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Alcaraz eases into Monte Carlo quarter-finals, Draper out



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GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

Sadd close in on Qatar Stars League title, Duhail fight to stay alive

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HORSE RACING

Al Shaqab Racing's Luwsail clinches Qatar Gold Sword

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Luwsail delivered another standout performance yesterday, adding a prestigious Group 1 PA victory to his resume with a hard-fought win in the Qatar Gold Sword at Al Uqda Racecourse. The five-year-old displayed remarkable determination and stamina, battling all the way to the line to clinch the title by a neck from the impressive runner-up, Moshrif.

Bred and owned by Al Shaqab Racing, trained by Jean de Mieuille, and ridden by Pierre-Charles Boudot – who completed a treble on the day – Luwsail's victory further cements his reputation at the highest level of Purebred Arabian racing.

HE Sheikh Thani bin Hamad al-Thani presented the coveted Qatar Gold Sword to Khalifa bin Mohammed al-Attiyah, who accepted the award on behalf of Al Shaqab Racing.

Meanwhile, Bolthole successfully defended his title in the QA Gr1 Qatar Gold Trophy, claiming the prestigious prize for a second consecutive year with a gutsy performance. Tracking the leader closely, he made his move at the home turn and dug deep in the closing stages to fend off a determined challenge. Owned by Wathnan Racing, trained by Alban de Mieuille, and also ridden by Boudot, Bolthole once again proved his quality. Stablemate Jeff Koons (Frankel) finished a strong second, giving Wathnan Racing an impressive one-two finish. QREC Board Member Abdulrahman bin Mansour al-Mansour crowned the winners.

Earlier in the day, Ghara, after a string of near-misses, finally found her winning stride with a powerful surge in the final 100 metres to claim the Qatar Silver Sword



HE Sheikh Thani bin Hamad al-Thani presented the coveted Qatar Gold Sword to Khalifa bin Mohammed al-Attiyah, who accepted the award on behalf of Al Shaqab Racing after Luwsail's victory at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

for 4YO Purebred Arabians by 1½ lengths. Trained by Hamad al-Jehani and ridden by Lukas Delozier, the bay filly delivered a well-earned victory for owner Al Wasmiyah Farm. QREC Board Member Khalifa bin Mohammed al-Attiyah presented the trophies to the connections.

In the Qatar Silver Trophy for Local Purebred Arabians, Hadlan produced a commanding performance. The six-year-old raced with authority from the start and displayed an electric turn of foot in the final stages to win by ¾ lengths. Trained by Wasim al-Sahn for owner Abdullah bin Saeed Abdullah al-Mesnad, Hadlan was expertly guided by Boudot, who completed a memorable day in the saddle. QREC Director of Support Services Department, Ahmed al-Sheebani, crowned the winners.

41ST AL RAYYAN RACE MEETING - QATAR GOLD SWORD AND TROPHY (DIV2)

- Winners: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1 - Qatar Gold Sword - Purebred Arabian (Class 1 Gr1) International race
 Luwsail, Jean de Mieuille, Pierre Charles Boudot
2 - Qatar Gold Trophy - Thoroughbred (Class 1 QA-Gr1) International race
 Bolthole, Alban Elie De Mieuille, Pierre Charles Boudot
3 - Qatar Silver Sword - 4yo Purebred Arabian (Class 1)
 Ghara, Hamad al-Jehani, Lukas Delozier
4 - Qatar Silver Trophy - Local Purebred Arabian (Class 1)
 Hadlan, Wasim al-Sahn, Pierre Charles Boudot



Pierre-Charles Boudot celebrates after riding five-year-old Luwsail to victory at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. PICTURE: Juhaim



Connections of Bolthole pose with the trophies after the horse successfully defended his title in the QA Group 1 Qatar Gold Trophy.

MOTOGP

Back from injury, Martin eyes modest goals on Qatar return

World champion will make his first appearance of the season in Lusail after passing a medical check

By Sahar Bidappa
Doha

It's been a frustrating two months for Jorge Martin. The reigning MotoGP world champion has been forced to watch from the sidelines as his rivals battle for early supremacy in the first three rounds of the new season.

The Spaniard, who won last year's title with Pramac Ducati, barely had a feel for his new Aprilia bike when he crashed and sustained hand and foot fractures during pre-season testing in Sepang, Malaysia, in February.

Since then, the Marquez brothers have dominated. Gresini Racing's Alex Marquez leads the championship with 87 points, followed by his brother Marc on the factory Ducati with 86. Marc's teammate and two-time champion Francesco Bagnaia is third with 75 points.

While Martin has a lot of catching up to do, he's not yet thinking about the title race after passing a medical check yesterday to make his Aprilia race debut at the Qatar Grand Prix. In fact, the 27-year-old admitted to having "a few nerves" and said that simply finishing the weekend would be a huge success.

He had completed only 13 laps on Aprilia's bike before the crash. "It's been a difficult two months. I've been working a lot to be here today. I don't know what to expect. I don't feel 100% yet. I have good strength but still feel pain. So let's see what the weekend brings and try to adapt a little more to the Aprilia," he said at the Lusail International Circuit yesterday.

"I will take it session by session, day by day. I don't know if I'll even be able to finish the weekend. For me, just to do that will be a big success. I just need time to recover, get used to the bike, and then let's see – in two or three months, everything will be on point again, and maybe I can fight with



FROM LEFT: Aprilia's Jorge Martin, Ducati's Marc Marquez, Gresini Racing's Alex Marquez and Ducati's Francesco Bagnaia pose after the press conference at the Lusail International Circuit yesterday. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil

these three riders," he added, referring to Alex and Marc Marquez and Bagnaia, who sat alongside him at the press conference.

Meanwhile, fellow Spaniard Marc Marquez will be looking to get back on track after a crash at the USA MotoGP in Austin scuppered his perfect start to the season. Forced to retire from the main race, the Ducati rider lost his top spot in the world championship standings in the process.

Starting from pole position, Marc had won the sprint race and looked on course for his sixth victory in as many races this season before suffering his first setback of

the year. "Ending a near-perfect weekend with this crash inevitably leaves a bitter taste," the 32-year-old said yesterday.

"This is racing. The good thing is that we crashed while leading the race by two and a half seconds, and I was riding really well," he added. "Yeah, I made a mistake – but I know why: I slowed down too much at Turn 3 and then entered too early at Turn 4. But okay, it happened. The good thing is that despite that big mistake, we are still second in the championship, just one point behind the leader. So here, it feels like everything restarts, and let's see



A view of the paddock at the Lusail International Circuit yesterday.

what we can do during the weekend."

Marc hasn't won the Qatar GP since 2014, which remains his only victory at Lusail in the premier class, and he hasn't been on the podium there since 2019. He admitted the Qatar GP is "theoretically" the first race of 2025 where Alex and Bagnaia "are better than me."

"It's the first circuit that, theoretically, Alex and Pecco are better than me, based on historic results. But let's see what I can do. If I'm competitive, it will be a very good sign for me. If not, I'll try to work to improve," he said.

Two-time world champion Bagnaia, who took advantage of Marc's crash to win his first race of the season in Austin, is braced for another showdown with the Marquez brothers. The Italian, who was expected at the start of the year to

be Marc's leading rival on the grid's most powerful bike, has so far struggled to challenge the Spaniard's dominance. He'll now be hoping to build on his Austin win at the Lusail Circuit, where he won last year.

Bagnaia is aiming to build momentum at a Lusail track better suited to his riding style. "It was great to have that kind of performance at a tough track for me," Bagnaia said of his win in Austin. "This is a better circuit, more suitable for my riding style. I like the track; I like the layout."

"We know that I won in Austin because of Marc's crash. He was gaining tenths every lap. My potential was to finish second. Then he crashed, and the only objective was to win," Bagnaia added.

The Qatar GP, which traditionally opens the MotoGP season in March, was postponed to April due to Ramadan.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Al Sadd's chance to distance rivals in tight points race

Defending champions face bottom-placed Al Khor today while second-placed Al Duhail host Al Arabi

The Ooredoo-Qatar Stars League will see intriguing action in six simultaneous kick-offs (6.30pm) today in the penultimate round 21 and which could well prove decisive for title chasers Al Sadd and a still hopeful Al Duhail.

While defending champions Al Sadd are leading with 46 points, Al Duhail have 44 points – having slipped from the top following a heavy 0-4 defeat at the hands of Al Shamal in the previous round.

Al Sadd will be meeting the bottom-placed Al Khor at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium, while Al Duhail face Al Arabi at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium.

Al Arabi are in ninth place with 23 points. Al Duhail need to win the tie to keep the title race alive and to take it into the final round.

A reverse result for Al Duhail could seal the title for Al Sadd – if they are to beat Al Khor.

Al Duhail's coach Christophe Galtier speaking to the media ahead of the crucial clash against Al Arabi, said: "Everyone believes Al Sadd will win the league. Of course, anything is possible and Al Sadd are at the top of the league, but nothing is guaranteed yet. Certainly, Al Sadd could stumble like we did and the scales in the league could tip.

"We could not handle the pressure (against Al Shamal) when we were the better side and I cannot believe the players were not excited. However, I believe the intense pressure while we were in the lead (in the standings) was a major factor in the way we performed during the match.

"I expect a strong response from the players. I am delivering my message through this press conference to the players and I will



Al Sadd's Akram Afif (left) and Al Duhail's Almoez Ali are seen during separate training sessions ahead of Round 21 matches in the Qatar Stars League (QSL). There are six QSL matches scheduled for today.



also tell them in the dressing room that the Al Shamal match was the biggest disappointment of my entire coaching career. Our fate is no longer in our own hands now that we lost and Al Sadd are on top of the league.

"The players know I am angry and I am convinced they did not lose on purpose, but the pressure got the better of them and that is confusing to me, because we have experienced players. We were not playing to avoid relegation, but

we were playing for the title. This kind of pressure should be positive. However, we did not handle it well," stressed Galtier.

Meanwhile, Al Sadd coach Felix Sanchez said: "We are now preparing for the final two matches in the league and we are fully aware of their importance. We have reached the top spot, but if we want to continue, we must continue winning.

"I believe both teams have a lot to offer in this match. Al Khor, after their recent results, are fighting

to stay in the First Division while we are trying to achieve our goal of winning the title. Therefore, both teams are expected to give their best during the match.

"Every victory brings us closer to the title and this is always Al Sadd's goal. However, we must maintain our current position against Al Khor so that we can enter the final match relying solely on ourselves. Our full focus is now on the Al Khor match and we hope to perform well and secure the three points," said

Sanchez. Al Sadd player Tarek Salman said: "We are not under any pressure. We play as a team and always complement each other. After 20 rounds, we are in the lead and we will not let it slip away in order to retain our league title."

In one of the other important games, Al Ahli and Umm Salal will be up against each other at the Al Thumama Stadium.

Umm Salal, who are in 11th place in the rankings with 15 points, are in desperate need of a win to avoid

being in direct relegation threat – with the bottom-placed Al Khor snapping at their heels with a tally of 13 points.

Umm Salal would therefore aim to clinch the maximum three points and secure a playoff spot. A loss or a draw could see them entering into a complex calculation situation making the task even more difficult in the next and final round of the league competition, especially if Al Khor are to achieve positive results.

In contrast, Al Ahli go into the tie being in 4th place in the standings with 35 points. The Brigadiers would be keen to continue their winning streak and strengthen their position to finish the league season in the top four.

Umm Salal coach Patrice Beaumelle said: "We will do our best to win. We realise that the match will be difficult against a strong team, so it is essential that we fight to achieve our goal of winning."

Al Ahli coach Igor Biscan said: "Everyone would play the remaining two matches with all their strengths and seriousness in order to secure points. The focus is currently on the Umm Salal match. We are looking forward to concluding the season in the best possible way."

Friday Fixtures (All kick-offs 6.30pm)

- Al Shamal vs Al Rayyan at Al Khor Stadium
- Al Sadd vs Al Khor at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium
- Al Wakrah vs Al Gharafa at 974 Stadium
- Al Duhail vs Al Arabi at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium
- Al Ahli vs Umm Salal at Al Thumama Stadium
- Al Shahania vs Qatar SC at Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Rahul shines as Delhi bag fourth straight win in IPL

AFP
Bengaluru, India

KL Rahul smashed an unbeaten 93 as Delhi Capitals beat Royal Challengers Bengaluru by six wickets to maintain their winning streak in the Indian Premier League yesterday.

Rahul, 32, hit six sixes and seven fours in his scintillating 53-ball knock to help Delhi overhaul Bengaluru's 163-7 with 13 balls to spare at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru.

Tristan Stubbs chipped in with 38 not out and shared 111 runs with Rahul off just 56 balls to steer Delhi to their fourth consecutive win.

Delhi now sit second in the table while Bengaluru are third in the 10-team competition.

Bengaluru bowlers picked some early wickets but ran into the in-form Rahul who batted with composure and ease.

Delhi had a wobbly start, losing openers Faf du Plessis and Jake Fraser-McGurk cheaply with just 10 runs on the board.

Captain Axar Patel tried to steady the innings but holed out to Tim David off impact sub Suyash Sharma for 15.

Stubbs said the win was "really satisfying".

"I came in a tricky situation, but the run-rate never got out of hand," he said.

"I did not need to do much – KL played the way he did."

Earlier, Bengaluru were off to a



Delhi Capitals' KL Rahul (left) is congratulated by Royal Challengers Bengaluru players for his innings at the end of the IPL match at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru yesterday. (AFP)

flier, with openers Virat Kohli and Phil Salt taking the attack to the opposition.

30 runs in third over

The duo smashed 30 runs in the third over off Mitchell Starc before guiding Bengaluru to the fastest team 50 of the season.

The batting assault ended when Salt (37) was run-out after a mix-up and Kohli (22) lobbed a catch to Starc who dived forward to take a fine catch at long-off.

Salt hit three sixes and four fours in his 17-ball knock.

Bengaluru lost regular wickets after the twin setbacks, with Delhi left-arm spinner Kuldeep Yadav picking two, including the scalp of captain Rajat Patidar for 25.

David provided a late flourish with an unbeaten 20-ball 37, studded with four sixes and two fours.

Patidar conceded his team did not bat well despite showing

"nice intent". "We were lacking in assessing the conditions and the situation.

"(But) the way David accelerated at the end, it was really amazing," he said.

BRIEF SCORES

Delhi Capitals 169 for 4 (Rahul 93*, Stubbs 38*, Bhuvneshwar 2-26) **beat Royal Challengers Bengaluru 163 for 7** (Salt 37, David 37*, Kuldeep 2-17, Nigam 2-18) **by 6 wickets**

MOTORSPORT

FIA deputy president Reid resigns, attacks Ben Sulayem

AFP
Sakhir, Bahrain

The FIA's deputy president Robert Reid resigned yesterday with a damning parting shot at the head of motorsport's governing body Mohammed Ben Sulayem.

"I took on this role to help deliver greater transparency, stronger governance and more collaborative leadership.

"Over time, those principles have been increasingly set aside and I can no longer, in good faith, remain part of a system that no longer reflects them," Reid posted on Instagram.

In a swipe at Ben Sulayem, Reid said motorsport "deserves leadership rooted in integrity, accountability, and respect for process".

"That's the minimum standard we should all expect, and demand," he concluded. The FIA issued a strong defence of itself in the wake of Reid's departure.

"The FIA has exceptionally robust corporate governance policies which guide our operations and ensure our rules, practices and processes are adhered to," a statement read.

Reid's resignation comes as Formula One gathered in Bahrain for Sunday's fourth race of the season.

Reid, who as co-driver helped Richard Burns to the 2001 world rally championship, is the latest in a long line of high profile figures to quit the FIA since Ben Sulayem's appointment in 2021, including its sporting director, F1 technical director and head of the women in motorsport commission.

Ben Sulayem's time at the helm of motorsport has been dogged by controversy.

The 63-year-old was taken to task by seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton for using stereotypical language when discussing the use of foul outbursts by drivers on team radios.

Drivers fell out with the FIA over its crackdown on swearing.

Max Verstappen and Charles Leclerc broke the rules in 2024 for turning the air blue at press conferences.

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

"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."



Ferrari's British driver Lewis Hamilton rides a scooter at the Bahrain International Circuit in Sakhir ahead of the Bahrain Grand Prix this weekend. The first free practice session takes place today. (AFP)

Veteran Dhoni to lead Chennai in IPL after Gaikwad injury

New Delhi: Veteran batsman Mahendra Singh Dhoni will lead Chennai Super Kings for the remainder of the Indian Premier League season after an injury ruled out Rituraj Gaikwad, coach Stephen Fleming said yesterday. An MRI confirmed that Gaikwad, 28, has an elbow fracture, Fleming said, adding that Dhoni would take over as captain for the remainder of the IPL. "Unfortunately, Rituraj Gaikwad is going to be

ruled out of the tournament," Fleming said. "Gaikwad got hit in Guwahati. He's been operating with an amount of pain." Dhoni, 43, led Chennai from 2008 until 2024, when he handed the captaincy to Gaikwad. He had also handed the captaincy to Ravindra Jadeja in 2022, but took back the leadership midway through the season after a string of disappointing results. Under Dhoni, CSK have won five IPL titles, the

last in 2023, as well as two Champions League trophies. The team however had a dismal start to the current season, losing four of their first five matches. They are currently languishing in ninth place, just above the last-placed Sunrisers Hyderabad. "He (Dhoni) had no hesitation to step up and help guide us out of this (poor run)," Fleming said. "We'll look at replacements. We've got some good players in the squad that have been with us a while."

TENNIS

Alcaraz eases into Monte Carlo quarter-finals

British fifth seed Jack Draper gets knocked out in three sets

AFP
Monte Carlo, Principality of Monaco

Carlos Alcaraz cruised into the Monte Carlo Masters quarter-finals for the first time yesterday with a straight-sets win over Daniel Altmaier, while British fifth seed Jack Draper was knocked out by Alejandro Davidovich Fokina.

Four-time Grand Slam champion Alcaraz brushed aside 84th-ranked German Altmaier 6-3, 6-1 to set up a last-eight clash with rising French star Arthur Fils today.

"His (Fils') level is really high right now," said Alcaraz. "I saw a little bit from his match today, and he's playing great. I'm not gonna be scared - that's for sure."

Alcaraz took some time to find his rhythm as Altmaier broke him back to level at 3-3 in the first set, but it was one-way traffic from then on.

The second seed reeled off three straight games to take the first set before racing through the second in just over half an hour.

"At the beginning of the match, we played really long and tough rallies, really close games," added Alcaraz.

"I think we both played great tennis. At the end of the first set, I think I played such a great level."

The 21-year-old, the reigning French Open and Wimbledon champion, is the favourite to lift the title this weekend after early exits for top seed Alexander Zverev and Novak Djokovic.

Alcaraz was beaten in his first match on his only previous appearance at the tournament in 2022. Fils eased into his third successive Masters quarter-final this season with an impressive 6-2, 6-3 thrashing of 2023 champion Andrey Rublev.



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz stretches to play a forehand to Germany's Daniel Altmaier during the Monte Carlo Masters match at the Monte Carlo Country Club yesterday. (AFP)

The 20-year-old Fils is aiming to reach the semis of a Masters event for the first time, after losing in the last eight at both Indian Wells and the Miami Open this year.

"If it's him, it's going to be the first time I'm going to play him," Fils said of meeting Alcaraz.

"It's going to be a good experience. He's a big champion. He won four Grand Slams already. I didn't win a single one."

Earlier, Draper was beaten in three sets by Spain's Davidovich Fokina.

Draper, who won the Indian Wells title last month, slipped to a 6-3, 6-7 (6/8), 6-4 loss as he failed to reach a first Masters quarter-final on clay.

Davidovich Fokina will take on Australia's Alexei Popyrin in today's quarter-finals.

The world number 42 is into the last eight in Monaco for the third time, with his best performance a run to the 2022 final which included a shock victory over Djokovic.

Davidovich Fokina edged a hard-fought opening set which featured three breaks of serve.

Draper saw three break points slip away in the ninth game, with Davidovich Fokina taking his second set point.

The players traded breaks in the second set before Draper saved a match point en route to levelling the contest in a tie-break.

But the Briton, playing in the

third round of a Masters tournament on clay for the first time, slipped 2-0 behind early in the decider.

It proved to be a topsy-turvy third set, though, with the pair both broken twice inside the first six games.

Davidovich Fokina quickly delivered the decisive blow in the 10th game to secure his first win over a top-10 opponent on clay since 2023.

Popyrin, the world number 27, defeated 2024 runner-up Ruud 6-4, 3-6, 7-5.

Three-time champion Stefanos Tsitsipas beat Nuno Borges 6-1, 6-1 while Alex de Minaur of Australia stunned Russia's Daniil Medvedev 6-2, 6-2.

FOCUS

Jassim al-Kuwari and al-Boinin win in dressage at Hathab



DOHA: The 11th round of the Longines Hathab - Qatar Equestrian Tour began yesterday at the Longines Arena at Al Shaqab, with riders across various age groups and categories delivering standout performances. In the Dressage Medium: Test 2, Jassim al-Jaham al-Kuwari impressed the judges to take first place, followed by Michelle Grimes in second and Jessica Waldon in third.

The Elementary Test 2 - FEI Children category saw Saoud Ahmed al-Boinin secure the top spot, while Jassim Mohammed al-Fahd al-Kuwari put in a strong showing to claim both second and third positions. Afraa Abdulrahman al-Sulaiti led the Dressage Introductory Test with a polished performance. Ahmad Alhussain al-Thani came in second, and Laura Britton rounded out the top three.

In the Dressage Preliminary B test, Dana Omar al-Emadi claimed first place, with Abdulla Khalid al-Julandani finishing second and Hamyan al-Kuwari taking third.

The Future Riders categories also showcased promising young talent. In Level 1, Jassim Saoud al-Fakhroo finished first, followed by Mubarak Nasser Ali and Nawar Talal al-Otaibi. In Level 2, Fatima Bader al-Darwish earned top honours, with Khalifa bin Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani in second and Mohammed Abdulla al-Marri in third.



SPOTLIGHT

Peaty says yes to 2028 Olympics after new swim events added

AFP
Los Angeles, United States

Adam Peaty announced yesterday he intends to compete at a fourth Olympics after six new swimming events were added to the 2028 Los Angeles Games in what he called "an amazing decision."

The International Olympic Committee ratified a move that will see the 50m backstroke, butterfly and breaststroke all contested for the first time.

Previously, only freestyle was raced over the sport's shortest distance despite all four strokes being on the schedule at world championships.

Britain's Peaty is a two-time 100m breaststroke gold medalist and the world record holder over 50m.

The 30-year-old had previously stopped short of confirming his plans for Los Angeles, but the chance to win a 50m breaststroke title has convinced him to keep going.

"50m Sprint Events have just been added to @la28games which confirms my attempt to be at my Fourth Olympic Games," he said on Instagram.

"This is the best result for our incredible sport and will allow more people to be part of it and stay in it much longer. Thank you @world_aquatics for this amazing decision."

"I've got a good feeling about these next three years," he added in his post.

The additional 50m events bring the swimming gold medal count to 41 from 35 at the 2024 Paris Olympics.

Australia's Cameron McEvoy, the reigning men's Olympic 50m

freestyle champion, added: "50m specialist training methods now a hot commodity after dunking on it for so many years!"

55 MEDALS AWARDED IN AQUATICS

Overall there will be 55 medals awarded in aquatics - which also includes artistic swimming, water polo, diving and open water - more than any other sport.

"Today's decision is a testament to the continued evolution of swimming at the Olympic Games," said World Aquatics President Husain al-Musallam after the move was ratified by the International Olympic Committee.

"Including these six new events enhances the programme's balance and adds more opportunities for athletes to showcase their skills on the world's biggest stage."

Swimming is one of only four sports contested at every Olympics since the first Games in 1896, alongside athletics, artistic gymnastics and fencing.

The United States and Australia have long been dominant in the pool, with the two nations again at the forefront in Paris last year.

The IOC also announced that the number of female athletes competing in Los Angeles (5,333) will exceed men (5,167) for the first time.

It follows the women's football tournament being boosted to 16 teams. The men's competition has 12.

An additional women's weight category in boxing and two extra women's water polo teams ensure gender parity in those sports.

A number of new mixed-team events were also confirmed, including in golf, gymnastics and table tennis, while a 4x100m mixed relay was added to the track and field competition.

GOLF

Nicklaus and Player pick McIlroy to win Masters

AFP
Augusta, United States

Jack Nicklaus picked Rory McIlroy to win this week's Masters yesterday after sharing advice with the world number two, and fellow honorary starters Gary Player and Tom Watson agreed.

The legends hit ceremonial shots off Augusta National's first tee before the 89th Masters began. All like the chances of McIlroy, a four-time major winner from Northern Ireland, completing a career Grand Slam by capturing the Masters on Sunday for his first major title since 2014.

"I just have a gut feeling that Rory is the guy that's going to win this week," eight-time major winner Watson said.

McIlroy is trying to join career Grand Slam winners Nicklaus, Player, Tiger Woods, Ben Hogan and Gene Sarazen.

"I think Rory McIlroy will win the Masters this year and I hope he does because it would give golf a great boost to have another winner of the Grand Slam," Player said.

"He has the best swing in golf without a question. He's the fittest golfer. He does a dead lift of 400 pounds... and I think timing in life. He has had his adversities, his opportunities to win majors, and let them slip. It's just the right time for him to win now."

Nicklaus, whose record 18 major titles include a record six Masters wins, made it unanimous.

"I think the same as you two guys," Nicklaus said. "I think it's about time that Rory won."

The 85-year-old icon went over every hole at Augusta National with 35-year-old McIlroy at lunch



Fred Ridley, Chairman of Augusta National Golf Club poses with Honorary Starters Gary Player of South Africa, Jack Nicklaus of the US and compatriot Tom Watson alongside their caddies on the first tee during the first round of the 2025 Masters at Augusta National Golf Club in Augusta, Georgia. (AFP)

last week. "I said, 'Rory, I know you prepared for Augusta. Tell me how you're going to play the golf course,'" Nicklaus said.

"We went through it shot for shot. And he got done with the round, and I said, 'Well, I wouldn't change a thing. That's exactly the way I would try to play the golf course.'"

Nicklaus says McIlroy has developed the discipline in his game to avoid a stray bad hole that has undone his 10 prior attempts to complete the career Slam at Augusta National. "The discipline to do that is what Rory has lacked," Nicklaus said. "He has got all the shots. He has got all the game. He certainly is as talented as anybody... I'm a big fan of Rory's and I like Rory a lot."

Watson: no PGA-LIV deal

Golf's elder statesmen also agreed they want to see stars from the PGA Tour and Saudi-backed LIV Golf reunited in one series for the sport to thrive. For now, they only compete together at majors.

"I don't see a real working mechanism for the two tours to get back together. I think that's one of the reasons you haven't seen an agreement," Watson, 75, said.

"Scottie Scheffler, in his speech at the Champions Dinner on Tuesday night, said, 'I'm glad we're all together again.' So the players would like to get together."

"But it's really up to the powers that be to see if there's a framework in which the two tours can co-operate. I don't see that

framework happening. Maybe they're smarter people than I am."

Player, 89, hopes conflicts can cool between players over the issue. "Confrontation is a terrible thing. Confrontation and forgiveness is very important," he said. "It would be wonderful if they could get together."

Nicklaus predicted that 15-time major-winner Woods, absent with a ruptured Achilles tendon, will join the 50-and-over Champions Tour when he turns 50 in December. "Tiger will get well and Tiger will be back," Nicklaus said.

"I believe he'll probably play the senior tour and I believe he'll probably dominate the senior tour. Tiger is too much of a competitor to not play."

SPOTLIGHT

Camel Handball Championship: 17 teams to vie for top honours

The competition will take place at the iconic Libsear racetracks in Al Shahaniya, starting today



Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Kuwari, President of the Arab Union for Camel Races (AUCR) and Vice-Chairman of the Local Organising Committee of the event, Dr Hazam bin Nasser al-Maqarihi, Secretary-General of AUCR; and Ahmed Mohammed al-Shaabi, President of the Qatar Handball Association, during a press conference yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar will join 16 teams at the 4th International Camel Handball Championship to be held from April 11 to 13.

This was announced at a press conference yesterday headlined by Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Kuwari, President of the Arab Union for Camel Races (AUCR) and Vice-Chairman of the Local Organising Committee of the event, Dr Hazam bin Nasser al-Maqarihi, Secretary-General of AUCR; and Ahmed Mohammed al-Shaabi, President of the Qatar Handball Association (QHA).

The participating countries from five continents include: The United States, Australia, Colombia, Bulgaria, Morocco, Algeria, Oman, Djibouti, Palestine, Libya, Jordan, Mauritania, Lebanon, Iraq, Tunisia, Somalia and hosts Qatar. Members and representatives of the participating Arab and international federations were also present at the press conference.

The championship is set to be held on the sidelines of the Camel Festival for the Sword of His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar. The competition will take place at the iconic Libsear racetracks in Al Shahaniya, starting today.

Al-Shaabi, President of QHA, said: "It is a pleasure for us to be gathered here for this championship, which is a successful model of co-operation between the Qatar Handball Association and the Arab Union for Camel Races. I wish all participants success and welcome all attendees to their second country, Qatar."

Al-Kuwari, President of AUCR, said yesterday: "We welcome all guests to this distinguished event, which we are proud



to host in the State of Qatar. We thank Mr Ahmed al-Shaabi for his presence and continuous support. We welcome all the guests and thank everyone who contributed to this gathering, including sponsors and supporters. We hope the tournament will be as successful as possible."

Dr Hazam revealed the new trophy of the championship and lauded the 'the wonderful partnership between the QHA and the AUCR'. He said that the tournament will kick off at the Libsear racetracks and include qualifiers between the participating teams, which include members of the AUCR and teams from five continents.

He said that the tournament regulations have been made available on the official website of the AUCR.

The design of the new trophy was also revealed yesterday. The trophy has been specially designed for this edition to showcase the 'beautiful' traditional sport of camel racing. The design was admired by all attendees, who were shown it on the main screen for viewing. Commemorative

photos with guests were also snapped with the trophy.

The teams were divided into two categories, Group A and Group B. An initial qualifying match will be held between Morocco and Bulgaria, with the winner advancing to Group B to complete the 16-team structure, each group consisting of eight teams. The winner of the qualifiers (Morocco or Bulgaria) will face Tunisia in the Round of 16, while Djibouti will compete against Iraq and Australia will play against Libya.

Other Round of 16 matches will see encounters between the United States and Oman, Algeria and Mauritania, Somalia and Jordan, Lebanon and Qatar and Colombia and Palestine.

Winners from each match will advance to the quarter-finals, with pathways to the semi-finals and finals determined by the draw. All matches will follow a knockout format.

According to the competition schedule, the semi-finals will be held tomorrow while the final and prize distribution cer-

emony will be held on Sunday. "The AUCR invites all camel handball fans to attend the matches and cheer on their favourite teams. Accompanying entertainment events and comprehensive media coverage will be provided to ensure an enjoyable experience for all," the AUCR president said yesterday.

The AUCR is an Arab sports organisation working to develop camel sports in a professional manner that combines the spirit of heritage with modern tools. Its headquarters are located in the State of Kuwait, and the State of Qatar holds the presidency. This is part of a Gulf co-operation aimed at preserving cultural heritage and presenting it to the world in a modern sporting format.

The federation comprises 15 Arab countries and offers unique sporting initiatives, most notably camel handball, which represents a qualitative shift in transforming camels from a traditional symbol into a fundamental pillar of a modern and innovative sporting competition.

Camel racing enjoys a global fan base: AUCR

Doha: Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Kuwari, President of Arab Union for Camel Races (AUCR), yesterday said camel racing enjoys a global fan base with youngsters rapidly getting attracted to the traditional sport.

Qatar is set to host the 4th International Camel Handball Championship from Apr 11 to 13. A total of 17 teams will take part in the three-day event. "We hope that this edition will meet international standards and be enjoyed by everyone from a technical and organisational perspective," al-Kuwari said at a press conference yesterday.

He highlighted the significant interest from Qatar's expatriate community, driven by extensive media and social media coverage. Al-Kuwari promised an array of exciting surprises at the championship's conclusion on Sunday. He said Qatar is committed to upholding international standards in both the event's technical execution and organisational efficiency.

He also noted the increased dedication and professionalism of the participating teams, attributing this to the frequently held competitions and tournaments, which 'have enabled federations to meticulously select their top competitors'. "The early arrival of many federations in Doha, to utilise the Arab Federation's provided camels for training, further underscores this heightened level of preparation," al-Kuwari said.

"I invite fans to come to Libsear racetracks and enjoy the competitions," al-Kuwari said.

Dr Hazam bin Nasser al-Maqarihi, Secretary-General of the AUCR, yesterday highlighted camel racing's ability to facilitate the exchange of expertise and underscore the significance of heritage sports, particularly the deeply rooted tradition of camel racing. He said this sport represents a modern innovation by the AUCR aimed at the advancement of camel racing, noting their successful integration of handball principles into the sport's structure. Dr Hazam said this week's competition has attracted participation from all five continents.

Hadeef Mohammed Hamad al-Marri, Treasurer of the AUCR, yesterday expressed his satisfaction with the results of the draw for the Fourth International Camel Racing Championship, saying that it was 'balanced'. "I expect very strong competition in this edition, given the diversity of competitors and champions, and the presence of new teams. We hope for the best for all participants. Reaching the podium will not be an easy task at all."

PUREBRED ARABIAN CAMEL RACING FESTIVAL

Shanah and Nathriya spark Al Misnad's double glory

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Annual Purebred Arabian Camel Racing Festival, held under the patronage of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, witnessed fierce competition for the Silver Thanaya Icons and the Million riyal prizes at Al Shahaniyah Race-track. The event, organised by the Camel Racing Organising Committee, featured a total of 38 races for Thanaya camels (four-year-olds) – both female (Bakar) and male (Qadaan) – over a distance of 8km, spread across morning and afternoon sessions.

Six thrilling heats unfolded for the silver Thanaya symbols, continuing the excitement of this heritage sport. The action kicked off with the first main heat for Thanaya Bakr (females, open category), the most prestigious race of the day. The competition was fierce, worthy of the top prize and the coveted Shalfa (silver trophy).

It was "Shanah" who surged like an arrow in the final metres to snatch the lead and soar to victory. The win earned the prized Shalfa for her consistently outstanding owner Nasser Abdullah Ahmed al-Misnad – the master of major titles across tracks. He also clinched the top two symbols in the silver Thanaya category: the Open Bakr Shalfa with "Shanah," and then the third heat's Bakr Omaniya Shalfa with "Nathriya," completing a historic double for Al Misnad's stable.

"Shanah" dominated with a thrilling and steady performance, taking the win in a time of 12:07.94 minutes, ahead of many renowned names and leading stables.

The Thanaya Qadaan Open category



Connections of the winning camels pose with their trophies during the Purebred Arabian Camel Racing Festival at the Al Shahaniyah Racetrack yesterday.

featured a strong lineup of Gulf camels determined to take the title. Amid high drama, it was "Al Hisan", owned by Mohammed Atiq bin Zaytoun al-Muhairi, who seized control and led to the finish, winning the Silver Dagger and the QR1mn prize with a time of 12:28.34 minutes for the 8km race.

Al Misnad's banner shone again in the third main heat for Thanaya Bakr Omaniya, deploying multiple strong contenders early to secure the Shalfa. "Nathriya" claimed victory in 12:08.08 minutes, followed closely by fellow stablemate "Mayyada" in 12:08.13 minutes – confirming the sheer dominance of the Al Misnad name on this grand heritage evening.

Meanwhile, "Kafo" owned by Mohammed Sultan bin Markhan al-Ketbi won the Silver Dagger for Thanaya Qadaan Omaniya. He led the fourth main heat strongly with a winning time of 12:21.77 minutes – bringing

the dagger and QR1mn prize to the stable from the UAE.

The fifth and sixth heats (for production-bred camels) were intense battles among strong stables. "Mathayel," owned by Ahmed Matar Majed Tarish al-Khayyili, triumphed in the Thanaya Bakr Production main race with a time of 12:16.86 minutes.

The final heat's star was "Mulabbi," who responded to his owner Saeed Suhail Ali al-Bayhouni al-Dhaheri's call, dominating to win the Production Qadaan Dagger in 12:29.92 minutes.

Interestingly, the evening's fastest time didn't come from any of the six symbol heats. That honour went to "Al Wathba," owned by Mohammed Sultan Markhan al-Ketbi, who won the seventh Thanaya Bakr Open race in 12:06.78 minutes – faster than all the official title races.

With 745 camels participating, 22 heats were held in the Thanaya cat-

egory on Day 10 of the grand festival.

The morning races featured thrilling rivalries among stables from across the Gulf Co-operation Council, alongside top entries from Shahaniya.

"Al-Wasilah," owned by Salem Ahmed Mohammed Darei al-Falahi, opened the senior stage (8km distance) with a win in 12:18.88 minutes, securing the top prize of QR150,000 in the main Thanaya Bakr Production heat. "Abab," guided by Suhail Salem Mohammed Luteih al-Amri, won the Qadaan Production heat with an impressive run of 12:34.92 minutes and a prize of QR120,000.

Meanwhile, "Salam" won the Qatar-only Thanaya Bakr Production heat for owner Abdullah Nasser Hafiz al-Hafiz al-Marri with a time of 12:32.17 minutes. In the Qadaan division, "Marfouq," owned by Mohammed Nasser Shafi al-Qahtani, took the title in 12:39.08 minutes.

