to win the first leg of their last 16 tie 1-0 in the French capital.

The Reds were outclassed for almost the entire match at the Parc des Princes on Wednesday but clung on thanks to what goalkeeper Alisson Becker described as the performance "of his life".

Harvey Elliott came off the bench to score the winner with his first touch on 87 minutes. Liverpool had only two shots, compared with PSG's 27 attempts at goal. It was the Paris side's first defeat in 23 games, a run stretching back to November.

Liverpool will expect to be much stronger for the second leg at Anfield on Tuesday, but Van Dijk warned the tie is not yet over. "It should be a great game and we have to be ready to suffer as they are a very good team who were unbeaten for a very long time,"

said the Liverpool captain. "What I really liked was the togetherness, everyone put a shift in and we know everyone can be better."

Liverpool boss Arne Slot conceded his side would have been lucky even to escape with a draw. Van Dijk agreed the backs-to-the-wall display is not how the runaway Premier League leaders are used to winning but paid tribute to the "world-class" opposition they faced.

"We don't want to be playing this way because everyone who plays football wants to have the ball a lot and wants to be dominating opponents," he said. "But we played against a team with a lot of quality, world-class quality, and they made it very difficult for everyone in the world so far and they made it difficult for us but we found a way and we have to try to finish it off next week."

Slot's substitutes made a telling contribution as Darwin Nunez set up the winner for Elliott, while Curtis Jones and Wataru Endo helped snuff out the PSG threat. "We are coming to the last stages of the season and the message is pretty clear - everyone who is part of the team has to play a part when they come on," said Van Dijk.



Liverpool's and Paris Saint-Germain players battle for the ball during the UEFA Champions League last 16 first leg match at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris. (AFP)

"With the goal you saw Darwin makes it difficult for Marquinhos and the ball falls and he gives a good pass to Harvey for the finish. "Even Wataru coming on, Curtis doing a good job is good to see. Everyone needs to feel that importance because there

are many big games - and decisive games - coming up so we have to keep going."

Liverpool can extend their 13-point lead at the top of the Premier League when bottom-of-the-table Southampton visit Anfield tomorrow.