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# GULF TIMES SPORT



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AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

# Afif stars as Al Sadd fight back to storm into quarters

Afif makes one assist and scores a stunner as Qatari champions in the hunt for a third Asian title

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Akram Afif produced a virtuoso performance to spark Al Sadd to a 3-1 win over Al Wasl as the Qatari side advanced to the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League Elite with a 4-2 aggregate victory on Monday.

Afif made one and scored a stunner to inspire the Qatari side to a comeback victory as they stayed in the hunt for a third Asian title.

Just like a week ago, Al Wasl seized the early initiative and went ahead in the 10th minute when Alexis Perez' cross was met with a sweet first-time finish by Fabio de Lima into the bottom corner that gave Meshal Barsham in Al Sadd's goal no chance.

The goal stunned Al Sadd into action with captain Afif leading by example, producing a long range effort that was pushed away by Khaled al-Senani in the 24th minute before notching his second assist in consecutive matches.

Two-time AFC Player of the Year Afif drove into the box from the left in the 27th minute before cutting back for Moustafa Mashal to sweep home to draw Al Sadd level. Al Sadd pushed on and took the lead three minutes later after Youcef Atal jinked his way into the box with his attempted cross deflecting off Jung Seung-hyun to wrong-foot Al Senani and end up in the back of the net.

With confidence soaring, Al Sadd increased their lead in the 37th minute when Afif played a short free-kick to Claudinho, received the pass back and curled an unstoppable shot into the top corner.

Al Wasl thought they had pulled one back in the 58th minute when Joao Pedro climbed highest to nod towards goal but Barsham clawed the ball away.

A trio of substitutions just after the hour mark from Al Wasl saw Jonatas Santos, Takashi Uchino and Caio Canedo entering the fray but apart from one weak Canedo overhead attempt, the Emirati side showed little signs of getting back into the game as Al Sadd booked their place in the last eight.

## HUGE TASK AWAITS RAYYAN AGAINST AHLI IN JEDDAH

Qatar's Al Rayyan SC will have a tough a task of overturning a two-goal deficit against Saudi's Al Ahli in the second leg of



Al Sadd's Akram Afif (right) celebrates after scoring against Al Wasl in the last 16 second leg clash of the AFC Champions League Elite at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha yesterday. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil

their AFC Champions League Elite last 16 tie at the King Abdullah Sports City in Jeddah today.

Al Ahli produced a commanding performance in the first leg and had they been more clinical, their place in the quarter-finals would have been sealed last week. With Roberto Firmino and Riyad Mahrez in fine form, Al Ahli will expect to safely navigate past Al Rayyan in the second leg.

Al Ahli needed a 90th minute goal from Galeno to salvage a draw with Al Khaleej in a Saudi Pro League tie on Friday and the Jeddah-based side will be determined to avoid such drama against Al Rayyan.

The result kept them in fifth place in the Saudi Pro League standings but Al Ahli have been a totally different side in the AFC Champions League Elite - with last week's victory against Al Rayyan their eighth in nine matches.

Unbeaten in their last 14 games on the continent, Firmino and Mahrez have been

at the front end of their challenge and having scored in all nine matches this season, it is hard to see Al Ahli not advancing to the quarter-finals for the sixth time and first since the 2020 season.

Al Rayyan felt they deserved more from the first leg but wastefulness in front of goal meant they were punished by a rampant Al Ahli and the Qatari side can't afford to hold back on Tuesday if they are to make the quarter-finals for the first time.

That, however, is easier said than done as not only did Al Rayyan lose both their home matches against Al Ahli this season but have only won one of their nine away ties against Saudi Arabian sides.

Roger Guedes will be key to their hopes of a comeback - the Brazilian's effort in the first leg meaning he has scored four of the nine goals Al Rayyan have to their name in the AFC Champions League Elite - with the forward also netting once in their 5-1 win against Al Khor in a QSS on Friday.



Al Sadd fans unfurl Qatar flag at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.



Al Sadd's Mostafa Meshal (right) vies for the ball with Al Wasl's Geronimo Poblete.

PREVIEW

# Winner of PSG's Liverpool clash will reach final, says Enrique

AFP  
Liverpool

Paris Saint-Germain boss Luis Enrique believes the winner of his team's last 16 clash with Liverpool today will go on to reach the final. PSG face the Premier League leaders in the second leg at Anfield with the daunting task of having to overturn a 1-0 deficit from the first meeting in Paris.

Luis Enrique's men delivered a dominant display at the Parc des Princes, but were unable to find a way past inspired Liverpool goalkeeper Alisson Becker. Liverpool's quality remains clear to the former Barcelona boss despite that spluttering display from the Reds and he is convinced whoever finishes victorious this week is certain to play in May 31's final in Munich.

"Even though we're trailing from the first leg, we will be playing our own game from the outset. Regardless of the result in Paris we wouldn't do anything different," he told reporters. "Our only option is to go out and win and that is what is driving us. I don't think Arne Slot has much doubts about our starting line-up, I've got my ideas about his starting line-up as well. I'm not going to give away who we are going to play or how we are going to play, but we will see two of the best teams in Europe,



two contenders for the final and whoever goes through will go through to the final."

Enrique is confident the Ligue 1 leaders can cope with the intense environment at Anfield, a stadium famous for Liverpool supporters generating a hostile atmosphere on big European nights.

"I am pretty convinced that absolutely every single one of my players will want to play," he said. "We know what Liver-

pool means with a historic stadium and a wonderful history. It's a huge source of motivation for the players and we want to show we are capable of putting in a performance. It is difficult to manage one's emotions and feelings, these are not easy games to prepare for and it is not easy to be at 100 per cent. But you don't want to be at 105 or 110 per cent because you could get carried away so you have to manage your

emotions in the best possible way?"

PSG lost on their only previous trips to Anfield in 1997 and 2018, but winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia is not concerned by the prospect of playing in such an intimidating arena. "When you play at Anfield against Liverpool you don't need to motivate yourself that much, you already have it inside you," the Georgia attacker said. "The game will be 50-50. We have a big mentality in the team and we will just try to win. It will be the most important game in our season because our goal is to play in the Champions League many times and play in the final."

## LIVERPOOL NEED BEST DISPLAY OF SEASON TO BEAT PSG: SLOT

Meanwhile, Arne Slot has urged Liverpool to produce their best performance of the season as they look to kill off PSG's hope. Slot promised Liverpool will not sit back to defend their slender advantage at Anfield, revealing he has told his players to raise the performance levels to new heights.

"We want to play a different game, the intention is always the same, we are not going to go for a draw," he told reporters. "That is also what we tried to do last week, it wasn't our intention to be so low all the time. At Manchester City away that wasn't the situation, at PSG that wasn't the situation. But we do take confidence from our home game against City where we did have

the ball much more and it was much more of an equal game."

In a dream first season in charge for Slot, Liverpool are 15 points clear at the top of the Premier League as they chase a record-equalling 20th English title. They also face Newcastle in the League Cup final at Wembley on Sunday.

But, asked whether it would require Liverpool's best performance under him to defeat PSG, Slot said: "Yes. I do think so. This is the most complete team we have faced so far. We have faced Arsenal and City and they are not big margins but the intensity PSG play at combined with the quality - and they are one of the richest clubs - and a great manager it is not easy to play against."

On the 39 previous occasions they have won the first leg of a European tie, Liverpool have gone through to the next round. Their record at Anfield is also formidable, having lost just once since April at a stadium that generates a wall of sound on high-stakes European nights. Responding to suggestions in France that Liverpool were less impressive than Arsenal and Bayern Munich against PSG this season, Slot said that was credit to Enrique's improved Ligue 1 leaders. "Some of them have said Arsenal and Bayern Munich were better than us. That is what I have heard," said Slot, who is boosted by the return from injury of Dutch forward Cody Gakpo.

CRICKET

# KL Rahul: India's new chase-finishing hero

AFP  
Dubai

**K**L Rahul was hailed yesterday as India's Champions Trophy unsung hero, having twice kept a cool head under pressure to see his team to victory in tense semi-final and finals.

Captain Rohit Sharma top-scored with 76 to lead India to a four-wicket final win over New Zealand in Dubai on Sunday, following Virat Kohli's 84 to anchor India's semi-final chase against Australia.

Both won Player of the Match awards for their respective knocks, but after they had departed it had been number six Rahul, almost under the radar, who had kept calm to guide India across the finish line.

He was unbeaten on 34 in the final as India chased down 252, just a few days after his 42 not out took India past Australia's 264 in the last four of the 50-over competition.

Rohit was full of praise for Rahul's composure at the sharp end of the nerve-shredding chases.

"Look, when we discussed KL's batting position, that is one thing we discussed quite deeply about how calm he is when he is batting," Rohit said after guiding India to a third Champions Trophy crown.

"I'm very, very happy with how he ... batted in the pressure situation, both in the semi-finals and this game.

**'Over the moon'**

"With KL being there, we know that he's got that mind where he keeps himself calm and keeps the dressing room also very calm."

While Rohit and Kohli grabbed the headlines, a softly spoken and smiling Rahul, 32, was quietly enjoying his first win in an ICC championship.

"ICC victories are not so easy to get and it's my first one, so I'm over the moon," Rahul said.

"It's been a complete team effort, all 11-12 players have stood up and their chance and opportunity has come and it's one of the biggest reasons why we have ended up winning the tournament."

An elegant batsman, Rahul started off as an opener for India in white-ball cricket.

But a loss of batting form and intense media scrutiny forced him to reinvent his play at the crease.

He dropped down to number six recently as he edged out Rishabh Pant behind the stumps.

"What I have been taught by my coaches from an early age is that cricket's a team game and whatever the team requires of you, you need to be able to do that," said Rahul, who sports a trademark beard and a man bun on his tattooed, athletic frame.

"It requires a lot of preparation, lot of work outside the field. I just watch and learn from the batsmen I like at four, five, six."

Rahul started his cricketing journey as a wicketkeeper-batsman but had given up the gloves in domestic cricket.

It was not until an injury to Pant against Australia in 2020 that he again stood behind the stumps.

"I kept wickets in the series, played at number five and performed well," said Rahul.

"From then on the captain and team management thought I could do that role," he said.



REVIEW

# Bittersweet for Black Caps after another final loss

'I think we pride ourselves on not giving up, and I don't think we did'

Reuters  
Dubai

**S**kipper Mitchell Santner was proud of the way New Zealand went about their Champions Trophy campaign but was left with a bittersweet feeling after the Black Caps once again ended up on the losing side in a major global tournament.

New Zealand went down to India by four wickets in the title-decider in Dubai on Sunday, suffering a fourth loss in four short-format global finals over the last decade.

"It's starting to add up a bit now," Santner told reporters after the final.

"But if you make finals, you're coming up against another pretty good team who's also playing some good cricket."

"I was proud with the way we fought tonight."

"I think we pride ourselves on not giving up, and I don't think we did..."

"I guess it's bittersweet. You always want to win one of these, and I don't know how many more chances we'll get, but this one was up there for us."

"I think we were playing some good cricket leading into this, and we thought we were a real sniff today, but I guess we just got beaten by a good team."

New Zealand suffered a blow before the final when pace spearhead Matt Henry was ruled out with a shoulder injury he picked up during the semi-final against South Africa.

That followed a freak injury



New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra (second right) celebrates with teammates after taking the wicket of India's captain Rohit Sharma (right) during the ICC Champions Trophy final at the Dubai International Stadium in Dubai on Sunday. (AFP)

to Rachin Ravindra, who was on Sunday named Player of the Tournament, that ruled the all-rounder out of New Zealand's opener.

The Black Caps players have, however, resolutely refused to engage in the debate over India's perceived advantage at having been based in Dubai throughout their campaign and Santner was not about to start complaining about adversity after the final.

"It's never going to go perfectly

in these tournaments," the spin bowler said.

"And you could take it back to a few different things but I think we didn't really complain about anything. We just kind of get on with it. That's how we like to operate."

New Zealand won three of five matches during the Champions Trophy, losing only to India twice, and most gratifying for Santner was the way the whole team contributed.

"I'm incredibly proud of this

group the way we've gone about it throughout this tournament," said the 33-year-old, who was captaining his country for the first time at a major global event.

"We had a mix of experienced players, but a few younger players in the squad."

"It's been an easy one to captain, different guys stepping up at different times throughout the tournament, which has been outstanding. And we came up against a very good team today."

SPOTLIGHT

## Second Edition of Ramadan Padel Tournament kicks off



**T**he highly anticipated second edition of the Ramadan Padel Tournament has commenced at The Pearl Island, bringing together thrilling competition and the spirit of the holy month. The tournament, which started on March 5, ends today.

Following the remarkable success of the inaugural edition, which witnessed enthusiastic participation from padel enthusiasts in an electrifying atmosphere, this year's tournament returns with even greater excitement and organisation. A total 16 competitive teams will battle for the championship title, making it a must-watch event for sports fans.

The first edition of the tournament attracted a large audience, with exceptional teams from The Pearl Island community and beyond competing with high sportsmanship. It quickly became one of the standout sporting events of Ramadan. Building on this success, the organisers are committed to enhancing the experience for both participants and spectators, offering a premium sporting environment that blends the excitement of competition with the island's unique setting.

Commenting on the event, Eng Abdul Latif al-Yafei, Executive Director of Public Services at United Development Company (UDC), stated: "We are beyond excited to welcome the participants from the Pearl Island Community and visitors of The Pearl Island for this one-of-a-kind event. This year's tournament is set to be even more thrilling and enjoyable, with fierce

competition, incredible sportsmanship, and a vibrant atmosphere that will make it a Ramadan experience to remember."

As a premier sports and leisure destination, The Pearl Island continues to attract sports enthusiasts from all backgrounds.

Its world-class facilities and integrated infrastructure make it an ideal venue for hosting major sporting events that meet international standards.

This year, the tournament will take place at Fanar Firouz, a venue that offers an exceptional setting for sports competitions, complemented by breathtaking views that elevate the excitement.

A large turnout is expected, with fans having the opportunity to witness the matches firsthand while enjoying a range of accompanying entertainment activities.

The tournament will also feature promotional events and special competitions designed to engage the audience and amplify the competitive spirit among participants.

This year's Ramadan Padel Tournament promises to be a highlight of The Pearl Island's sports calendar, offering an ideal opportunity for sports enthusiasts to engage in high-energy competition while embracing the social essence of the holy month. Competing teams will showcase top-tier performances and skills, ensuring an exceptional experience for padel fans.

The Pearl Island invites everyone to join in and enjoy a week filled with excitement, competition, and entertainment.

QCA T10 RAMADAN CUP

## Hurricanes hammer Mavericks by 10 wickets

**H**urricanes defeated Mavericks by 10 wickets in a match of the ongoing QCA T10 Ramadan Cup at the Westend International Stadium on Friday.

Batting first, Mavericks scored 136 for 6 with Shariq (36) and Ayan (13) making good contributions. Hurricanes, however, chased the target easily with Umash Sachila De Zoysa scoring 85\* off 28 balls. He was named Player of the Match. Doha Rangers eves beat Al Sadd Strikers

Meanwhile in the Qatar Women's Premier League 2025, Doha Rangers secured an 8-wicket victory over Al Sadd Strikers at the University of Doha for Science and Technology ground.

Al Sadd Strikers posted 147 for 3 in their allotted 20 overs



with Christeena (24) and Sabeja (22) contributing. In reply, Doha Rangers attained the target in 16.3 overs powered by Chere Dreyden's 72 off 47 balls, earning her Player of the Match award.

## Geopolitics and lack of buzz blight Champions Trophy's return

**Dubai:** Geopolitical reality, lack of buzz in host nation Pakistan and mediocre cricket in general meant Champions Trophy's much-anticipated return to the calendar did not go according to plan for the governing International Cricket Council (ICC).

The one-day international (ODI) tournament served as an ICC fundraiser but offered no assurance about the future of a format battling for relevance in a cricket landscape ruled by Twenty20 leagues either. Financial engine India's participation, a key factor behind the commercial success of any cricket tournament, was in doubt after Pakistan bagged the hosting rights for the first ICC event in the country since 1996. The Indian board (BCCI) stuck to their policy of not touring Pakistan because of the strained political ties between the bitter neighbours, who play each other only in ICC events.

Like for the 2023 Asia Cup in Pakistan, a 'hybrid model' was agreed on under which India were allowed to play their matches in Dubai to salvage a tournament, which had been discontinued after the 2017 edition.

Under the agreement running until 2027,

Pakistan will play in a neutral venue for any ICC event, like next year's Twenty20 World Cup, scheduled in India.

Reigning T20 world champions India beat New Zealand in Sunday's final to prove their credentials as a white-ball behemoth. India have lost just one match - the final of the ODI World Cup in 2023 - in their last three ICC events and probably did not require what many called an "unfair advantage" of playing all their matches in Dubai.

"I feel sorry for India's cricketers," award-winning cricket writer Nicholas Brookes told Reuters.

"They are an outstanding team - in my mind, streets ahead of their competition regardless of conditions, and one of the greatest white-ball sides the game has seen."

"This tournament should have been their victory lap, but their brilliance has been somewhat overshadowed by constant questions about unfair advantages." Allowing India to play all their matches in Dubai robbed Pakistan of the honour of hosting the final and disrupted the schedule of the knockout matches.

South Africa were made to take a farcical 18-hour trip to Dubai in anticipation of a

semi-final against India before flying back to Pakistan to face New Zealand.

**"BENDING OVER BACKWARDS"**

The whole affair made the ICC, currently headed by former BCCI secretary Jay Shah, look weak in front of the world's richest cricket board.

The scheduling also favoured India, who had a week's rest between their last two group matches, while Afghanistan played twice in three days.

"That looks like the ICC putting finances ahead of fairness," said Brookes, whose *An Island's Eleven* charts the history of Sri Lankan cricket and won the *Wisden* Book Of The Year award in 2023.

"Some people will naturally think that the governing body is bending over backwards to accommodate India." Defending champions Pakistan looked under-prepared for the tournament, both on and off the field.

Eleventh-hour facelift to stadiums in Karachi and Lahore, sparse crowd and three wash-outs dampened the spirit among the locals in the tournament.

(AFP)

FORMULA ONE

# Hamilton in red, Verstappen under pressure in new season

The 24-race season will mark 75 years since the inaugural 7-race championship kicked off in 1950



British F1 driver Lewis Hamilton signs autographs during the Scuderia Ferrari HP Drivers' presentation event by Unicredit, in Piazza Castello in Milan, on March 6, 2025. (AFP)



Race winner Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen celebrates with the trophy on the podium after the Qatar Grand Prix at the Lusail International Circuit in Lusail, on December 1, 2024. (AFP)

AFP  
Paris

The 2025 Formula One season has all the makings of a white-knuckle 24-race celebration to mark 75 years since the inaugural seven-race championship in 1950, while Lewis Hamilton's move to Ferrari provides an intriguing storyline.

Red Bull's Max Verstappen appears to have his work cut out to seal a fifth straight title with Lando Norris poised to knock the Dutchman off his perch.

Hamilton says his move from Mercedes to Ferrari has given him a new lease of life.

**Here AFP Sport looks at six talking points before the season gets underway in Australia on Sunday:**

**Fifth title for Verstappen?**

Seventy-five years after Giuseppe Farina claimed the first F1 world championship at the wheel of an Alfa Romeo, Verstappen embarks on the 2025 season in pursuit of a fifth successive title, a feat only achieved once before, by Michael

Schumacher. If he succeeds it will cement the Dutchman's place as a titan of the sport. He hoovered up seven of the first 10 races in his rampaging Red Bull last year, before a 10-race winless run as McLaren, Mercedes and Ferrari ran riot. But Verstappen had the last word, fighting back to win in Brazil and clinch title number four with two races to spare.

McLaren prised the constructors championship away from Red Bull to seal their long road back to the F1 summit. The tough task facing Verstappen is underlined by the betting, which has him as only second favourite behind Norris (who ended last season 63 points behind) for the 2025 crown.

**Can Hamilton make Ferrari magic?**

Hamilton is convinced he can help Ferrari win a first drivers' championship since 2007 after the seven-time world champion made the move to Italy. At 40, the Briton seems full of youthful enthusiasm for the new challenge.

"The passion here is like nothing you've ever seen. They've got absolutely every ingredient they need

to win a world championship and it's just about putting all the pieces together," he said.

**Class of 2025 rookies**

An Italian teenager who only passed his driving test in January is among the six-strong 2025 rookie intake.

Kimi Antonelli is an exciting 18-year-old who uses the nickname of his uncle who was a fan of Ferrari's last world champion, Finn Kimi Raikkonen. He takes Hamilton's seat alongside George Russell at Mercedes.

"I really want to make my own story" insists last year's multiple Formula 2 winner, brushing off suggestions he is the seven-time world champion's 'replacement' at the Silver Arrows.

Kiwi Liam Lawson, a 'veteran' of 11 Grands Prix already, makes his fully fledged debut as Verstappen's new wingman at Red Bull.

Ferrari's British academy driver Ollie Bearman was thrown into the F1 deep end when he was called up as a last-minute replacement for Carlos Sainz at the Saudi Grand Prix last year, becoming the youngest ever driver to compete

for the Scuderia. He seized his chance, holding off Hamilton and Norris to finish seventh.

He joins Ferrari-powered Haas. Brazil has a presence on the grid for the first time in five years in F2 champion Gabriel Bortoleto at Sauber.

Australian Jack Doohan will be hoping to enjoy even a small slice of his dad Mick's success on two wheels in MotoGP as he graduates from reserve driver to become Pierre Gasly's teammate at Alpine. Last but not least is RB's Isack Hadjar, the 20-year-old French-Algerian who narrowly missed out to Bortoleto for the F2 title.

**FIA in drivers' crosshairs**

In the volatile unpredictable high-octane bubble that is F1, one thing seems assured in 2025: renewed tension between the governing body and the drivers. Notably over the FIA's crackdown on swearing.

Verstappen and Charles Leclerc fell foul of the rules in 2024 for turning the air blue at press conferences.

The guidelines were strengthened in January, triggering an indignant response from drivers,

who took a swipe at FIA president Mohammed Ben Sulayem.

"We urge the FIA president to also consider his own tone and language when talking to our member drivers, or indeed about them, whether in a public forum or otherwise," they wrote, adding: "Our members are adults. They do not need to be given instructions via the media, about matters as trivial as the wearing of jewellery or underpants."

**From Australia to Abu Dhabi**

Australia hosts the first of the 24 races next weekend with Bahrain moved to April as Ramadan runs throughout March.

2025's six sprints are at Shanghai, Miami, Belgium, Austin, Sao Paulo and Qatar.

The FIA is trying to liven up the jewel in the calendar - Monaco - where overtaking is nigh-on impossible, imposing a mandatory two-pit stop strategy.

With the traditional three-week summer break in August the F1 circus pitches up in the desert of Abu Dhabi for its final show on December 7.

"2025 will be a special year as

we celebrate the 75th Anniversary of the FIA Formula One World Championship, and it's that legacy and experience that allows us to deliver such a strong calendar," said F1 CEO Stefano Domenicali.

**Testing times**

The times from three days of pre-season testing in Bahrain last month did not tell anyone much.

With fuel loads unknown, and team set-ups kept under wraps, it was hard if not impossible to pinpoint the winners and losers.

Russell's Mercedes was top of the pile on the last day, with Sainz's Williams topping the times on the middle day and Norris's McLaren taking the first day honours.

Ferrari were bang in the thick of it, and Verstappen will have been pleased with his final-day showing.

One thing seems certain - the bulk of the teams look closely matched, prompting McLaren CEO Zak Brown to predict: "I can see it being super competitive. Last year four teams won multiple races, this year I could see that being even more. I'm more excited than nervous."

TENNIS

## Swiatek, Rybakina serve up bagels in Indian Wells

Reuters  
Indian Wells, California

Defending champion Iga Swiatek crushed Dayana Yastremska 6-0 6-2 and 2023 champion Elena Rybakina powered past Britain's Katie Boulter 6-0 7-5 to reach the fourth round of Indian Wells on Sunday with displays of dominance.

Swiatek, seeded second, is aiming to become the first woman to win the tournament three times and the Polish player looked eager to do so in as little time on court as possible, reeling off 10 games in a row and needing just 65 minutes to see off her Ukrainian opponent.

"At the end I got a bit tired, it's always hard to finish a match like that but I'm happy that I kept my intensity up in the last game to close it," she said.

"I had control from the beginning so I'm happy with the performance for sure."

It was Swiatek's second bagel set of the tournament after she overwhelmed Caroline Garcia 6-2 6-0 in her first match.

The five-times major champion



has not won a title since her triumph at Roland Garros in 2024, her longest drought since winning her first major title in 2020.

She served a one-month suspension in October for a failed drug test and has seen Aryna Sabalenka take her world number one ranking but said the California desert is an ideal setting to get back to winning ways.

Swiatek will face 15th seed Karolina Muchova in the round of 16 after the Czech player beat her compatriot Katerina Siniakova in the afternoon.

After cruising through the first

set, Rybakina fell behind 5-3 in the second before regrouping. She stretched to hit a sensational defensive shot in a game where she broke back for 5-5 and broke again on match point to seal the win.

Rybakina, who missed last year's tournament due to an illness, will play ninth-seeded teenager Mirra Andreeva in a rematch of their Dubai semi-final, which the Russian won in three sets en route to becoming the youngest player to win a WTA 1000 title.

Andreeva is coached by former Wimbledon champion Conchita Martinez, who the 17-year-old said was keeping her focused.

"She already told me that she booked a court at 12pm," she told reporters after her night match. "I see not much time passed from the match... she's just like this, but it's not bad."

Ukrainian Elina Svitolina upset 14th seed Danielle Collins 6-2 6-4 and will face another American, fourth seed Jessica Pegula in the next round after she breezed past China's Wang Xinyu 6-2 6-1.

Svitolina's countrywoman Marta Kostyuk beat American wildcard Caroline Dolehide 6-3 6-3.

**MEDVEDEV, TSITSIPAS ADVANCE**

On the men's side, Stefanos Tsitsipas showed off his impressive athleticism and defence, leaping for overheads and speeding around the court to beat Italy's Matteo Berrettini 6-3 6-3.

"I'm approaching these matches with determination and willingness to just leave it all out there on the court," Tsitsipas said.

"I want to get out there on the court and be a gladiator, and that's how I approach every single match I get to play."

The Greek eighth seed will face battle-tested Holger Rune after the Danish player dug deep to outlast Frenchman Ugo Humbert 5-7 6-4 7-5 with the backing of the crowd on centre court.

Daniil Medvedev was on court for just 10 minutes before his American opponent Alex Michelsen was forced to retire due to illness after two games.

The Russian fifth seed has lost to Carlos Alcaraz in the Indian Wells final the past two years, and the Spaniard is once again on the opposite side of the draw.

Medvedev will next face popular American Tommy Paul.

## Katara International Ramadan Open Chess Championship in full swing



DOHA: The Katara International Ramadan Open Classic Chess Championship will continue today at the Katara Cultural Village. This hugely popular international chess tournament, drawing 90 players from 22 nations, culminates on March 15. Employing a 9-round Swiss system, the classic competitions adhere to a 60-minute plus 30-second increment per move format. Today at 9pm, the sixth round will be held, promising clashes among the top contenders. Among those competing at this event include Syed Abdul Khader of India, compatriot Balanandan Ayyappan, Loyola Rolenson Jr (Philippines) and compatriot Ryan Mendoza. Top Qatari players include Layan

al-Qassabi, Erfan Mohamad Firdaus and Khaled Aljamaat. Hamad al-Tamimi, Executive Director of the Qatar Chess Association (QCA), told Qatar News Agency fans are enjoying thrilling battles among the leading six players.

He commended the performance of the Qatari national team members in the initial five rounds, reaffirming the Federation's dedication to working their development and maximising their achievements. Al-Tamimi specifically acknowledged the crucial support provided by Katara Cultural Village. He stressed that this support is vital for the growth of chess in Qatar, and enhances the experience of the players.



## Al Yarmouk beat Palestine at Al Thumama Ramadan tourney

DOHA: The excitement continued in the second edition of the Al Thumama Ramadan Championship underway at Al Furjan Stadium in Al Thumama. Al Yarmouk team defeated Palestine 2-1 and Abdul Rahim al-Boush from Al Yarmouk team received the award for best player in the match. In another match, a goalless draw decided the match between the Eagles and the Leader, in which Youssef Moawad, the Eagles player, won the Best Player award. The competitions will continue with two matches scheduled today. The first will bring together the Palestine team and the Eagles, while the second match will see Al Yarmouk meet the Tariq Bin Ziyad team.



Al Adaam team leads the competition so far with 12 points, followed by Al Nusoor team in second place with seven points, Palestine in third place with six points, Yarmouk in fourth

place with four points, Al Zaem in fifth place with four points, Tariq Bin Ziyad in sixth place with three points, then Al Janoub in seventh place with two points. Faisal Khalifa al-Lanjawi from the Al Adaam team is currently leading the scorers list with four goals. Hassan Ali al-Ishaq, Chairman of the Organising Committee of the tournament, confirmed that the coming days will witness exciting competition between the teams as the tournament approaches its end, expressing his happiness with the positive reactions from the participants, which confirms the great success achieved by the tournament in all its organisational and technical aspects, in addition to the high technical capabilities of the players.

## CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# Bayern will play to win despite 3-0 lead: Kompany

Leverkusen will miss injured Wirtz, who was ruled out for weeks

Reuters  
Leverkusen, Germany

Bayern Munich plan to set the pace in their Champions League Round of 16 second leg at Bayer Leverkusen today, coach Vincent Kompany said, with his team carrying a 3-0 lead into the match.

Kompany said the Bavarians would play to win and would not go into the game thinking about their 3-0 victory in Munich last week over their German rivals. "You cannot go into the game like that. When you start a game the main priority is always to win," Kompany told a press conference. "We still have to deliver our best performance to win it. It is a very important game tomorrow."

Bayern, who saw Leverkusen win the domestic league and Cup double last season, are leading the Bundesliga title race but suffered a shock 3-2 home loss to strugglers VfL Bochum on Saturday despite a 2-0 lead. This will be the fifth game between Bayern and Leverkusen this season, having also met in the Bundesliga twice, as well as in the German Cup.

Kompany said while his players were frustrated after their loss to Bochum, the importance of the Leverkusen return leg meant they had to quickly put it behind them. Bayern were not planning to just sit back and soak up Leverkusen pressure, relying on their first leg advantage.

"It is not only about Leverkusen's first goal but also about Bayern's first goal as well," Kompany said. "In the end it will be the quality of players who will decide the game but if you only think about what the other team needs then that could end up happening. You can never know the future. We have to prepare for what we can and believe in what we can do," Kompany, in his first season in charge, said.

Bayer Leverkusen's coach Xabi Alonso said his side will show they are a complete team against Bayern even without injured midfielder Florian Wirtz, who was ruled out for weeks with a ligament injury yesterday.

The news of Wirtz's injury is a major blow to the reigning Bundesliga champions. "I am really sorry for him because he was in a top moment," Alonso told a press conference. "Now it is a good moment to show we are a complete team and that we can go on without him. Once the ball is rolling many unexpected things can



Bayern Leverkusen's players train yesterday, ahead of their UEFA Champions League second leg match against Bayern Munich. (AFP)

happen. For us, this game is all-in, make or break."

The 21-year-old Germany international suffered a ligament injury in their 2-0 home loss to Werder Bremen on Saturday and will be out of action for several weeks, the club said earlier on Monday. Wirtz, who has scored nine league goals and set up another 10, has netted another six times in the Champions League, and he will also miss Germany's Nations League quarter-final legs against Italy on March 20 and March 23.

Holders Leverkusen are also through to the German Cup semi-finals. Alonso said while a 3-0 deficit from the first leg against Bayern was a huge challenge, believing they could

turn it around was key, while the absence of Wirtz could also act as added motivation.

"The first thing we have to do is to believe, and for the fans to also believe from the first second that we can do it," the coach said. "It is a game of another dimension. We must play with heart, passion and brain. We have a chance and have to fight until the end. But with a big situation you can also achieve something epic. (Wirtz's injury) could also be a boost, to say we fight for the big game but also for Flo."

"The team is convinced we can do it for many reasons but one is that we are in a position where we have nothing to lose. 100 percent of Bayern fans believe they will go through," Alonso added.

## PREVIEW

## Barca will play in honour of late doctor, says Flick

AFP  
Barcelona

Barcelona coach Hansi Flick said his team will face Benfica in the Champions League today playing for club doctor Carles Minarro, who died on Saturday.

The Catalan giants hold a 1-0 lead in the last 16 tie from the first leg in Lisbon ahead of the clash at the Olympic Stadium.

Following a moment of silence, the German said it had been a difficult last two days as they mourn the passing of 53-year-old Minarro, who died suddenly in the team hotel hours before Saturday's scheduled match at home to Osasuna, which was postponed 20 minutes before kick-off.

"It's a huge loss, Carles was a really great person, but also a great doctor, and this combination of Ricard (Pruna, another club doctor) and him was unbelievable for the club and for the team," Flick told a news conference yesterday.

"(He was) one of the big puzzle (pieces) for the success, because they are doing a great job, and we miss him, but it's also life. I think he will support us from above. The team also, we want to play... for him. Now in this situation, it's very important that we win, and this is the focus, what we want to do tomorrow."

Doctor Minarro had been work-

ing with different Barcelona sides since 2017, and began working with the men's football first team a few months ago.

Barcelona beat Benfica 5-4 in Lisbon in the group stage and then again with 10 men for most of the game last week after Pau Cubarsi was sent off. They are on a 16-game unbeaten run across all competitions and in contention for three major titles as they lead La Liga and have reached the Copa del Rey semi-finals in which they drew 4-4 with Atletico Madrid in the first leg before the April 2 return.

However Flick said his squad would not take progress to the quarter-finals as a given, with Benfica beating Juventus on the road in the group stage and thrashing Atletico Madrid at home. "None of us thinks that it's done, and this is the important thing," continued the coach. "Their away matches in the Champions League, they are doing really great, they won a lot of matches away. So we have to think about that and take care."

"We are in a very good moment, in a fantastic dynamic. We hope to continue like this," Flick said. "I see the team very focused. This morning, we had a talk and we went through all the good things they had done lately. Nobody has taken anything for granted, that's the most important thing. The team, if it has a good dynamic, for me, that's the most important thing."



Barcelona players run through cones during a training session at the Joan Gamper training ground in Sant Joan Despi, near Barcelona. (AFP)

### Qatar to host West Asian Clubs Athletics Championship from April 7 to 10

**Doha:** The Organising Committee of the West Asian Clubs Athletics Championship has announced the participation of 300 athletes representing 14 clubs from 13 countries in the competition, set to take place at Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium, Qatar Sports Club, from April 7 to 10.

During a meeting held at Al Ahli Sports Club, the committee confirmed that all arrangements are in place for the second edition of the championship, in coordination with the Qatar Athletics Federation.

Khalid al-Suwaidi, Championship Director and Head of Athletics at Al Ahli Sports Club, emphasised the committee's dedication to delivering a high-calibre event that meets its technical and sporting objectives. He highlighted the strong support from Hassan Youssef al-Mulla, President of Al Ahli Club, who has ensured that the club's resources are fully utilised to make the championship a success.

Al-Suwaidi also expressed his appreciation for the Qatar Athletics Federation's role in entrusting Al Ahli with hosting the event. He noted that this reflects the federation's commitment to enhancing the organisational and technical capabilities of Qatari clubs, with a particular focus on Al Ahli's experience in hosting major competitions.

Al-Suwaidi highlighted that the championship provides a valuable platform for clubs in West Asia to enhance their athletes' skills in both track and field events. He emphasised that the competition serves as an opportunity for athletes to improve their performances, set new records, and elevate their overall level, ultimately benefiting their respective national teams.

The significant participation from clubs across the region underscores the event's growing reputation and its importance in the annual athletics calendar.

Al-Suwaidi confirmed that the organising committee will hold regular meetings to finalise arrangements and ensure the event contributes to Qatar's ongoing success in athletics at the regional level. He reaffirmed the committee's commitment to working diligently to deliver an exceptional championship. The Al Ahli Sports Club Board of Directors has officially approved the event's organisational structure, marking the final step in preparations for the much-anticipated competition.

## SPOTLIGHT

## 'Not good enough' and 'overpaid': Ratcliffe slams Man United flops

AFP  
London

Manchester United co-owner Sir Jim Ratcliffe has blasted some of his troubled club's stars as "not good enough" and "probably overpaid".

Ratcliffe has endured a dismal start to his reign at Old Trafford since taking charge of footballing operations in February last year. The British billionaire named Rasmus Hojlund, Andre Onana, Casemiro, Jadon Sancho and Antony as the chief causes of his frustration.

Sancho and Antony are currently on loan at Chelsea and Real Betis respectively after underachieving with United. In reference to United still paying instalments of transfer fees on several out-of-form players, Ratcliffe, who shares ownership of United with the US-based Glazer family, told the BBC: "If you look at the players we are buying this summer, that we didn't buy, we're buying Antony, we're buying Casemiro, we're buying Onana, we're buying Hojlund, we're buying Sancho."

"These are all things from the past, whether we like it or not, we've inherited those things and have to sort that out. For Sancho, who now plays for Chelsea and we pay half his wages, we're paying £17mn to buy him in the summer."

Asked if he was suggesting those players were not good enough for United, Ratcliffe said: "Some are not good enough and some probably are overpaid, but for us to mould the squad that we are fully responsible for, and accountable for, will take time."

After United finished eighth in the Premier League last season and won the FA Cup, Ratcliffe and his United advisors opted to stick with boss Erik ten Hag despite their poor form for much of the campaign. The Dutchman was subsequently sacked in October and replaced by Ruben Amorim after United endured another wretched run.

INEOS chairman Ratcliffe has ac-



Manchester United's co-owner Jim Ratcliffe has endured a dismal start to his reign at Old Trafford since taking charge of footballing operations in February last year. (AFP)

cepted the decision to keep Ten Hag as a mistake. He applied the same verdict to his decision to hire Dan Ashworth as sporting director, a role he left in December after just five months.

"I agree the Erik ten Tag and Dan Ashworth decisions were errors," the 72-year-old said. "I think there were some mitigating circumstances, but ultimately they were errors. I accept that and I apologise for that."

Despite United's struggles since Amorim took charge, leaving them 14th in the Premier League. United have lost nine of their 26 games under him and are 36 points behind league leaders and rivals Liverpool. However a win at home to Real Sociedad this week will see them in the

quarter-finals of the Europa League – and a step nearer to possible Champions League qualification, the prize for winning the competition.

Ratcliffe insisted he would keep faith with the former Sporting Lisbon boss. "If I actually look at the squad which is available to Ruben, I think he is doing a really good job to be honest," he said. "I think Ruben is an outstanding young manager. I really do. He's an excellent manager and I think he will be there for a long time."

He also praised Amorim for attempting to put his stamp on the squad – England forward Rashford was sent on loan to Aston Villa after it became clear he was not part of the new manager's plans.

### Juventus coach Motta faces sleepless night after Atalanta thrashing

**Turin:** Juventus coach Thiago Motta said it would be difficult to sleep after his team were hammered 4-0 at home by Atalanta on Sunday in a major blow to their slim hopes of the Serie A title.

Juventus's five-game winning streak in the league came to an end and they remain fourth in the table with 52 points, nine behind leaders Inter Milan, in a disappointing season after they were knocked out of the Champions League and the Coppa Italia. "Atalanta deserved to win and we knew our opponents' game plan," Motta told reporters.

"Today we are disappointed and it will be difficult to sleep. Everything can influence us, because we are Juventus. The fans, like the press, have the right to think what they want. The facts say that we are in this position. This team has an enormous margin for growth. After the first goal we suffered a lot. We are quite disappointed and now we have to start thinking about the next game."

Juventus had not suffered a Serie A home defeat by four or more goals since 1967, but Motta said last month's 4-2 loss on penalties to Empoli in the Italian Cup quarter-finals was more painful. "It is a defeat we do not like, but I do not put it on the same level as the defeat to Empoli," he said. "They are different situations. We needed to keep our balance and we didn't do that, but it's partly down to a lack of experience in the side." Juventus play at Fiorentina next Sunday.

Meanwhile, Atalanta manager Gian Piero Gasperini's side must believe they can win the Serie A title after thrashing Juventus moved them within three points of leaders Inter Milan, whom they host next week.