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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

# Duhail reclaim top spot after thrilling win over Ahli

Three of Duhail's four goals came late in the second half as the Red Knights lead Sadd by one point

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**T**itle contenders Al Duhail staged a fine comeback to secure a thrilling 4-2 win over Al Ahli in the Qatar Stars League at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium yesterday.

The result took Duhail back to the top of the leaderboard with 41 points, a slender one-point ahead of defending champions Al Sadd, while Al Ahli remained in fourth place with a tally of 29 points.

Three of Al Duhail's four goals came late in the second half with Michael Olunga (74th minute), Hakim Ziyech (82nd minute) and Benjamin Bourigeaud (90+2 minute) finding the net.

Earlier in the first half, it was the double whammy of Ahli's German star and attacking midfielder Julian Draxler who struck successively in the 38th and 42nd minutes that saw The Brigadiers hit back after Duhail had taken the lead in the 26th minute through Lucas Verissimo De Silva.

The Red Knights were initially kept at bay by alert Ahli. Unable to make a breakthrough, Duhail aimed to forcing things and in the 25th minute Olunga, after being in the clear, attempted a big strike but the ball sailed over the crossbar.

The very next minute, Duhail took advantage of a corner kick and Almoez Ali made a header but it was blocked by Al Ahli goalkeeper Marwan Sherif Badreldin but the ball fell in front in an open space and De Silva kicked the ball in with his right foot. Ahli hit back twelve minutes later on a counter as Eric Exposito sent in a cross from the right, over defenders, for a rushing-in Draxler to beat the goalkeeper to his right at the far end for the equaliser.

Draxler repeated the act, this time after being fed with a long ball from the centre line and he beat past two defenders and



Al Duhail's Hakim Ziyech (left) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Al Ahli at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium yesterday.

the goalkeeper to his right with a left-foot strike (2-1).

The second session was a long tussle before Duhail broke the shackles giving their rivals a taste of their own medicine as Edmilson Junior provided Olunga with a fine lob to make a successful header (2-2).

Soon Duhail were back in the lead

through their Dutch-born Moroccan star Ziyech who piled through the wall to shake the next on the left (3-2). The Red Knights added one more to the tally with Bourigeaud slamming in a left-footed drive into the left corner for a thrilling 4-2 finish.

Meanwhile, Rodri struck a late winner as Al Arabi edged Al Shamal 1-0 at the Al



Qatar SC drew with Al Wakrah 1-1 at the Stadium 974. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

Thumama Stadium. Shamal had to play with 10 men nearly all of second half after Mohammed Musa was shown a red card in the 48th minute. And Arabi finally found a way to score past resilient Shamal as Rodri volleyed in with his left foot in the fourth minute of stoppage time. Arabi are now eighth in the table, while Shamal are sixth.

In the other game of the night, Qatar SC drew with Al Wakrah 1-1 at the Stadium 974. Wakrah took the lead after Ayman Hussein struck in the 45+3 minute. Qatar SC had to wait till the 88th minute as Ataa Mohammed slotted home. With this result, Wakrah are in ninth place, while Qatar SC are a place below.

PREMIER LEAGUE

# Liverpool open up 16-point league lead; Forest beat City

Reuters  
Liverpool, England

**L**iverpool's march to the Premier League title continued with a 3-1 victory over last-placed Southampton yesterday as Mohamed Salah bagged a double and Darwin Nunez scored to give them a 16-point provisional lead over Arsenal. Arne Slot's men have 70 points, while the second-placed Gunners have 54 but two games in hand. They play at Manchester United today.

Nottingham Forest's Callum Hudson-Odoi struck late in a 1-0 victory over Manchester City that boosted their chances of a top-four finish and a prized place in next year's Champions League. Last-minute penalty drama gave Brighton & Hove Albion a 2-1 win over Fulham for their fourth consecutive win, while Crystal Palace salvaged a 1-0 win over relegation-threatened Ipswich Town with a late goal from Ismaila Sarr.

Liverpool had to come from a goal down at Anfield after Will Smallbone took advantage of miscommunication between goalkeeper Alisson and Virgil van Dijk just before the break. The league leaders ran roughshod over the struggling Saints in the second half and Nunez levelled in the 51st minute, then won a penalty three minutes later that Salah fiercely slotted home.

Salah completed his double in the 88th minute with a second goal from the spot after Yukinari Sugawara's hand ball, the Liverpool talisman's 27th league goal this season. "We need to keep winning games - it's as simple as that," said Liverpool midfielder Harvey Elliott. "It's about taking it game by game and making sure we apply ourselves in the best possible way."

At Nottingham, Hudson-Odoi picked up a diagonal pass from Morgan Gibbs-White before stepping outside Josko Gvardiol and



Liverpool's striker Mohamed Salah scores from the penalty spot during the English Premier League match against Southampton at Anfield in Liverpool, north west England, yesterday. (AFP)

driving the ball between City goalkeeper Ederson and his near post in the 83rd minute. "I'm absolutely buzzing with the goal," said Hudson-Odoi after his contribution secured Forest their first league win over Manchester City since 1997.

The result in a game of few chances kept this season's surprise team Forest in third on 51 points, putting them in a strong position for their first berth in Europe's elite competition since the mid-1990s. Reigning league champions City are fourth on 47 points but manager Pep Guardiola is not panicking. "We have 10 games to qualify (for the Champions League), we have to

win games to qualify and we're going to the next one," he said.

A Joao Pedro penalty in added time helped Brighton to snatch a win over Fulham and boost their bid to qualify for European football. Brighton climbed two places in the standings to sixth with 46 points from 28 games, while Fulham dropped to 10th. "I work for that. I try to stay calm. I was happy to score the winning goal, three points and I'm very happy. They had their chance to win," match-winner Pedro said.

Fulham struck first when Raul Jimenez latched on to a cross from Alex Iwobi before slotting home past Bart Verbrugg-

en. Five minutes later Fulham equalised through Jan Paul van Hecke. Just as it looked like the spoils would be shared, Pedro was bowled over by Harrison Reed deep in stoppage time and the Brazilian international stepped up to calmly slot home the winner.

At Selhurst Park, Palace's victory left them 11th on 39 points, while Ipswich remain in the bottom three in 18th spot on 17 points. Ipswich racked up 15 goal-scoring chances in an entertaining though often sloppy encounter, but a combination of wasteful finishing and an inspired Dean Henderson in the Palace goal saw them



Nottingham Forest's Callum Hudson-Odoi celebrates after scoring against Manchester City. (Reuters)

leave empty-handed. Sarr played the hero when he stole in behind the defence in the 82nd minute to score with a lovely dinked effort. "The game today was tough but we won. I am happy for myself and the team but we need to keep going and working hard... the first half was tough but in the second we scored and got the three points," Sarr said. In the early evening kickoff, a deflected effort from Ollie Watkins four minutes after the break gave Aston Villa a 1-0 win away to Brentford to keep them in the chase for the Champions League places, leaving them in seventh spot on 45 points, two behind Manchester City.

## CRICKET / CHAMPIONS TROPHY

# Unfinished business for India in final, says Gill

'I AM QUITE EXCITED. IT'S MY SECOND ICC EVENT FOR TEAM INDIA AND SECOND FINAL'

AFP  
Dubai

India's Shubman Gill yesterday said the team will look to win the Champions Trophy final against New Zealand to get over their 2023 ODI World Cup title defeat.

The final today in Dubai will decide the winner of the eight-nation tournament played in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

"I am quite excited," vice-captain Gill told reporters. "My second ICC event for team India and second final. The last time which we couldn't do, we will try to do it this time."

India went down to Australia in the 50-over World Cup final in November 2023 on home soil in Ahmedabad in a heartbreaking defeat for the team, which had come into the title clash unbeaten.

However, Rohit Sharma's team eased the heartache of fans a few months later when they lifted the 2024 T20 World Cup title - India's first victory in a major global event since the 2013 Champions Trophy.

Gill, who was not part of the T20 triumph, said the ICC title in Barbados allows the team to go into Sunday's final without any baggage.

"It's also about once you get one title that kind of breaks the jinx and then it gives you the momentum and also you are not desperate



India's Virat Kohli (centre) speaks with his teammates during a practice session yesterday, a day ahead of the ICC Champions Trophy final against New Zealand at Dubai International Stadium in Dubai. (AFP)

about getting the title," said Gill. "Winning the title in 2024 doesn't mean that we are less hungry, but it kind of gives us more balance that we have won an ICC

title and we will try to do our best to win this one." India come into the title clash unbeaten in four matches after they went past Australia in the

semi-final to eye a third Champions Trophy crown. India have played all their matches in Dubai after they refused to tour hosts Pakistan due to

political tensions. Gill said the importance of a final does come into the equation when they walk out but a champion team knows how to handle pressure.

"The big-match pressure is always there," said Gill. "This is the reason why we talk about big teams of previous years, including West Indies and Australia. Those teams played their best cricket in knock-outs. Easier said than done, but good teams play their best cricket under pressure."

Virat Kohli has been in top form as he hit an unbeaten 100 against arch-rivals Pakistan in a group game and hit 84 in another successful chase in the semi-final.

Rohit has been slammed for not converting his starts into bigger scores, but his quick cameos have nonetheless allowed the team to build totals.

Gill, who opens with Rohit, said India's batting depth has allowed the top-order to bat freely.

"I think this is the best batting line-up that I have been part of," said Gill. "Rohit, Virat, I think all-time one-day greats. Rohit one of the best openers in white-ball and Virat one of the best ODI batsman ever."

He added: "The depth in our batting makes the work easier for batsmen at the top and you tend to play freely because of the depth."

Whilst Indian media continue to speculate on Rohit's retirement, Gill said there has been no talk about it in the dressing room.

"The discussion has been around the final," said Gill. "I don't think even Rohit is thinking about it too much."

## FOCUS

## Santner wants NZ to keep 'open mind' for final

AFP  
Dubai

New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner said yesterday mid-match communications and adaptability regarding the pitch in this weekend's Champions Trophy final against India could be key to success.

Today's final in Dubai will decide the winner of the eight-nation tournament played in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

India have played all their matches in Dubai after they refused to tour hosts Pakistan due to political tensions and come in the title clash unbeaten in four matches. The pitches have been vastly different in the two countries. Pakistan tracks produced big totals, in contrast to the slow and turning decks of the Dubai stadium.

"I think we have to kind of go in with an open mind of how the pitch will play, and then adjust accordingly," Santner told reporters. "Get those communications back to the groups, what you think a good score is. Yeah, I think we obviously, it could be a 300 wicket, we don't know I guess yet, but it could also be a 250 kind of winning score."

"So, I think there will be periods throughout this game on both



New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra stretches during a practice session yesterday. (AFP)

sides where you're under pressure for a period of time. But if you can kind of withstand that and get through, it might get easier," he added.

The highest total at Dubai in this 50-over tournament was Australia's 264 in the semi-final and India overhauled the score with 11 balls to spare. New Zealand went down to India by 44 runs in the last group meeting at the venue where the Black Caps restricted the opposition to 249 before being dismissed for 205. "We'll learn from that," said Santner.

"We know India are probably going to go in with the same team.

So, I think we have to be ready and be adaptable for what's coming."

India have played four spinners in their last two matches on a sluggish pitch that has aided slow bowlers. India's Varun Chakravarty returned figures of 5-42 with his mystery spin - lot of variations - and remains a potent threat in the final. "He's obviously a world-class bowler we've seen it here and obviously in the IPL and that little bit of mystery," said left-arm spinner Santner.

"But it was the first time some of the guys have been facing him. I think they'll learn from the other day. If the pitch plays a similar

way, it's going to be a challenge along with all three of their other spinners."

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.

New Zealand beat South Africa in the semi-final in Lahore and flew back to Dubai. "I think it was a bit of a shock," Santner said on the temperature in the two cities.

"Jumped up 10 degrees in the last four days for us. But I think, obviously, coming off a semi-final win, the guys are in pretty good spirits."

Fast bowler Matt Henry is racing against time to recover for the final after he landed awkwardly on his right shoulder while fielding in the semi-final.

"Matt's going to have a bowl just to see how he is," said Santner. "Yeah and then I guess we'll make a call after that."

New Zealand will be looking to win the tournament for the second time, having done so in 2000 when they beat India in the final.

New Zealand also beat India in the inaugural World Test Championship final in 2021.

"Hopefully we're third time lucky," Santner said.

"But no, I think we know India are going to be a challenge tomorrow," he added.

## Al Adaam continue fine run in Al Thumama Ramadan Championship

DOHA: Al Adaam continued their fine run in the second edition of the Al Thumama Ramadan Championship with a 2-0 victory over Al Janoub, maintaining their position at the top of the standings. Omar Tariq of Al Adaam was named best player of the match for his standout performance. In the second game, Al Zaeem and Al Yarmouk played to a 0-0 draw, with Yaman al-Dahan of Al Zaeem earning the best player award. The final match of the round saw Palestine defeat Tariq bin Ziyad 2-1, with Abdullah al-Khatib of Palestine receiving the best player honour. Al-Khatib, a standout player for Palestine, shared his excitement

about participating in the championship, praising the warm welcome from the organising committee, led by Hassan al-Ishaq and tournament director Youssef bin Ali Abdel Nour. Despite the fierce competition, al-Khatib is hopeful his team will secure an advanced position and continue giving their best performances in pursuit of the title. The tournament, which features players aged 10 to 14, is held at Al Furjan Stadium in co-operation with the Qatar Sports for All Federation.

Two matches are scheduled for today: Al Zaeem will take on Al Nusoor at 8:30pm, followed by Palestine vs Al Yarmouk at 9:20pm.



## CYCLING

## Pogacar remounts after fall and charges to Strade Bianche win



Team UAE's Slovenian rider Tadej Pogacar celebrates as he holds his trophy on the podium after winning the 19th one-day classic 'Strade Bianche' (White Roads) race between Siena and Siena in Tuscany yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Siena, Italy

Slovenia's Tadej Pogacar won the Strade Bianche yesterday for the third time in his career, after recovering from a fall 50km from the finish.

Pogacar of Team UAE topped the podium by 1min 24sec ahead of Briton Tom Pidcock, with Belgium's Tim Wellens a further 48sec adrift. After victory in the Tuscan one-day race in 2022 and 2024, 26-year-old Pogacar now equals Swiss rider Fabian Cancellara's record of three victories in the Strade Bianche.

"Pretty good race today. The race was super fast. It was a really strong breakaway and our guys did super amazing work in the front," said Pogacar who completed the 213km race in 5hr 13mins and 58secs.

"We just went fast and it was a really hard race."

After falling off his bike at a corner on a descent, Pogacar displayed several cuts to his body with blood notably visible on his left shoulder. "I enjoyed it until I crossed

the finish line. Now I'm in adrenaline wear-off and I start to feel a lot of pain," said the reigning world champion and Tour de France winner.

"Not the best way to win a race, but a win is a win. Let's hope it's nothing worse than it looks and all should be fine."

"I went too fast I guess. I know this road very well. I rode it already 20 times in my life," added Pogacar, who had been leading at the time of his fall. "For a moment I didn't know if I was OK. The bike was not working so I had to change the bike."

"I was a bit worried because when you crash the body takes a lot from you. But still I had enough to finish it off."

Pogacar saw his rear wheel give way and ended up in a ditch after a spectacular spin. But the three-time Tour de France champion quickly got up and resumed the race, with his jersey and shorts ripped.

He then found himself 32 seconds behind Team Q36.5's Pidcock, but after a change of bike, he finally caught up with the 2023 winner 45km from the finish in Siena, after Pidcock had surprisingly stopped to wait for him. "When he crashed, of course, I carried on. I didn't

know what was happening, but then he was back on his bike, he was coming back, so of course I waited," said Paris 2024 Olympic mountain bike gold medalist Pidcock.

"He's a competitor, he's a world champion, you respect that, you wait, regardless of whether he's a world champion or not. You know, he made a mistake. This is not how you take advantage in a race."

Pogacar dropped Pidcock at 18.8km thanks to a lightning-fast acceleration on one of the last difficulties, the Colle Pinzuto.

"Of course I wanted to try and win. I think I did a good performance, let's be honest. I came pretty close," said Pidcock.

"But he (Pogacar) was still too strong in this last attack of his. I'm happy, but at the same time, of course, disappointed."

Pogacar will have to put any lingering pain from the fall swiftly behind him as his schedule starts to heat up, with Milan-San Remo two weeks away on March 22.

Alongside Paris-Roubaix, it is one of the two Monuments that the Slovenian has yet to win and is his main objective at the start of this 2025 season.

MOTORSPORT

# Sheikh Jassim shines in third round of QDRC

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The thrilling third round of the Qatar Drag Race Championship (QDRC) concluded at the Qatar Racing Club (QRC) early yesterday. This round saw the participation of more than 130 racers who took part in two qualifying sessions on Thursday evening. Based on the results of these sessions, they were placed in the elimination brackets for the eight categories on Friday. By the end of the competitions, six of these categories witnessed the crowning of new champions who won the title for the first time.

This QDRC is being held under the generous patronage of QRC Chairman HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani.

In the quarter-mile Index categories, there are four categories that witnessed the crowning of three new champions. In the (INDEX 9.00) category, Sheikh Jassim al-Thani made it to the final race where he faced Majed al-Sharshani. Sheikh Jassim claimed his first title in the championship, while al-Sharshani settled for



QRC Director General Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani pose with the winners of the third round of the QDRC.

second place. In the (INDEX 8.5) category, both Rakan Ali al-Ajmi and Ahmed Malallah reached the final race for the first time, where al-Ajmi secured the title.

Shihab Bourbaa achieved his first title in the championship in the (INDEX 8.5) category for Bikes, defeating racer Abdulrahman al-Najim, who came second. Al-Najim recorded his second podium finish in the championship, having previously finished third in

the opening round.

Only racer Hisham al-Awadi in the Index categories, which compete over a quarter-mile, managed to achieve his second title in the championship after his victory in the opening round. Al-Awadi's title this time came after defeating racer Ahmed al-Emadi in the final.

Turki al-Dhufairi was the only racer who managed to retain his title for the second consecutive round in the Super Street category,

after a repeat final showdown from the previous round against the same competitor, Dawood al-Sharshani.

After reaching the final race in the previous two rounds in the Street Bike category and finishing second both times, Mohamed al-Salem managed to reach the final race for the third consecutive round and won his first title in the championship. He triumphed in the final race against Badr bin



Action from the the third round of the Qatar Drag Race Championship.

Aidan, while the winner of the last two rounds, Mohamed Borashid, finished third in this round.

The young racer Mohamed al-Fraih also managed to win his first title in the championship, which came in the (INDEX 4.80) category, after defeating the previous round's winner, Youssef Adel al-Khamiri, who finished second in this round.

The final race of the (INDEX 4.50) category featured the two brothers, Saeed and Rashid al-Balushi. Saeed was looking for his first win after finishing third in the

previous round, while Rashid was seeking his second title this season after winning the opening round. In the end, Saeed claimed the victory, leaving his brother Rashid in second place.

QRC Director General Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani presented the awards to the top three finishers in each category. The fourth and penultimate round will kick off on Wednesday with testing sessions.

The qualifying sessions will be held the following day before the elimination races begin on Friday.

TENNIS

# Griekspoor stuns top-seeded Zverev, Giron upsets Ruud

'I AM INCREDIBLY PROUD OF MYSELF FROM THIS PERFORMANCE'

AFP  
Indian Wells, United States

Tallon Griekspoor stunned top-seeded Alexander Zverev 4-6, 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/4) in the second round at Indian Wells on Friday, avenging a devastating loss to the German at Roland Garros last year.

Zverev, the world number two who is heading the field of the prestigious ATP Masters event with No. 1 Jannik Sinner serving a three-month drugs ban, is the first Indian Wells men's top seed to lose his opening match since Andy Murray in 2017. It was a cherished win for Griekspoor, who had lost five straight matches - including four last year - to the German.

That included a five-setter at the French Open in which Griekspoor was up a double break in the fifth in a defeat he called "absolute heartbreak".

"It was such a mental thing. I played so many battles against him and had chances but they all went his way," said Griekspoor, who claimed his first victory over a top-five player in his 19th attempt. "I am incredibly proud of myself from this performance and to get it over the line," the 28-year-old added.

Broken to trail 5-6 in the third set, Zverev saved five match points in a dramatic 12th game, finally converting his fifth break point of the game to force the tiebreaker.

But Griekspoor sealed it on his first chance in the decider. The defeat in a tension-packed Stadium Court clash continued a lacklustre run for Zverev since he fell to Sinner in the Australian Open final.

Following that loss he has made early exits at Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro and Acapulco.

"I always struggle against him," Zverev said of Griekspoor. "He played a good match. There's no question about that. But I have to look at myself a little bit, and it's nowhere near where I want to be."

American Marcos Giron joined Griekspoor in posting his first win over a top-five player, upsetting fourth seed Casper Ruud 7-6 (7/4), 3-6, 6-2. Russian Daniil Medvedev, runner-up to Carlos Alcaraz the past two years, moved on with a 6-2, 6-2 victory over 71st-ranked Bu Yunchaokete of China.

Fifth-seeded Medvedev, bundled up against the cold desert night air with leggings under his shorts and long sleeves, dropped his serve to open the match.

But he broke back immediately and was never seriously threatened despite the wealth of long



Tallon Griekspoor of the Netherlands plays a backhand against Alexander Zverev of Germany in their second round match during the BNP Paribas Open in Indian Wells, California. (AFP)



Iga Swiatek of Poland plays a forehand against Caroline Garcia of France in their second round match. (AFP)

rallies. "I'll be surprised if he had more than five winners in the match," Medvedev said. "I just knew that I have to put the ball in court and run."

**SWIATEK SAFELY THROUGH**  
Iga Swiatek, the women's defending champion in this combined ATP and WTA 1000 event, eased through her opener 6-2, 6-0 against French veteran Caroline Garcia. "I'm happy that I was solid until the end, and I'm just happy that I adjusted to the conditions well," said Swiatek, who played as the late afternoon temperature dropped and the breeze picked up.

"First matches are not easy, and didn't know what to expect from Caro, but I'm happy that I could dominate from the beginning."

Swiatek converted six of her nine break points and was broken only once in the 61-minute victory. Fourth-seeded American Jessica Pegula also powered through, beating Poland's Magda Linette 6-4, 6-2. "Honestly, I think it was just handling the conditions," Pegula said. "I felt like I was able to handle the side with the wind pretty well and really take advantage of using that for my serve ... and then just being a little gritty and digging out some tough points on the side

that was against the wind."

Mirra Andreeva, the 17-year-old Russian, who became the youngest ever WTA 1000 champion in Dubai last month, battled back from 0-4 down in the second set to beat France's 70th-ranked Varvara Gracheva 7-5, 6-4 in another windblown, error-laden late match. Andreeva, seeded ninth, booked a third-round meeting with Denmark's Clara Tauson, the woman she beat in the Dubai final.

Tauson advanced with a 7-6 (7/3), 7-5 victory over Colombian Camila Osorio, who had ousted four-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka in the first round.

GOLF

# Friendship the fuel as Lowry takes 2-shot lead at Arnold Palmer

AFP  
Miami

Relaxed Shane Lowry fired a five-under-par 67 to open up a two-shot lead at the half-way stage of the Arnold Palmer Invitational in Orlando on Friday.

The 37-year-old Irishman reeled off six birdies and one bogey to head into the weekend at the Bay Hill Club & Lodge on eight under through 36 holes.

Lowry has played the first two rounds this week alongside close friend Rory McIlroy - a fact that he believes has assisted his strong start to the tournament.

Lowry and Northern Ireland star McIlroy could be seen laughing and chatting throughout the round, and Lowry admitted the close proximity of his Ryder Cup teammate had helped take his mind off the task in hand. "If I'm playing with somebody I like and get on well with, I'll have conversations in the walk between shots," Lowry said.

"It's a long day out there, so you need to occupy your mind somehow. I felt like we had a good time with doing our job at the same time.

"You're out there with one of the best golfers in the world, with big crowds, great golf course, lovely weather, what's not to like? It's easy to get up for something like that."

Lowry had advanced up the leaderboard after making five birdies in the opening 13 holes before a lone bogey on the 16th - a hole he had eagled in the first round.

**'BORDERLINE UNPLAYABLE'**  
But he recovered that dropped shot with a birdie on the last, coolly rolling in a 17ft putt from just off the green.

Lowry might have been forced

to share the lead had it not been for a late collapse from Wyndham Clark, the first round leader.

Clark looked poised to head into the weekend at the top of the leaderboard but stumbled with a double-bogey six on the 15th after hitting his tee shot out-of-bounds.

A birdie on 16 clawed back one of those shots, but a further bogey on the 17th meant Clark had to settle for a one-under-par 71, leaving him on six under overall.

"The tough thing out here is you know you're going to hit some bad shots - maybe a water ball or in my case an out-of-bounds ball," Clark said afterwards.

"But the tough thing is the greens are getting so firm and pretty borderline unplayable. It's just huge that anytime you get in trouble, to minimise the mistakes."

Collin Morikawa and Canada's Corey Conners are three off the lead on five under, while McIlroy, Russell Henley and Jason Day are a further shot back on four under.

McIlroy had another frustrating day, his two-under-par 70 sprinkled with five birdies but offset by three bogeys including a five on the par-four 18th.

Max Greyserman, Justin Thomas and Keegan Bradley are five off the lead on three under, while defending champion Scottie Scheffler has some ground to make up heading into the weekend after struggling to an even-par 72 that left him on one under after 36 holes.

Scheffler's day began well with a birdie on the first, only for the wheels to come off on the par-three second with a double-bogey five. Two more bogeys on the fourth and fifth holes left him three over for the round at the turn, but he recovered down the stretch to make three birdies on a bogey-free back nine.



Shane Lowry of Ireland hits a tee shot on the 10th hole during the second round of the Arnold Palmer Invitational in Orlando. (AFP)

## Norris opens up four-shot lead at Joburg Open

South Africa's Shaun Norris carded a 67 to take a four-shot lead on 14 under-par at the end of yesterday's third round in the DP World Tour's Joburg Open on a difficult day of scoring at the Houghton Golf Club.

Norris carded a 63 on Friday despite being troubled by an ear infection and held a one-shot advantage going into the weekend. He has extended that lead despite a double-bogey on the par-four third hole and another dropped shot on the 15th.

France's Adrien Saddier (70) and South African Jacques Krusywijk (68) share second place at 10 under-par, with the German Nicolai von Dellingshausen (69) a further stroke back.

Norris, 42, won the Alfred Dunhill Championship at Leopard Creek in December, his second victory on the DP World Tour after the Steyn City Championship in 2022.

**SPOTLIGHT**

# India's Syed leads Katara Ramadan Chess Championship

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

India's Syed Abdul Khader has taken the lead after two rounds of the Katara International Ramadan Open Classic Chess Championship, being held at the Hall of Building 15 at the Cultural Village Katara. The tournament, featuring 90 players from 22 countries, will run until March 15.

Khader has 2 points, the same as compatriot Balanandan Ayyappan, but the latter is ranked second due to a tie-breaker. Philippines' Ryan Mendoza is in third place, while India's Albin Sajjan is fourth. The competition, consisting of 9 rounds, is played under the Swiss system (60 minutes per player, plus 30 additional seconds per move). In today's fourth round, the top four players are expected to face off in direct confrontations.

Among the Qatari players, Khaled al-Jumaat is in 7th place after securing his second win, defeating India's Sikar Kirutish. Irfan Mohammed is in 9th place after defeating his national teammate, Ibrahim al-Janahi. Lian al-Qassabi is in 17th place following her second consecutive victory over Hamad al-Kuwari. Turki al-Kuwari, who defeated India's Sarvanan Advait, is ranked 16th. Fahad al-Mansoori lost to India's Sumith S., and Ahmed Saif was defeated by India's Jawahar Bharathan. Rawda al-Qassabi lost to Jordan's Muawiya Mubarak.

A total of 13 players from Qatar's national teams, across various age groups, are



Mohammed al-Mudhahka, President of the Qatar Chess Federation (QCF), makes a ceremonial move before the third round.

participating in the tournament. The event also features several players ranked by the International Chess Federation (FIDE).

Mohammed al-Mudhahka, President of the Qatar Chess Association (QCA), expressed satisfaction with the performance of Qatari players in the early rounds. He emphasised that the next phase of the tournament will include more competitions and international matches aimed at

further developing the players' skills and enhancing their experience.

Al-Mudhahka also reiterated the QCF's commitment to developing its players and ensuring their continued success in future events. He expressed gratitude to the Public Institution for Cultural Village, Katara, for its ongoing support of the tournament and its efforts to promote the culture of chess in Qatar.



**LIGUE 1**

# Dembele hits double as PSG win against Rennes

Leaders maintain their unbeaten record in domestic competition this season

AFP  
Paris

Ousmane Dembele scored twice as Paris Saint-Germain warmed up for the second leg of their Champions League last-16 tie against Liverpool by winning 4-1 away to Rennes in Ligue 1 with a much-changed team yesterday. Bradley Barcola and Goncalo Ramos had PSG 2-0 up in Brittany before Lilian Brassier pulled one back for Rennes, but Dembele netted twice in stoppage time to seal the victory for the visitors.

The result allowed the Ligue 1 leaders to maintain their unbeaten record in domestic competition this season.

The Parisians are now a huge 16 points clear at the top before closest challengers Marseille play at home to Lens later. Luis Enrique's side were ultimately comfortable winners despite the coach making eight changes to his starting line-up in between the two legs of the Liverpool tie, with the return at Anfield coming up on Tuesday.

"We are in perfect condition to go and take on Liverpool. We have nothing to lose and we will give everything to try to qualify," for the quarter-finals, said Enrique. "It was difficult but we put in a serious performance and it gives us lots of hope before going to Liverpool," the Spaniard added of his team's display.

Barcola, Joao Neves and Willian Pacheco were the only players to keep their places for PSG against Rennes following the 1-0 home loss to Liverpool in the first leg last Wednesday. Dembele was among the regular starters to be rested at kick-off, but he came off the bench just after the hour mark and the France forward's double strike



Paris St Germain's Ousmane Dembele scores against Rennes at the Roazhon Park in Rennes, France, yesterday. (Reuters)

moves him onto 20 league goals for the campaign.

The player who began his career at Rennes has now scored 28 times in all competitions this season, including 23 goals in 18 appearances since mid-December. Rennes came into the game on a run of four wins in five outings to climb up into mid-table after Habib Beye replaced Jorge Sampaoli as coach at the end of January.

However, PSG went in front at Roazhon Park on 27 minutes as Desire Doue, another former Rennes player, quickly took a free-kick just inside the home half and released Barcola to run through and score his 18th

goal of the season. Teenage forward Mohamed Kader Meite almost equalised for Rennes before the break, heading off the crossbar from Adrien Truffert's cross.

Barcola then turned provider as PSG doubled their lead five minutes after half-time, squaring for Ramos - one of those brought into the starting line-up - to net his 13th this season in all competitions. Centre-back Brassier pulled one back for Rennes shortly after, heading in from close range after a corner had been flicked on.

However, Enrique then sent on the cavalry, with Dembele, Nuno Mendes, Vitinha, Khvicha Kvaratskhelia and Achraf Hakimi

all coming off the bench for the latter stages. PSG made sure of the points as Hakimi ran through on goal before unselfishly squaring for Dembele to make it 3-1 in the first minute of stoppage time at the end of the game.

Dembele then fired in his second and PSG's fourth goal from the edge of the area in the 94th minute.

In the other game Lille, in between the two legs of their Champions League last-16 tie against Borussia Dortmund, beat bottom side Montpellier 1-0. Lille entertain Dortmund on Wednesday after drawing 1-1 in the first leg in Germany.

**Barca's La Liga match postponed after club doctor dies**

**Barcelona:** Barcelona's La Liga match against Osasuna was postponed yesterday after one of the club's first team doctors died. "Barcelona is sorry to announce the sad news of the death of the first team doctor, Carles Minarro Garcia, this afternoon," said the club in a statement.

"For this reason, the match between Barcelona and Osasuna has been postponed until a later date. The board of directors and all the staff at Barcelona wish to convey our most sincere condolences to his family and friends, we are with them at this difficult time."

Fans had begun entering the Olympic stadium for the league leaders' clash against Osasuna, before it was called off around 20 minutes before the expected kick off at 2000 GMT.

"Osasuna wishes to convey its deepest condolences to the family of doctor Carles Minarro Garcia and would like to send a big hug at this difficult time to all the staff of Barcelona, as well as their fans. May he rest in peace," said Osasuna on social media platform X.

Osasuna president Luis Sabalza said his team had no objection whatsoever to the match being postponed.

"We understand that life is the most important thing and you can't play a game thinking that the person with whom you've lived with for so long is not there any more," he said.

Barcelona top the La Liga standings with 57 points, one ahead of Atletico Madrid with Real in third on 54 points.

Real host Rayo Vallecano's visit in La Liga today.

Tomorrow's Villarreal's game against Espanyol in La Liga was also postponed because of a heavy rain alert in the region.

**SERIE A**

# Pulisic brace rescues Milan at lowly Lecce

Reuters  
Lecce, Italy

AC Milan came from two goals down to win 3-2 at lowly Lecce in Serie A yesterday, with midfielder Christian Pulisic levelling for the visitors from the penalty spot before netting the winner late in the second half.

Milan had two goals ruled out for offside inside 15 minutes, with Nikola Krstovic scoring for the hosts in between with a stunning shot from a distance for a 1-0 lead at halftime. The Montenegro striker doubled Lecce's lead before the hour mark but the home side then scored an own goal through defender Antonino Gallo before Pulisic pulled Milan level from the spot and sealed the win from close range shortly afterwards.

Milan, who arrived at Lecce on the back of three consecutive league defeats, moved up to eighth on 44 points after 28 games. They



Lecce's Frederic Guilbert (left) and AC Milan's Christian Pulisic vie for the ball during the Serie A match yesterday. (Reuters)

are eight points off fourth-placed Juventus, who host Atalanta, in third, today. Lecce, Serie A's lowest scorers with 20 goals, sit 16th, three points above the relegation zone.

Milan thought they had taken the lead 47 seconds from the opening whistle when Santiago Gimenez

struck with his first touch from a Theo Hernandez pass. The goal was chalked off for offside but the early scare did not intimidate the home side, who took a shock lead in the seventh minute with a beautiful Krstovic strike inside the right post. Milan saw another goal ruled

out for offside when Matteo Gabbia netted from close range. Lecce, who last scored on home soil in late December, could have increased the advantage when Krstovic hit the post after 21 minutes before Santiago Pierotti misfired two minutes later.

Krstovic finally doubled the lead after the restart, scoring with a first touch into the bottom left corner. The hosts' good fortunes started to decline when they scored an own goal in the 68th minute.

Half-time substitute Rafael Leao squared a lovely pass to Joao Felix from the left and the Portuguese forward struck from close range first time, before the ball ricocheted off Gallo and sailed into the net. Milan were then awarded a penalty for a foul on Pulisic, which the United States international converted confidently in the 73rd minute to equalise.

Clearly fired up, he put Milan in front from point-blank range from another great cross by Leao nine minutes from fulltime.

**BUNDESLIGA**

# Bayern get away with shock defeat as Leverkusen lose too

AFP  
Munich

A 10-man Bayern Munich got away with a shock 3-2 home defeat to Bochum yesterday after title chasers Bayer Leverkusen were beaten 2-0 by Werder Bremen. Despite the loss, just Bayern's second of the season, the Bavarians still hold an eight-point lead over defending champions Leverkusen with nine games to play.

Leverkusen's woes were deepened with an injury to star midfielder Florian Wirtz, who limped off after a rough challenge having played just 14 second-half minutes. With an eye on Tuesday's return leg in

the Champions League last 16 against Leverkusen, Bayern coach Vincent Kompany named a heavily changed XI, including leaving striker Harry Kane on the bench.

Leverkusen were down after just seven minutes when Romano Schmid tapped in from close range. With Leverkusen failing to click, coach Xabi Alonso brought Wirtz to the bench at halftime, but the Germany midfielder was brutally fouled eight minutes afterwards and limped from the field and left the arena on crutches.

Any injury to Wirtz, the club's talisman and best player this season, would be a serious blow to Alonso's side, particularly ahead of Tuesday's Champions League match against Bayern.