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Saturday, March 8, 2025  
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# GULF TIMES SPORT



TENNIS

Djokovic says  
hamstring injury  
behind him, targets  
'Sunshine Double'

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FOOTBALL

## Sadd rout Shahania to go top of Qatar Stars League



Al Sadd's Akram Afif celebrates with teammates after scoring against Al Shahania yesterday.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**R**eigning champions Al Sadd humbled Al Shahania 5-0 in the Qatar Stars League at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday to go two points clear at the top. Brazilian forward Giovani Henrique (33rd minute and 45+3 minute) and Akram Afif (59th minute-penalty & 83rd minute)

scored a brace each, while Rafa Mujica (53rd minute) scored one. Their 13th win of the league championship took Al Sadd's tally to 40 at the top of the ladder, two ahead of Al Duhail, who face Al Ahli today. Meanwhile, Shahania remained in 7th place with 23 points. Shahania managed to hold off the formidable rivals for the first half hour, but soon Afif ran down the left and Abdulla al-Yazidi provided a fine long lob from the mid-field for the former to make a fine header

in front of the goal which was latched on to by Giovani to strike and score the opener. Shahania suffered a second blow in added time of the first half as a Claudio Luiz Leonel kick was blocked by a defender by the ball went to a vacant space in front of the goal near the small box and this time again the alert Giovani lunged forward to take the advantage and score. Sadd held sway and early in the second session Afif burst into the danger zone to send across a fine cross from Mujica to put



Al Rayyan thrashed bottom-club Al Khor 5-0 yesterday.

into the net. Six minutes later, Shahania's hopes were further dashed as Mohamed Bader Sayyar while trying to battle for the ball stepped on the toes of Mujica inside the top of the box and the referee called for a penalty. Afif coolly drove into the left corner of the net from the spot. In the 71st minute, Al Sadd attacked again and Afif provided Giovani with a fine pass but the latter shot just over the cross-bar from the right, looking for a hat-trick.

Afif wasn't however done and in the 83rd minute despite losing possession while on the go. The dazzling striker immediately made good of a cross from Yusuf Abdurisag from the left to strike, and the ball found bottom of the right post before going in. In other matches yesterday, Al Rayyan thrashed bottom-club Al Khor 5-0, while third-placed Al Gharafa edged Umm Salal 1-0.

PREMIER LEAGUE

## Arsenal's Arteta warns Man Utd still a threat

Arsenal travel to Old Trafford seeking their fifth straight league win over their old rivals

AFP  
London

**M**ikel Arteta said last Tuesday's 7-1 hammering of PSV Eindhoven in the Champions League had given the club a huge lift but urged caution ahead of tomorrow's trip to misfiring Manchester United. Second-placed Arsenal, 13 points behind leaders Liverpool, are realistically out of the Premier League title race after recent stumbles. But they travel to Old Trafford seeking their fifth straight league win over their old rivals in Arteta's 200th Premier League game in charge. Arsenal, struggling with injuries in forward areas and goalless in their past two league matches, hit form in the first leg of their last-16 Champions League tie on Tuesday. "It was a great night for us in an important competition that we have hope in," the Gunners boss said. "The manner, the way we did it obviously lifted everybody. That's the past unfortunately so it's about what we do today, the preparation for tomorrow and try to replicate a great performance on Sunday." United are a lowly 14th in the Premier League, 21 points behind Arsenal, but Arteta said they should not be underestimated. The Spaniard was asked what he expected from Ruben Amorim's team, who have produced some surprising results this season including a win against Manchester City, a draw against Liverpool and an FA Cup win against Arsenal on penalties. "That's the history of that football club," he said. "The players that they have and the coach that they have. Watching the game last night against Real Sociedad (a 1-1 draw in the Europa League) you come very clear that they are very capable to put a really strong performance and beat you on the day. So we know that, we know the difficulty of the match and that's how we prepared." Arteta, who became Arsenal manager in December 2019, was asked at his pre-match press conference to name his top moments as Gunners boss as he marks 200 league games in charge. "Probably the number one



Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta talks to his players during a training session in London yesterday.

is with the day that I was sitting here on the first day, just fulfilling that dream of one day becoming the manager of this incredible football club," he said. "And then there are many others, but the other night was up there with one of the best because of the way we did it. I have a lot of energy still and I'm very driven to have more success." **AMORIM SAYS UNITED WILL NOT GIVE HIM TIME ARTETA HAD AT ARSENAL** Meanwhile, Ruben Amorim does not believe he will get as much time at Manchester United to turn things around as Arteta was given to revive Arsenal's fortunes. The 40-year-old Amorim has struggled since succeeding Erik ten Hag at Old Trafford in November. The Red Devils languish 14th in the Premier League and are out of both domestic cup competitions. The Europa League is the only remaining route to silverware and, realistically, continental qualification for a threadbare side

preparing to take on an Arsenal team second in the Premier League. Arteta has made the Gunners a force again, with some eye-catching decisions as he reshaped the squad after being appointed in late 2019, including getting rid of senior players. Asked if he saw similarities between Arteta's position and his job at United, Amorim said: "I don't feel that. I will not have the time that Arteta had. I feel that. It's a different club. So, we just need to survive with the players on Sunday and during these games. I think it's a different club. I think in that aspect, the way Arteta dealt with that is an inspiration for everybody. I will not have the time like Arteta had." United secured a 1-1 draw away to Real Sociedad in the first leg of their Europa League last-16 tie. They were without 11 first-team players in Spain, where the lack of options in their 18-man travelling squad and recent exertions took their toll. "We need to survive Sunday," Amorim said. "The team was so tired in the last 20 min-

utes. We have to prepare Sunday and then think about this important game for our season on Thursday (the return leg against Real Sociedad)." Amorim does not expect any of his injured players to be fit in time to face Arsenal, with Harry Maguire and Manuel Ugarte this week joining the lengthy casualty list at Old Trafford. Amad Diallo, Kobbie Mainoo, Lisandro Martinez, Mason Mount and Luke Shaw remain out, as do Jonny Evans, Altay Bayindir and Tom Heaton, while Patrick Dorgu is suspended. **FIXTURES (1500 GMT UNLESS STATED)** **Today:** Nottingham Forest v Manchester City (1230), Brighton v Fulham, Crystal Palace v Ipswich, Liverpool v Southampton, Brentford v Aston Villa (1730), Wolves v Everton (2000) **Tomorrow:** Chelsea v Leicester (1400), Tottenham v Bournemouth (1400), Manchester United v Arsenal (1630) **Monday:** West Ham v Newcastle (2000)

**Slot urges against complacency as Liverpool prepare for 'three finals'**

**London:** Arne Slot says he has to convince his Liverpool players they are playing three finals over the coming week, urging fans to raise the roof against Premier League basement club Southampton today. Liverpool are closing in on the Premier League title, have a 1-0 lead against Paris Saint-Germain after the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie and face Newcastle in next weekend's League Cup final. But Slot is anxious to focus on the visit of Southampton, even though his men are heavy favourites to extend their 13-point lead at the top of the table, at least for 24 hours. "Our full focus, my full focus, is now on Southampton, which is the first of three finals to be played in the upcoming week," Slot said. The Dutchman was anxious to guard against complacency with the second leg against PSG and the League Cup final at Wembley to come. "I hope, I truly hope, that our fans will be as loud as possible, at the loudest tomorrow," he said. "And not in the final and not against PSG, but tomorrow. I have to convince my players that we play three finals," he added. "And I'm hoping, and that's why I every time I come up with the word final, that I influence our fans a bit as well, that they understand how important they're going to be tomorrow. "So I'm hoping they will not come into the stadium five minutes before the kick-off. I'm hoping the whole stadium is already completely filled half an hour before kick-off, and that these players get the reward for what they did in Paris, for working so hard." The Dutchman admitted his players had been "really, really, really lucky" to come away from their midweek trip to Paris with a win after the French side had dominated the game, with goalkeeper Alisson Becker playing a starring role. "But, as Michael Jordan said once, the harder you work, the more luck you have. And this is the biggest compliment you have to give the players," he said.



PREVIEW

# Unbeaten India ready to face record-setting New Zealand for Champions Trophy glory

A FULL-HOUSE WILL BE IN ATTENDANCE AT THE 25,000-SEAT DUBAI INTERNATIONAL STADIUM



Hardik Pandya bats against Australia during their ICC Champions Trophy match in Dubai on Tuesday. **Right:** New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra (left) plays a shot during the ICC Champions Trophy semi-final against South Africa at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore on Wednesday. (AFP)

AFP  
Dubai

India play New Zealand in the Champions Trophy final in Dubai tomorrow in what could be a last hurrah for veteran stars Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma. The 36-year-old Kohli and skipper Rohit, 37, came into the 50-over tournament with speculation swirling over when they will retire following lean patches in Test cricket. Mainstays of a formidable India side for more than 15 years, the duo retired from T20 internationals after winning the World Cup last year. This weekend could be the end for them in ODIs, with the next 50-over World Cup not until 2027.

"I am sure Rohit will lead India to a title. He will have another ICC trophy soon," former seam bowler Praveen Kumar told *The Times of India*. "I will only say that Virat and Rohit, give us one more ICC trophy before you retire," he added.

**Title favourites**

India go into the final at Dubai International Cricket Stadium as favourites and with their confidence sky-high. They have won all four of their matches at the eight-nation tournament, including beating New Zealand by 44 runs in the group phase, although both teams had already reached the semi-finals by then. Rohit's side have played all their games in Dubai after refusing to

visit Champions Trophy hosts Pakistan because of political tensions. Rohit and Kohli came into the competition under pressure. Master batsman Kohli silenced his critics with an unbeaten 100 against arch-rivals Pakistan, then hit a match-winning 84 against world champions Australia in the semi-finals. Rohit's highest score has been 41 in their opening win over Bangladesh but the opener has been lauded for handing the team quick starts to build totals on at a venue where batting is tough. India, who are looking to win the Champions Trophy for a record third time, also boast a world-class spin attack. They unleashed four spinners in beating New Zealand with Varun Chakravarthy returning figures



of 5-42 to help bowl out the Black Caps for 205 in their chase of 250. India were unchanged against Australia as the spin-heavy selection came up trumps again, albeit on a Dubai pitch that turned a little less that time around.

**Henry injury doubt**

In front of them lies a New Zealand team hoping to win the tournament for the second time, having done so in 2000 in what was the second edition of a competition likened to a mini World Cup. The Black Caps powered into the final by beating South Africa by 50 runs in Lahore. But the victory came at a price with an injury to pace bowler Matt Henry after he landed on his shoulder awkwardly while taking a catch.

Henry, who took 5-42 against India in the group phase, is in a race to be fit for the final tomorrow. "Still a little bit unknown at this stage," head coach Gary Stead said. "He's obviously pretty sore just from landing on the point of his shoulder. Hopeful he will be okay." Batsman Rachin Ravindra hammered 108 in New Zealand's Champions Trophy record total of 362 against South Africa at the batting-friendly Gaddafi Stadium. Ravindra put together 164 runs with veteran batsman Kane Williamson, who hit 102. The left-handed Ravindra, who also bowls left-arm spin, has amassed 226 from three matches after he returned from a nasty hit to his forehead in a tri-series match in Pakistan. The Wellington-born Ravindra

is of Indian origin with his parents hailing from Bengaluru. "We don't quite know how the Dubai pitch is like," Ravindra told reporters. "I think we pride ourselves in adapting and playing the situation in front of us, so will see what happens in the next couple of days and hope it's a good cricket wicket," he added. India might be favourites and will have much of the crowd at the 25,000-capacity Dubai stadium roaring them on, but recent history is actually with New Zealand. They registered a surprise 3-0 Test whitewash in India in October and November last year. The Black Caps also hold a clear advantage over India with nine wins, six losses and one no-result at global white-ball tournaments.

## 5 KEY FACTORS IN INDIA-NEW ZEALAND CHAMPIONS TROPHY FINAL

**Dubai:** India and New Zealand face off in the final of the Champions Trophy in Dubai tomorrow to decide the winner of the eight-nation ODI tournament. AFP Sport looks at five key factors that could decide the fate of the title clash.

**HENRY'S OPENING BURST**

New Zealand pace spearhead Matt Henry leads the bowling charts in the 50-over tournament with 10 wickets - five when the Black Caps faced India earlier in the competition. Henry took down Shubman Gill and Virat Kohli in the group match in Dubai to reduce India to 30-3, before a middle-order fightback lifted Rohit Sharma's team to 249-9. Henry, who combines pace with good seam movement, returned figures of 5-42, albeit in a losing cause. His opening burst in the final could be vital for New Zealand in gaining the upper hand.

**CHAKRAVARTHY'S MYSTERY SPIN**

Wrist spinner Varun Chakravarthy was a late addition to the India squad for the tournament and against New Zealand bamboozled the opposition with figures of 5-42. That was his first match of the tournament and only his second ODI, having made his debut against England in February. The 33-year-old, a mystery spinner who has many variations up his sleeve, took another two wickets in the semi-final against Australia. Chakravarthy could be key to India's chances - if part of the XI - on pitches that have helped the spinners.

**RAVINDRA, WILLIAMSON THREAT**

Rising star Rachin Ravindra and old warhorse Kane Williamson come into the final fresh from centuries against South Africa in Lahore. The left-handed Ravindra and Williamson put together 164 runs in a match-winning stand in the semi-final and have the ability tackle the Indian spinners with aplomb. Williamson, 34, hit a valiant 81 in the previous match against India and with Ravindra, 25, will once again pose a serious threat to India on an expected sluggish pitch. Skipper and left-arm spinner Mitchell Santner said Williamson and Ravindra's batting makes life a "little easier" for the bowlers.

**ROHIT'S START**

India captain Rohit hasn't hit top gear in the tournament, with his highest score being 41 in the opening



win against Bangladesh. But even his scores of 20-plus in two matches - against Pakistan and Australia - have handed India quick starts for others to build on. Critics have slammed the opener for not converting those starts into bigger scores. Head coach Gautam Gambhir says his impact has been crucial and not driven by numbers. "You evaluate from the runs; we evaluate from the impact. That's the difference," Gambhir shot back at a question on Rohit's form.

**THE PITCH FACTOR**

The pitches at Dubai International Cricket Stadium have been a talking point with India playing all their matches at the same venue after refusing to tour Pakistan for political reasons. The surface in Dubai has been sluggish and aided spinners with Australia posting the highest total in this tournament of 264, which was overhauled by India with 11 balls to spare. Tracks in Pakistan have produced tall scores with New Zealand getting a Champions Trophy record 362-6 before restricting South Africa to 312-9 in Lahore. While India stay at their temporary home for the final, New Zealand's Ravindra said "we pride ourselves in adapting and playing the situation in front of us".

## SPOTLIGHT

# 'No advantage' in playing matches in Dubai, says Kotak

AFP  
Dubai

India playing all their Champions Trophy matches in Dubai was a pre-tournament decision and the talk of unfair advantage is baseless, the team's batting coach said yesterday. Rohit Sharma's team face New Zealand in the title clash tomorrow at the Dubai International Stadium, where India have been unbeaten in four matches. India refused to tour hosts Pakistan in the eight-nation tournament due to political tensions and were given Dubai as their venue in the United Arab Emirates. "The draw that happened, it happened before," batting coach Sitanshu Kotak told reporters. "After India winning four matches, if people feel that there is an advantage, then I don't know what to say about it." The tournament's tangled schedule, with teams flying in and out of the UAE from Pakistan while India have stayed put, has been hugely controversial. South Africa batsman David Miller said "it was not an ideal situation" for his team to fly in to Dubai to wait on India's semi-final opponent and then fly back to Lahore in less than 24 hours. Even nominal hosts Pakistan had to jump on a jet and fly to Dubai to play India, rather than face them on home soil. The pitches have been vastly different in the two countries. Pakistan tracks produced big



New Zealand coach Gary Stead yesterday talks to the media ahead of his team's ICC Champions Trophy final against India. The final will be played in Dubai tomorrow. (@BLACKCAPS)

totals, in contrast to the slow and turning decks of the Dubai stadium. "End of the day, I think in a game, you have to play good cricket every day when you turn up," the 52-year-old Kotak said. "So the only thing they (critics) may say is that we play here. But that is how the draw is." "So nothing else can happen in that. It is not that after coming here, they changed something and we got an advantage," he added. India have been the team to beat after they topped Group A, which had New Zealand, Pakistan and Bangladesh. They then beat Australia in the first semi-final. New Zealand, led by Mitchell Santner, lost the last group game to India by 44 runs before they beat South Africa in the second semi-final in Lahore.

Kotak said the previous result between the two teams will have no bearing on their mindset going into the final. "That depends how the New Zealand team thinks, but I think we should not think that," said Kotak. "We should just try and turn up and play a good game of cricket because there is no use thinking about the last match." New Zealand head coach Gary Stead said they are not too worried about India's advantage. "I mean, look, the decision around that's out of our hands," said Stead. "So, it's not something we worry about too much. India have got to play all their games here in Dubai. But as you said, we have had a game here and we'll learn very quickly from that experience there as well. And if we're good enough to beat India on Sunday, then I'm sure we'll be very, very happy," he added.



SPOTLIGHT

# Fit-again Djokovic targets ‘Sunshine Double’

Reuters  
Indian Wells, California

Novak Djokovic said he has recovered from the hamstring injury that forced him out of the Australian Open semi-finals and confirmed he will play the ‘Sunshine Double’ at Indian Wells and Miami for the first time since 2019.

The 24-time Grand Slam winner, who retired from his last four match at Melbourne Park in January due to the injury and lost his opener at the Qatar Open last month, also said he was reaping the rewards of his work with coach Andy Murray.

“The injury is behind me. I mean, hopefully,” he told reporters. “I haven’t felt any problems prior to Doha, end of Doha tournament I felt completely fine, as I have felt in the lead-up to Indian Wells, my



Novak Djokovic of Serbia and his coach Andy Murray working on his serve during a practice session at the BNP Paribas Open at Indian Wells Tennis Garden in Indian Wells, California. (AFP)

training weeks.” The 37-year-old Serb, a five-times Indian Wells winner, can become the third man to claim 100 singles titles in the professional era behind Jimmy Connors (109) and Roger Federer (103) with another triumph in the Southern California desert.

He has won the Indian Wells-Miami Open double a record four times.

“I’ll play the Sunshine Double first time after six years. I haven’t done really well in Indian Wells and Miami ever since 2016 or ’17, and I struggled to find my best game here.

“I’m not going to get younger, I know that. But I definitely look to go deep in the tournament. I’ve done, I think, the right things in preparation.”

Djokovic said he expects Murray to be an asset at both tournaments and to continue through the clay court season including the French

Open and, hopefully, Wimbledon. “I’m enjoying the relationship with Andy,” Djokovic said of his former rival.

“I still feel like we are going through the process of getting to know each other on the court in a different way than we have known each other for 25 years.

“So it’s obviously a new role for him.

“He’s also exploring it and trying to understand how he can excel in it.”

Djokovic, who won gold at the Paris Olympics, said he had been pleased with his level in Melbourne before retiring after the first set against Alexander Zverev.

“I think I played maybe the best tennis that I played in quite some time.

“Since the Olympics, actually,” he said.

“So I definitely attribute that to the work I had with Andy.”

TENNIS

# Fonseca delivers on Indian Wells debut in fine style

‘People call it the fifth Grand Slam and I can understand why’

Reuters  
Indian Wells, California

Highly touted Brazilian teenager Joao Fonseca rallied from a break down in the third set to beat Britain’s Jacob Fearnley 6-2 1-6 6-3 on his Indian Wells debut.

Fonseca cruised through the first set before Fearnley found his groove in the second to level the match on a windy day in the California desert.

Fearnley raced out to a 3-1 lead in the third before Fonseca stepped up his shotmaking to reel off the final five games and wrapped up the win in style with a dazzling lunge volley at the net on match point.

“It’s a pleasure being here on centre court at Indian Wells. It’s a dream,” said Fonseca, who received a wildcard into the tournament.

“People call it the fifth Grand Slam and I can understand why. It’s literally a paradise. So I am really grateful. Today was pretty difficult, very windy and I got through so I’m very happy.”

There has been immense hype around the 18-year-old since he beat Andrey Rublev in straight sets at the Australian Open for his first win over a top-10 opponent and won his first ATP Tour title in Buenos Aires last month. Fonseca, ranked 80th in the world, enjoyed the vocal support of the boisterous Brazilian fans on hand for the match at the ATP 1000 event.

“Everywhere I go there are



Joao Fonseca of Brazil returns a shot to Jacob Fearnley of Great Britain during the BNP Paribas Open at Indian Wells Tennis Garden in Indian Wells, California. (AFP)

some Brazilians watching and cheering for me,” he said.

Next up for Fonseca is another Briton, 13th seed Jack Draper.

Earlier, American Jensen Brooksby overcame a nightmare start to defeat France’s Benjamin Bonzi 1-6 7-5 7-5 for his first ATP Tour win in two years.

Brooksby served a 13-month suspension for missing three drugs tests and was hampered by injury after his ban ended.

He made his return to tennis at this year’s Australian Open, where he lost in straight sets to compatriot Taylor Fritz in the first round.

Brooksby will next face 17th seed Felix Auger-Aliassime of Canada.

Emma Raducanu’s struggles continued as the former US Open champion had no answers to the solid play of Japan’s Moyuka Uchijima, who prevailed 6-3 6-2 amid gusting winds.

Raducanu made the third round of the Australian Open in January but has since suffered first-round exits in Singapore, Abu Dhabi and Qatar.

Raducanu, who was playing her first match under coach Vladimir Platenik, said she felt good mentally.

“I didn’t have what happened in Dubai in my head at all today,” she told reporters.

“If anything, like a bit of a lack of preparation on the tennis court, playing someone who played pretty good in these conditions. Extremely awkward in the wind here.”

Uchijima will meet third seed Coco Gauff in the second round.

Former world number two Paula Badosa withdrew ahead of her clash with Caroline Dolehide due to a lower back injury, having retired due to the problem in the quarter-final of last week’s Merida Open.

## Back to the drawing board for teary Kyrgios after wrist injury



Nick Kyrgios of Australia reacts after a point against Botić Van De Zandschulp (not pictured) during his first round match of the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Well Tennis Garden.

**Indian Wells, California:** A bitterly disappointed Nick Kyrgios said he was getting worried that injuries were stopping him from finishing matches after the former Wimbledon finalist retired from his first-round contest at Indian Wells on Thursday due to pain in his right wrist.

The Australian showed flashes of brilliance as he battled back from 4-1 down in the first set against Botić van de Zandschulp before losing a tight tiebreaker, where he had a set point, in front of a supportive crowd.

However, Kyrgios tearfully threw in the towel in the second set due to sharp pain in his surgically repaired wrist while trailing 7-6(7) 3-0.

“We go back to the drawing board as a team and we try and figure out a way to get through these matches,” Kyrgios told reporters.

“I would have loved to be able to finish that match, even if I lose just as a building block to say, okay, I went out there and was competing with a very good player, and I had chances and set points and breakpoints.

“But now if I’m not finishing matches that becomes a concern.”

Kyrgios hinted that he might not play singles at the Australian Open again after his first-round loss there in January and said there was no roadmap back from the injury that has plagued him for nearly two years.

“No one in the sport has had a wrist reconstruction and tried to play after that,” he said.

“There’s been players that have had wrist surgeries and nowhere near as bad as what I had.

“It would be nice if someone had this injury prior if I could just go there and ask them, okay, these are setbacks you were having.

“It’s all an experiment at this point. I was told I was arguably maybe not ever playing tennis again. I feel I’m like right there, I feel like I can compete.”

Kyrgios, who turns 30 next month, said there were times during Thursday’s match when he forgot about his injury problems and was just happy to be playing again.

“I had glimpses of it tonight with the crowd going absolutely ballistic, and I’m playing amazing and I’m enjoying being out there,” said Kyrgios, who has won seven titles and reached the Wimbledon final in 2022.

“The pain, it’s not great. I don’t know. I’ll just keep looking forward and try and do the right thing.”

Kyrgios hoped he would feel healthy enough to compete at the Miami Open but there was little time for recovery.

“Obviously the time frame of Miami is not ideal, but I was scheduled to play that, so I will see how my wrist responds,” he said.

“And if not Miami, I will keep looking forward.”

MOTORSPORT

# GM-backed Cadillac team confirmed for the 2026 Formula One season

Reuters  
London

General Motors-backed Cadillac entry will become Formula One’s 11th team next year after securing formal approval from the commercial rights holders and governing FIA yesterday.

Formula One and the FIA confirmed in a joint statement that the necessary sporting, technical and commercial assessments had been completed.

The various parties reached an agreement in principle last November after Formula One rejected a previous bid under the name of Andretti that the FIA had approved.

“As we said in November, the commitment by General Motors to bring a Cadillac team to Formula One was an important and positive demonstration of the evolution of our sport,” said Formula One chief executive Stefano Domenicali.

“I want to thank GM and TWG Motorsports for their constructive engagement over many months and look forward to welcoming the team on the grid from 2026 for what will be another exciting year for Formula One.”

FIA president Mohammed Ben Sulayem said the expansion to 11 teams was a “transformative moment” and an important milestone for the championship.

“GM/Cadillac brings fresh energy, aligning with the new FIA 2026 regulations and ushering in an exciting era for the sport,” he added.

“The Cadillac Formula One team’s presence in the paddock will inspire future competitors and fans.”

Formula One is entering a new engine era in 2026, with significant chassis regulation changes also, and Cadillac have a deal in place to use Ferrari engines until General Motors can produce their own.

Cadillac have also appointed Briton Graeme Lowdon to lead the team and have established a European headquarters at Silverstone.

“In terms of being ready to race, everything is on schedule,” Lowdon told the F1 website.

“There’s an awful lot of work that has gone on in the background. There’s still a lot of work to do.

“We’re in a significantly better position now that we’re a fully-fledged F1 team. We will have access to all the data and information that all the other teams have.

“Now we can really push to come up with the most competitive car that we can,” Lowdon added. Lowdon said drivers would be hired on merit.

GOLF

# Late birdies help Clark go two clear at the Arnold Palmer Invitational

AFP  
Miami

Wyndham Clark conjured two birdies in his final three holes to open up a two-shot lead after the opening round of the PGA Tour’s Arnold Palmer Invitational in Florida on Thursday.

World number seven Clark, the 2023 US Open champion, fired a five-under-par 67 to edge clear of the field at Bay Hill on a day when gusty winds made for challenging conditions.

The 31-year-old Clark separated himself from the pack after rolling in an 18-foot birdie putt on the par-five 16th, before a brilliant second shot on the 18th left him with a tap-in for birdie.

It marked an encouraging opening round for Clark, who



finished a runner-up to Scottie Scheffler at last year’s tournament.

“It’s nice to put some good numbers on this golf course and if anything it’s really good momentum for the rest of the week,” Clark said.

With winds of up to 30 miles per hour buffeting the course throughout the day, Clark took

advantage of a late afternoon lull to make his move over the final few holes.

Clark leads from a group of four players knotted on three under: Keegan Bradley, Canada’s Corey Connors, South Africa’s Christiaan Bezuidenhout and Ireland’s Shane Lowry, who all carded 69s to finish on three under.

Lowry flirted with finishing the day on top of the leaderboard after a superb eagle three at the par-five 16th, where his second shot from 195 yards left him with a six-foot putt that he duly rolled in.

Lowry admitted he had benefited from more benign afternoon conditions after watching the windswept morning with an increasing sense of dread.

“It didn’t look much fun out there – I wasn’t particularly looking forward to my round,” Lowry said.



LIGUE 1

# PSG's Enrique wary of Rennes' new manager bounce

Reuters  
Paris

Paris St Germain boss Luis Enrique has praised counterpart Habib Beye's impact at Stade Rennais, saying he expected a stern test when the runaway Ligue 1 leaders visit Roazhon Park today.

Rennes have won four of their last five league games without conceding under Beye, who has helped them out of the relegation zone into 11th spot since replacing Jorge Sampaoli in January.

"It's obvious that they've been on a very good run since the change of coach," Luis Enrique told reporters.

"Four wins, one defeat. They have the opportunity to be in a good position in

the standings. It's difficult to form a quick connection with the players, but in this case they're doing a very good job. It's difficult to play away from home. Rennes is always difficult. I have no doubt that they are motivated to beat us... They have a very positive dynamic, they're very aggressive in defence on one-on-ones, they take risks, the players are well placed, they're at home and have nothing to lose."

Today's match will also see Desire Doue return to Rennes for the first time since moving to PSG in a deal reportedly worth 50mn in August last year. The 19-year-old winger, a Rennes academy graduate, is considered one of the brightest talents in French football and has made 36 appearances across all competitions for PSG this season, scoring seven goals and recording 10 assists.

Asked about Doue's development, Luis Enrique said: "There are no two similar paths. Some players are quicker than others to adapt. Doue played very well at Rennes last season, in different positions. With us, he's performing like he did last season. He's in line with the rest of the team."

PSG, who lead Ligue 1 by 13 points, face their Champions League last-16 return game against Liverpool on Tuesday, with Luis Enrique's side looking to overturn a 1-0 deficit after totally dominating the first leg but somehow losing.

However, the Spaniard said he was fully focused on facing Rennes first, adding: "We've only had two days to prepare. It's the shortest possible cycle. It's not training, it's recovery. I'm only interested in pre-match training with Rennes."



Paris St Germain lead Ligue 1 by a mammoth 13 points.

LA LIGA

# Flick backs keeper Szczesny as key player for Barca

The Pole was central to 10-man Barcelona 1-0 win against Benfica

Reuters  
Barcelona

Barcelona coach Hansi Flick praised Polish goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny's contribution to the team as the leaders prepare for the visit of mid-table Osasuna in La Liga yesterday.

Szczesny has become a key player for Barca after coming out of retirement in October to join the club, who were seeking a replacement after Marc-Andre ter Stegen's long-term injury. At Benfica in the Champions League on Wednesday, the 34-year-old was central to 10-man Barcelona gaining a 1-0 advantage in the first leg of their last-16 tie.

"He is fantastic. The other players were defending 10 against 11, and he helped us a lot. That is his job. We cannot hide it. He does his job very well, and that is why he is now the number one," Flick told reporters. "When you watch players in training, you get a feeling. I discuss it with my staff, I see how the players work and what level they can reach. It was clear to everyone that Szczesny could reach this level. We all knew it. I make the decisions, but I talk with my coaching staff."

Flick is wary of Osasuna, who were the first team to beat Barcelona in La Liga this season with a 4-2 win in September. "It was different, we played away ... Tomorrow, we have to field the best possible team. I think our performance level is different now. I am optimistic about tomorrow's match," he said.

Barca are a point ahead of Atletico Madrid and three in front of Real Madrid before 11th-placed Osasuna visit. "It is always good to be positive and to maintain a positive image at all times. If you approach things from a negative perspective, trying to avoid mistakes, I don't think that's good. We can defend well as a team. It will be a tough game - I always say the same. They played very well there, pressed us well, also in one-on-one situations. It was difficult for us to get out of their press. We will try to be prepared."

**MADRID DUO FACE TITLE RACE DERBIES AMID CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TUSSLE**

Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid are locked in a Champions League battle but must first turn their attention to two other derby clashes in La



Wojciech Szczesny has become a key player for Barca after coming out of retirement in October to join the club, who were seeking a replacement after Marc-Andre ter Stegen's long-term injury.

Liga this weekend before they can settle it. The capital clubs both face tough games as they try to keep up with the pace in the tightest of title races. Champions Real Madrid welcome high-flying Rayo Vallecano tomorrow, right after Diego Simeone's Atletico visit Getafe.

Los Blancos have England midfielder Jude Bellingham back from suspension but are concerned about Kylian Mbappe's last two performances. After a slow start the French superstar hit the sublime level everyone expected of him, but failed to find the net against Real Betis last weekend and in the Champions League last-16 first-leg win over Atletico on Tuesday.

Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti admitted Mbappe's conditioning was affected by a tooth issue. Rayo Vallecano are seventh and fighting for European football next season.

Inigo Perez's side were beaten 1-0 by Barce-

lona in February but deserved more from the match as they showed they can handle themselves against the league's top sides. Getafe by contrast are fighting relegation, currently 14th and six points clear of the drop zone, but all teams know a trip to the Coliseum Alfonso Perez is synonymous with a tough time.

Jose Bordalas' unforgiving side have a score to settle with Atletico after suffering a 5-0 thrashing on the road in the Copa del Rey in February. With Atletico needing to save strength for their attempted comeback against Real Madrid, Simeone could rotate his pack.

The coach has a deep squad and the likes of Alexander Sorloth, Angel Correa and Conor Gallagher could be brought into the starting line-up. As ever, Atletico coach Simeone insisted the Getafe game was at the forefront of his mind and not the second leg at the Metropolitan stadium.

ROUND-UP

# India football great Chhetri comes out of retirement aged 40

Indian football legend Sunil Chhetri will return to the national team aged 40 in an unexpected reversal of his decision to hang up his boots last year. The former captain, the fourth-highest men's international goalscorer of all time, played his last match for India in June 2024 in a World Cup qualifier.

Chhetri said last year that "instinct" told him the match against Kuwait should be his last and he bowed out in front of nearly 59,000 fans in Kolkata. But on Thursday, India head coach Manolo Marquez announced the return of India's most-capped player for the March international window.

India are out of qualifying for the 2026 World Cup and are now targeting the Asian Cup in 2027. "The qualification for the Asian Cup is very crucial for us. Given the importance of the tournament and the matches ahead, I discussed with Sunil Chhetri about making a comeback to strengthen the national team," Marquez said in a statement from the All India Football Federation. "He agreed, and so we have included him in the squad."

India play a friendly against Maldives on March 19, in preparation for an Asian Cup qualifier against Bangladesh on March 25. Football has struggled to find its feet among the 1.4 billion people of India, where the sport is dwarfed by the nation's long-standing cricket obsession.

Former FIFA president Sepp Blatter once called India a "sleeping giant" of football. Chhetri is a sporting icon in cricket-mad India. The diminutive striker, who is 1.7 metres (5ft 7in) tall, made his debut against fierce rivals Pakistan in 2005 and scored India's only goal.

Chhetri had two brief but unsuccessful spells in Portugal and the United States, but has spent most of his career in India. In 2009 he was offered a contract by London club Queens Park Rangers, in England's second tier, but he could not get a work permit.

Chhetri's return to the national team comes as India prepares for the 2023 Asian Cup in Qatar, where he will be 40 years old. "It's a great honor to be back in the national team," Chhetri said. "I want to contribute to the team and help India achieve its goals. I will give my best for the country."

**ETO'O WINS COURT BATTLE TO STAND IN CAF ELECTION**

The Court of Arbitration for Sport ordered the Confederation of African Football (CAF)



to allow Cameroonian football chief Samuel Eto'o to stand as a candidate for its executive committee. CAF had refused to accept the candidacy of the former African player of the year who has headed the Cameroonian federation (Fecafoot) since 2021.

The African federation is scheduled to hold the election during a meeting of its general assembly next week. Former Barcelona forward Eto'o, 43, who is also in conflict with the Cameroonian sports ministry, had appealed that decision to sport's top court.

"It is ordered that the CAF Executive Committee includes Mr Samuel Eto'o Fils in the list of candidates for election to the CAF Executive Committee by the CAF Extraordinary General Assembly Meeting on 12 March 2025," Lausanne-based CAS said in its ruling.

Eto'o is targeting a position as CAF vice-president, according to sources in Cameroon.

**UEFA LOSES BID TO THROW OUT LIVERPOOL FANS' LAWSUIT OVER 2022 CL FINAL**

European football's governing body UEFA lost its bid to throw out lawsuits brought by hundreds of Liverpool fans who attended the 2022 Champions League final in Paris for personal injuries allegedly caused by chaos outside the stadium.

The case against UEFA and UEFA Events, which was filed in 2023, was brought following mayhem outside the Stade de France before the match, which was delayed for over 30 minutes. French police were filmed using tear gas on fans, who complained of heavy-handed treatment as they were herded into pens outside the stadium.

## Leverkusen must move on from Bayern loss, says Alonso

**Munich:** Bayer Leverkusen's players must be professional and quickly move on from their chastening 3-0 Champions League defeat to Bayern Munich, manager Xabi Alonso said yesterday ahead of a Bundesliga clash with Werder Bremen.

On Wednesday, Leverkusen suffered their first defeat to Bayern since Alonso took charge in October 2022, and saw their hopes of advancing to the Champions League quarter-finals all but evaporate. Alonso said his side could not afford to wallow in their disappointment and urged them to refocus their attention on the Bundesliga, where defending champions Leverkusen sit second in the standings, eight points behind Bayern.

"The mood today is better than yesterday. We discussed everything as usual, we have to be professional and focus on the next game," Alonso told reporters ahead of their home match against Werder today. "Today was

our first and last training session in preparation for tomorrow. "We want to take every competition very seriously and now the Bundesliga is next on the agenda. We are in a position where a lot can still happen and everything is open... We're used to switching between the Champions League and Bundesliga, so it shouldn't be a problem for us. We need fresh legs and a clear head, no matter who we're playing and in which competition. We want to go full throttle every game."

The Spanish manager said midfielder Robert Andrich was unlikely to feature against 12th-placed Werder, adding: "He still has the flu and isn't feeling well yet."

Following their meeting with Werder, Leverkusen will play their Champions League last-16 return game against Bayern at home on Tuesday. "We need more energy and more clarity for this second leg," Alonso said.

PREMIER LEAGUE

# Manchester City boss Guardiola feeling pressure as top-four race heats up

AFP  
London

**Pep Guardiola** admitted he is feeling the pressure as he tries to salvage Manchester City's poor season by finishing in the top four of the Premier League. City, who have won six of the past seven Premier League titles, are currently fourth in the table, a single point behind today's opponents Nottingham Forest.

A top-four finish is usually required to qualify for the Champions League but fifth place is likely to be enough this season. City have been ever-present in Europe's top club competition since 2011/12, lifting the trophy for the first time in 2023.

Guardiola was asked at his pre-match press conference how the pressure he faces now compares to when City have been fighting for the Premier League title in previous seasons. "The pressure is always there," he said. "In the big clubs the pressure is always there. You have to press yourself to do your best. It doesn't



matter what you are playing for."

He added: "The reality is to try to finish in the top four and tomorrow (Saturday) we have an opportunity to go third in the table and climb and secure this target."

Guardiola said he was wary of the threat from Nuno Espirito Santo's Forest, whose league form has dipped in recent weeks. "When you are third in the table after eight, 10 fixtures, OK," he said. "But when you are there with 11 games left, still you are third, it's because you have done really, really, really well. Otherwise you cannot be there for many, many times,

many months, doing good things and being third in the table. Impressive, I would say."

Just six points separate Forest in third spot from Aston Villa in 10th, setting up a tight finish to the season. "There are many clubs, many teams fighting for this target," said Guardiola. "Everyone wants to be in the Champions League next season. For the club, for the prestige, for our sustainability, economically, for many reasons."

Guardiola, whose team are out of the Champions League but through to the FA Cup quarter-finals, was relaxed about his side's European fate. "It will not be the end of the world (if we don't qualify)," he said. "We want to qualify for the Champions League but if it doesn't happen it's because we haven't been good enough and the other teams deserve it."

City manager Guardiola also told reporters that defender Nathan Ake could be out for up to 11 weeks following surgery on a fracture in his left foot. The Netherlands international was substituted during City's FA Cup fifth-round victory over Plymouth at the Etihad Stadium last week after aggravating the problem.