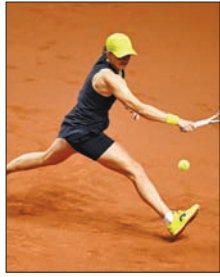


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Gymnastics  
World Cup kicks  
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Sublime Swiatek  
cruises into  
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FOOTBALL

PSG keep Champions  
League title bid alive,  
despite old ghosts  
reappearing

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FOOTBALL / CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# Arsenal too good for Real, Inter Milan edge Bayern

IN THE AWAY CLASH, BUKAYO SAKA AND GABRIEL MARTINELLI SCORED FOR ARSENAL

AFP  
Madrid

**A**rsenal staved off Champions League holders Real Madrid's superstars and rich history of unlikely comebacks to snatch a 2-1 victory yesterday and reach the semi-finals with a superb 5-1 aggregate triumph.

The Gunners' 3-0 quarter-final first leg triumph last week gave them a vital cushion in the Spanish capital as they made the final four for the first time since 2009, where they will face Paris Saint-Germain.

Bukayo Saka, who missed a first-half penalty, sent Arsenal ahead and although Vinicius Junior levelled the 15-time winners were never close to making up the deficit.

Gabriel Martinelli rubbed salt in their wounds with a stoppage-time winner for Arsenal, who have never lifted the Champions League trophy.

Los Blancos, far more brittle than when they won a Champions League and La Liga double last season, were convinced they could turn the game around but created too little against Arsenal's tight defence. The Premier League side held their nerve to reach the semi-finals for only the third time in their history.

Kylian Mbappe chested home in the opening stages but was clearly offside, with the forward gesturing to the crowd to turn up the volume to create the fabled aura which helps Madrid pull off near-impossible feats at the Santiago Bernabeu. David Alaba was booked for hacking down Saka as Madrid tried to add the grit they badly lacked in their first leg demolition in London, and the Arsenal winger also had a drive fielded well by Thibaut Courtois.

Arsenal were awarded a penalty seemingly out of the blue when the VAR booth instructed French referee Francois Letexier to review an incident from an earlier corner.

Raul Asencio pulled back Arsenal forward Mikel Merino in the area and Letexier pointed to the spot, to the bemusement of the home crowd. Saka stepped up to take it but his poorly-executed



Arsenal's English midfielder Bukayo Saka scores his team's first goal during the UEFA Champions League quarter-final second leg against Real Madrid at Santiago Bernabeu Stadium in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)

Paneka, skewing off to the left, was saved by Courtois.

**Inter hold off Bayern to reach Champions League last four**  
Inter Milan reached the semi-finals of the Champions League yesterday after drawing 2-2 with Bayern Munich to win a pulsating last-eight tie 4-3 on aggregate.

Italian champions Inter will face Barcelona in the semis after goals in the space of three minutes from captain Lautaro Martinez and Benjamin Pavard cancelled out a Harry Kane strike for Bayern which levelled the tie in the 52nd minute. Eric Dier's looping header in the 75th minute earned Bayern a draw on the night in soaking and blus-

tery Milan but that wasn't enough for Vincent Kompany's side to continue their bid to be crowned Kings of Europe for a seventh time. Simone Inzaghi's side came through in awful conditions at the San Siro where a combination of heavy rain and driving winds affected both teams' ability to play their best football, but added uncertainty and tension to an already highly-charged occasion.

Inter Milan's Benjamin Pavard scores their second goal in the Champions League quarter-final, second leg, against Bayern Munich at San Siro, Milan, yesterday. (Reuters)



SPOTLIGHT

## In-form Newcastle crush Crystal Palace to go third in Premier League

AFP  
Newcastle, United Kingdom

**N**ewcastle soared into third in the Premier League with a 5-0 thrashing of Crystal Palace to close in on a return to the Champions League next season.

Jacob Murphy, Harvey Barnes, Fabian Schar and Alexander Isak were on target for the Magpies, with Marc Guehi also scoring an own goal, as Newcastle made light of the absence of manager Eddie Howe due to pneumonia.

A sixth consecutive victory in all competitions opens up a five-point lead for Newcastle over sixth-placed Chelsea, with a place in the top five good enough for Champions League qualification.

Palace remain down in 12th with their season now fully focused on an FA Cup semi-final date with Aston Villa later this month.

Newcastle travel to Villa on Sat-

urday in a huge clash in the battle for European places.

But the League Cup winners are pulling away from the chasing pack for a top-five finish, buoyed by ending their 70-year wait for domestic silverware last month.

Isak wasted two big early chances to open the scoring when he was firstly denied by a fine Dean Henderson save and then headed over from Murphy's enticing cross.

Newcastle only had to wait until the 14th minute to open the scoring when Murphy blasted in a remarkable finish from a narrow angle.

Palace were gifted the chance to get back into the game when goalkeeper Nick Pope rushed off his line and wiped out Chris Richards in his attempt to punch the ball clear.

After a lengthy VAR check, a penalty was finally awarded.

However, Eberechi Eze's lackadaisical spot-kick was easily collected by the relieved Pope.

Within a minute, Newcastle had doubled their lead when Guehi turned into his own net as he attempted to block Barnes' cross towards Isak. The England defender has been regularly linked with a move to Tyneside and has now scored an own goal in each of Palace's two meetings with Newcastle this season.

It went from bad to worse for the visitors as Barnes continued his fine form with a composed finish for his fourth goal in three games.

Murphy's free-kick was then flicked in by Schar to make it 4-0 before the break.

The normally lethal Isak continued to be frustrated in front of goal as Henderson spread himself to deny another effort from point-blank range early in the second half.

However, the Swedish striker finally got his 25th goal of the season with a fine finish from outside the area just before the hour mark.



Crystal Palace's Adam Wharton in action with Newcastle United's Anthony Gordon and Joe Willock during their Premier League match against at St James' Park, Newcastle, Britain, yesterday. (Reuters)

FOCUS

# 17th Artistic Gymnastics WC kicks off

The 17th edition of the Artistic Gymnastics World Cup (Taishan) got underway yesterday in Doha and will continue through April 19, bringing together a world-class field of gymnasts from across the globe.

Among the most prominent delegations are those from Armenia, China, Kazakhstan, Chinese Taipei, and Great Britain, underscoring the event's international prestige and competitive significance. All athletes are aiming to deliver their best performances and secure top results.

The organising committee has allocated a total prize pool of \$50,000, with \$5,000 awarded for each of the 10 apparatus events – six for men and four for women. Prizes will be distributed to the top eight finishers in each event. The tournament features 95 male and 55 female gymnasts, with 35 international judges overseeing the competition.

As expected, the championship began with a high level of intensity. The qualification rounds, spread over two days, started yesterday with events on five apparatus: three for men – floor exercise (16 gymnasts), pommel horse (21 gymnasts), and still rings (13 gymnasts) – and two for women – vault and uneven bars, each with 12 gymnasts competing.

Today, the qualifications will continue with the remaining five apparatus: the men will compete on vault, parallel bars, and horizontal bar, while the women will



Gymnasts during qualifying on day one of the 17th edition of the Artistic Gymnastics World Cup which got underway in Doha yesterday.



contest balance beam and floor exercise. Eight gymnasts from each apparatus will advance to the finals, which are scheduled for April 18 and 19.

The championship features a notable lineup of athletes. Among them is Karbanov of Armenia, the silver medallist on pommel horse at the Paris Olympics. Kazakhstan's Kabanov, runner-up in the Olympic vault event, is also competing.

Tong Hong from Chinese Taipei, who won bronze on the horizontal bar in Paris, and Ashaw Yaqian of China, silver medallist on balance beam, are among the contenders. Jordanian gymnast Ahmad

Abu al-Saud is also competing on the pommel horse, adding to the strong international presence.

Andrew Tumbas, Chair of the FIG Men's Technical Committee, praised the exceptional organisation of the tournament. Speaking to the media during the opening day, he remarked that Qatar once again demonstrates its expertise in hosting top-tier international events.

He commended the quality of the competition hall, training facilities, accommodation, and logistical arrangements, saying everything was at the highest level. Tumbas noted that the competition had started with great in-

tensity, as athletes gave their all in pursuit of Olympic qualification, and he expects the level to rise even further in the finals.

Donatella Sacchi, Chair of the FIG Women's Technical Committee, echoed that sentiment. She expressed her admiration for the high standard of organisation and attention to detail, highlighting the professional environment Qatar has created for the event. She was especially impressed by the enthusiastic crowd, which she said added a special energy to the championship and reflected the growing popularity of gymnastics in the region.

Sacchi also praised the state-

of-the-art venues and support services for athletes, describing Qatar as a model for international sports event hosting. She added that the level of preparation and optimal competition environment would allow the world's best female gymnasts to deliver standout performances.

Nasser al-Hamad, Technical Director of the championship, confirmed that competition has been fierce since the opening day. He said the event brings together Olympic medallists from Paris 2024, previous World Cup champions, and emerging talents who have captured attention with their performances.

Al-Hamad highlighted the balance between established stars and rising names, describing it as a positive sign of the sport's development.

He expressed pride in the championship's technical excellence and said the organising team aims for this edition to be recognised as one of the most successful in the World Cup series.

With a packed field of high-profile athletes, he concluded, Doha has firmly established itself as a key destination on the international gymnastics circuit, and he hopes the city will continue to be the preferred venue for the world's best gymnasts.

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

# Starc sparkles as Dehli win Super Over thriller

RAJASTHAN SLUMP TO THEIR FIFTH LOSS IN SEVEN MATCHES

AFP  
New Delhi

Delhi Capitals edged out Rajasthan Royals in IPL's first Super Over of the season after pace bowler Mitchell Starc defended nine off the last over to end the match tied yesterday.

Left-arm quick Starc kept Rajasthan down to 188-4 in response to Delhi's 188-5 and then returned to bowl another disciplined over at the Feroz Shah Kotla ground.

Rajasthan managed just 11 runs from their Super Over after Shimron Hetmyer and Riyan Parag hit a boundary each but both got run out on ball four and five and the innings ended with those two wickets.

Needing 12 to win, KL Rahul started with a double and then hit a boundary before Tristan Stubbs finished off with a six on the fourth ball from Sandeep Sharma.

Delhi, led by Axar Patel, got back to winning ways and returned to take top spot in the 10-team table with five victories and just one defeat on six matches.

Rajasthan, who have been chasing the IPL title since their inaugural triumph in 2008 under late Australian hero Shane Warne, slumped to their fifth loss in seven matches.

Opener Yashasvi Jaiswal and Nitish Rana hit 51 each to set up Rajasthan's chase of 189, but wickets at regular intervals kept Delhi in the hunt.

Australia's Starc dismissed Rana in the 18th over before Dhruv Jurel hit back in his 26 and the left-handed Hetmyer made 15 not out.

Starc's 20th over was on target as it was just singles and twos in the six balls and with two needed to win on the last delivery Jurel was run out while attempting a second run and the teams prepared for one-over eliminator.

Earlier Rajasthan raced to 50 in five overs



Delhi Capitals' Mitchell Starc and Mohit Sharma celebrate with teammates after running out Rajasthan Royals' Yashasvi Jaiswal during their IPL match in New Delhi yesterday. (Reuters)

with Jaiswal on fire and skipper Sanju Samson switched gears but retired hurt after his 19-ball 31 as he felt some pain in his ribs.

Left-handed Jaiswal raised his third fifty of the season before being dismissed by left-arm wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav but Rana kept up the batting surge.

Rana survived a reprieve on 20 when Stubbs dropped the batter on the ropes for the ball to go for six and the batter made the most of it but the batting effort was not enough.

Delhi rode on Abhishek Porel's 49 and 34 each from Patel and Stubbs.

In-form Rahul made 38 and put on 63 runs with the left-handed Porel.

Later Axar put on 41 runs off 19 balls with South African Stubbs as the two hit the ball to all parts of the ground much to the delight of the home crowd as Delhi managed 77 runs from the last five overs.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**Delhi Capitals 188 for 5** (Porel 49, Rahul 38, Stubbs 34\*, Archer 2-32) **tied with Rajasthan Royals 188 for 4** (Jaiswal 51, Rana 51, Axar 1-23, Starc 1-36) **DC won Super Over**

COMMENT

## 'Magician' Chahal casts spell with IPL heroics



AFP  
New Delhi

Veteran spinner Yuzvendra Chahal has been out of the Indian national team for two years but is toast of the cricketing world after a stellar IPL show for Punjab Kings.

The 34-year-old returned an IPL best of 4-28 Tuesday as Punjab defended the tournament's lowest-ever total of 111 to beat Kolkata Knight Riders by 16 runs in a thriller.

Chahal – IPL's leading bowler with 211 wickets in 166 matches – was bought for a whopping \$2.13mn by Punjab in the November auction but had ordinary outings this season prior to the match-winning spell.

After Punjab were bowled out for 111 in 15.3 overs at Mullanpur, Chahal came into his own to rattle Kolkata who were cruising at 62-2 in their chase.

"In the last game I conceded 56 for four overs, but I had full confidence and backed myself and my abilities," Chahal said after being named player of the match.

"I always have the mindset of how to get the batters out, I varied my pace and if they have to hit, they will have to make an effort." Chahal struck with two key

wickets including opposition skipper Ajinkya Rahane, trapped lbw for 17 with a googly that outfoxed the Indian batsman.

Chahal struck again with two in two balls, with the visitors bowled out for 95 in 15.1 overs.

"Terrific stuff. He bowled beautifully," former New Zealand pacer Simon Doull said on Indian website Cricbuzz.

"He is just a clever, clever bowler. He is too good a bowler to go for that many games without some performance that turns a game for you and he has done it tonight."

Chahal was once a white-ball stalwart for India and his partnership with left-arm wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav helped the national team to many victories.

He slowly fell out of favour and played his last international against West Indies in August 2023, though he has since played a spell in county cricket.

Chahal and spin partner Rob Keogh took 17 wickets between them for Northamptonshire in their first win of the season against Derbyshire at home.

"We call him magician. He has got a bag of tricks," Keogh said.

The diminutive Chahal has played 72 ODI and 80 T20 matches for India and claimed 217 wickets in the two formats since his 2016 debut.

SPOTLIGHT

## Qatar Cup trophy visits Al Abdulghani Motors

As the Official Automotive Partner of the Qatar Stars League, Al Abdulghani Motors welcomed the Qatar Cup trophy to its Toyota showroom at the company's headquarters in Al Abdulghani Tower. The visit is part of the official trophy tour across the country.

A Toyota Land Cruiser, provided by Al Abdulghani Motors, served as the official vehicle transporting the trophy during the tour – reinforcing the company's long-standing support for

Qatari football. Since its launch in 1972, the Qatar Cup has remained one of the nation's most prestigious tournaments, drawing fans of all ages and nationalities.

Al Abdulghani Motors is proud to continue its partnership with Qatar Stars League and remains committed to promoting local sports, encouraging healthy lifestyles, and strengthening community engagement through football.

The visit was attended by senior management and staff, who gathered

to celebrate this special occasion. Al Abdulghani Motors a national company in Qatar founded in 1958 and operates in the Automotive industry as the official distributor for Toyota and Lexus in Qatar since 1964.

Driven by a mission to be the best in town mobility company, Al Abdulghani Motors provides various mobility services and products, including car rentals, pre-owned car sales, heavy equipment sales, car service centres, and other mobility services.



SPOTLIGHT

# Shell supports Qatari heritage at the spectacular camel race finale

The 2025 Qatar Camel Festival season concluded with a spectacular finale at the Al Shahaniya Camel Racetrack, showcasing the vibrant heritage and culture of Qatar. Shell, a sponsor of the event for many years, praised the successful execution of the festival and reaffirmed its commitment to supporting this culturally significant sport.

Rob Maxwell, Managing Director of Qatar Shell, shared his excitement: "His Highness the Amir's main race was truly an exciting and exceptional event. The dedication and expertise of the

Camel Racing Organising Committee ensured a thrilling and memorable festival. Shell is honoured to be part of this tradition that celebrates the richness of Qatari culture."

Shell's involvement in HH The Amir's Main Race is part of its broader commitment to social initiatives in Qatar. The company actively participates in various programmes aimed at preserving and promoting the nation's traditions and culture, such as falconry, and in supporting Qatar's education system through its Tafawoq, NXplorers and Shell Intilaaqah initiatives.

Abdullah al-Kuwari, Deputy President of the Camel Racing Organising Committee said, "The success of this year's Camel Race season is a testament to the dedication and passion of everyone involved. We are grateful for Shell's continued support in preserving and promoting our rich cultural heritage."

The highlight of the season, HH The Amir's Main Race took place on April 15, with the winner receiving HH The Amir's Sword. The event drew significant attention and participation, further cementing its status as the most prestigious race of the year.



TENNIS

# Swiatek cruises into Stuttgart quarter-final

The World No 2 from Poland has twice won in Stuttgart, in 2022 and 2023

AFP  
Berlin

World number two Iga Swiatek won 6-2, 6-2 against Croatian qualifier Jana Fett in the last 16 of the WTA event in Stuttgart yesterday. Swiatek broke her 153rd-ranked opponent twice in the first set and three times in the second.

The victory marked a return to winning ways for five-time Grand Slam winner Swiatek as she bounced back from a surprise defeat to Alexandra Eala in the quarter-finals of the Miami Open in March. "You need a lot of inner energy and a lot of motivation to get out every week and play as good as you can," Swiatek said. "It's not only about technique and tennis. It's about mentality and the feelings you have inside."

The Pole has twice won in Stuttgart, in 2022 and 2023. A third Stuttgart crown would be Swiatek's first tournament victory in 2025. Rising star Mirra Andreeva booked her spot in the round of 16 earlier on Wednesday as she progressed when her elder sister Erika retired while trailing 6-2, 1-0. The 17-year-old Russian will take on Ekaterina Alexandrova for a spot in the quarters.

World number one Aryna Sabalenka is already assured of a spot in the last eight despite not yet taking to the court in Stuttgart. Sabalenka received a first-round bye before her scheduled last-16 opponent Anastasia Potapova announced her retirement from the tournament due to injury on social media. The Belarusian has never won the title in Stuttgart, but finished runner-up three times between 2021 and 2023 - twice losing the final to Swiatek.

American world number three Jessica Pegula and countrywoman Coco Gauff, ranked fourth in the world, will be in action in the last 16 today.

## ZVEREV JOINS SHELTON IN MUNICH ATP QUARTERS

German world number three Alexander Zverev is through to the quarter-finals of the ATP event in Munich after cruising to a straight-sets win over Daniel Altmaier.



Poland's Iga Swiatek in action during her round of 16 match against Croatia's Jana Fett in Stuttgart. (Reuters)

Zverev, the top seed at a tournament he won in 2017 and 2018, won 6-3, 6-2 to reach his 99th quarter-final on the ATP tour.

"He makes it complicated. He has beaten lots of top players before. He's beaten (Jan-nik) Sinner, he's beaten me before, so he knows how to make it complicated," said Zverev. "I'm extremely happy with the win and looking forward to the next match."

Zverev has not made it past the quarters on the Munich clay since last winning the tournament seven years ago. He has also struggled for form since losing the Australian Open final in January. In six tournaments since losing to Sinner at Melbourne Park, Zverev has been unable to get past the quarter-finals.

A defeat to Matteo Berrettini in his first match at the Monte Carlo Masters last week cost Zverev a shot at the world number one ranking held by Sinner. Zverev then dropped down from second after Carlos Alcaraz won

the title in the principality. The 27-year-old Zverev will face either fellow German Yannick Hanfmann or Tallon Griekspoor, of the Netherlands, for a place in the semi-finals in Munich.

Zverev joined world number 15 Ben Shelton in the last eight. Shelton beat Botić van de Zandschulp 7-6 (7/1), 6-3 earlier. Shelton, seeded second, was broken in the opening set by Van de Zandschulp, in the tournament as a lucky loser. The American fought back with a break of his own before a dominant showing in the tie-break.

The 22-year-old continued his dominance in the second set, winning the match against his 89th-ranked opponent in one hour and 28 minutes.

"I couldn't be happier," Shelton told the crowd. "I love playing in Germany and especially in Munich... there's still a lot to do." Shelton will face Italian Luciano Darderi in the quarter-finals.

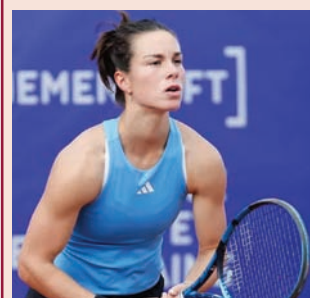
## RUNE, FILS REACH BARCELONA OPEN LAST EIGHT

Holger Rune battled back from a set down to beat Sebastian Baez 4-6, 6-1, 6-2 to reach the Barcelona Open quarter-finals. The world number 13 pulled out of Monte Carlo with food poisoning last week but roared back to defeat his Argentine opponent in three sets on the clay after a troubled opening.

Baez broke in the first game, consolidating for a 2-0 advantage and served it out to claim the first set, with Rune committing 15 unforced errors to 10 winners. However, the Dane broke three times in the second set to get back on track and did the same again in the decider, converting his third match point.

Earlier, Frenchman Arthur Fils breezed past Spain's Pedro Martinez in straight sets 6-3, 6-2. Ranked 14th in the world, Fils conceded just one break point in the match, which the 20-year-old saved.

## Boisson serves up humour in response to Dart's odour complaint



Paris: French tennis player Lois Boisson fired back with humour after Britain's Harriet Dart complained on court about her body odour, posting a photoshopped snap of herself mid-serve clutching a deodorant can and tagging Dove for a "much-needed collab."

Dart has since apologised for blurting out that her opponent "smells really bad" during her heavy defeat at the Rouen Open on Tuesday. Dart, who lost 6-0 6-3, was captured on the broadcast asking the umpire to tell Boisson to use deodorant, during a second-set changeover.

"Can you ask her to put on deodorant? She smells really bad," Dart was heard saying to the official as she struggled against the 21-year-old Frenchwoman in the first round. The comment sparked an immediate backlash on social media, prompting Dart to address the incident on Instagram.

"It was a comment made in the heat of the moment and I truly regret it. It's not the way I want to behave and I take full responsibility," Dart wrote. "I have a lot of respect for Lois and the way she competed today. I'll learn from this and move on."

Meanwhile, Australian fire-brand tennis star Nick Kyrgios, no stranger to controversy himself, weighed in saying: "Nah saying this when you are down and getting snipped is wild".

Boisson, who was already out on court while Dart was still seated, appeared to be out of earshot when the Briton made her remark. The victory marked a stunning upset for the 303rd-ranked Boisson, making her first WTA Tour appearance of the season following injury, against the 62nd-ranked Dart.

FORMULA ONE

# Troubled Red Bull search for path back to fast lane

AFP  
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Ailing Red Bull arrive on the Red Sea for this weekend's Saudi Arabian Grand Prix in Jeddah desperate to prevent their 2025 season sinking into mediocrity. The Austrian Formula One giants left Bahrain on Sunday in sombre mood, their limitations laid bare under the harsh floodlights in the desert of Sakhr. Here AFP Sport assesses the issues that threaten to derail Max Verstappen's quest for a fifth successive world title:

## THE STATE OF PLAY

Verstappen slipped to third in the drivers' standings, eight points behind McLaren's leader Lando Norris, after trailing in sixth, over half a minute behind Norris's teammate Oscar Piastri, in Bahrain. He has accounted for all but two of the team's tally in the constructors' championship where they are lagging a massive 80 points behind runaway leaders McLaren after just four races.

## CRISIS TALKS

As McLaren celebrated their third win from four in Sakhr, Red Bull convened a 'crisis' meeting involving their top brass. Team principal Christian Horner, influential adviser Helmut Marko, technical director Pierre Wache, and chief engineer Paul Monaghan met to mull over the team's plight.

Horner, in a post-race media encounter in Red Bull's hospitality tent, had offered



Max Verstappen slipped to third in the drivers' standings, eight points behind McLaren's leader Lando Norris, after trailing in sixth, over half a minute behind Norris's teammate Oscar Piastri, in Bahrain.

a blunt appraisal of where they were at. "This race has exposed some pitfalls that are obviously very clear that we need to get on top of very quickly. "Ultimately you can mask it a little through set-up and we were able to achieve that last weekend in Suzuka. We understand where the issues are, it's introducing the solutions that ob-

viously takes a little more time," he said. Verstappen, who was plumb last at one stage at the Bahrain Grand Prix, lamented that "basically everything went wrong". "It's of course not what we want, but it's just where we are at with our car and the tyre behaviour that we have with the car. "Everything is just highlighted

even more on a track like this," added the Dutchman.

## ONE-MAN BAND

Red Bull would be in even worse shape if it wasn't for Verstappen's combative brilliance in cajoling a problematic car to fight with quicker rivals like McLaren and Mercedes. His win in Japan in the first leg of this month's triple header was only down to arguably his greatest ever qualifying performance.

The machine's idiosyncracies proved too tough a riddle to solve for the unfortunate Liam Lawson, who was unceremoniously dropped to their sister team RB after just two races. The Kiwi's successor Yuki Tsunoda finished out of the points in Suzuka before adding two from ninth place in Sakhr. Without an effective 'wingman' to help him in races Verstappen is left to do it all on his own.

## EXODUS OF TALENT

It can surely be no coincidence that Red Bull's malaise comes after some of their brightest brains have jumped ship.

The team were shocked when legendary design guru Adrian Newey, at the heart of developing cars that won seven drivers' and six constructors' championships, quit to join Aston Martin. Another huge loss was the departure of sporting director Jonathan Wheatley, who took up his new role as Sauber team principal this month.

Red Bull's head of race strategy Will Courtenay also left, for McLaren, where former chief designer Rob Marshall had moved to in 2023.

## MAX'S FUTURE?

Verstappen, who has been with the Red Bull family since 2015, has a deal running until 2028. In Mexico last October he said it was "definitely" his intention to see out his time at Red Bull, despite the tension surrounding Horner last season after he was accused of inappropriate conduct towards a woman colleague.

Horner was cleared of any wrongdoing ahead of the 2024 season-opener but the off-track scandal rumbled on for weeks. Yet on Monday, Marko dropped a bombshell, telling Sky Germany he has "great concern" that unless Red Bull up their game, Verstappen could up sticks.

"The concern is great. Improvements have to come in the near future so that he has a car with which he can win again," Marko warned. "We have to create a basis with a car so that he can fight for the world championship."

## WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP DRIVER'S STANDINGS

- Lando Norris (GBR) 77 pts, 2. Oscar Piastri (AUS) 74, 3. Max Verstappen (NED) 69, 4. George Russell (GBR) 63, 5. Charles Leclerc (MON) 32, 6. Kimi Antonelli (ITA) 30, 7. Lewis Hamilton (GBR) 25, 8. Alexander Albon (THA) 18, 9. Esteban Ocon (FRA) 14, 10. Lance Stroll (CAN) 10, 11. Pierre Gasly (FRA) 6, 12. Nico Hulkenberg (GER) 6, 13. Oliver Bearman (GBR) 6, 14. Yuki Tsunoda (JPN) 5, 15. Isack Hadjar (FRA) 4, 16. Carlos Sainz (ESP) 1, 17. Fernando Alonso (ESP) 0, 18. Jack Doohan (AUS) 0, 19. Liam Lawson (NZL) 0, 20. Gabriel Bortoletto (BRA) 0

## Qatar's Cherif and Ahmed clinch gold at AVC Beach Tour

Qatar's top beach volleyball duo Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan reaffirmed their continental dominance with a flawless run to the gold medal at the Asian Volleyball Confederation (AVC) Beach Tour 24th Samila Open in Thailand. In the final, the 2020 Olympic bronze medallists showcased their class with a commanding 2-0 (21-18, 21-16) victory over New Zealand's Bradley Fuller and Ben O'Dea.

The Qatari pair were in sublime form throughout the tournament, winning every match in straight sets. They topped Group 2 in the group stage with a perfect record, collecting six points from three wins – including emphatic victories over opponents from Hong Kong (21-8, 21-6), Kazakhstan (26-24, 21-11), and Iran (21-13, 21-9).

Their momentum continued into the knockout stages. In the round of 16, Cherif and Ahmed comfortably dispatched Indonesia 21-15, 21-14, before going on to defeat Australia and Iran in the quarter-finals and semi-finals, respectively, both in straight sets.



## CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# PSG keep title bid alive, despite old ghosts reappearing

'We need to cut out these little errors for the semi-finals'

AFP  
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain's bid to win a first Champions League crown remains on course but the French giants only just survived a bumpy ride against Aston Villa on Tuesday as old ghosts almost came back to haunt them.

Luis Enrique's side have won plaudits for the thrilling way they have played in recent months and went into the second leg of their quarter-final on a run of one defeat in 30 matches. That single loss came at home to Liverpool in the first leg of the last 16 and was overturned a week later at Anfield, before they beat Villa 3-1 at the Parc des Princes with an outstanding performance.

So when they found themselves 2-0 up before the half-hour mark in Birmingham on Tuesday, breakaway goals by full-backs Achraf Hakimi and Nuno Mendes putting them 5-1 ahead on aggregate, the tie seemed over with PSG cruising towards the last four.

Then they switched off, allowing their Premier League opponents to pull one back before half-time and then score two goals in three minutes early in the second half through John McGinn and Ezri Konsa.

With the visitors rocking, Villa needed only one more goal to force extra time, and they might have got it but for some big saves from PSG goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma and a crucial late block by William Pacho. "I think the intensity levels dropped when it got to 2-0. We need to cut out these little errors for the semi-finals because you can pay a heavy price," captain Marquinhos told said.

The Brazilian knows that better than anyone. At 30, he is the elder statesman of the youngest team left in this season's Champions League, and he has plenty of unhappy memories in the competition with the club he joined in 2013.

None could be more traumatic than the 6-1 defeat in Barcelona in 2017, which came after PSG had won 4-0 at home – Barca went into the 88th minute needing to score three goals, and did so as PSG collapsed.

The Paris coach that night was Unai Emery, with Luis Enrique on the Barcelona bench. Fast forward eight years and the two men were



Paris St Germain's Vitorinha, Joao Neves and Fabian Ruiz celebrate after their win as Aston Villa players look dejected after Champions League quarter-final in Birmingham. (Reuters)

facing off again, with the latter now in charge of PSG. "You can never be over-confident, because a football match can change in an instant," Luis Enrique acknowledged after Tuesday's game.

Whether it has been complacency or just nerves, PSG have had other disastrous collapses in Europe, including against Manchester United in 2019 and Real Madrid in 2022. The difference this time is that they held on to go through, and can now look forward to a semi-final against either Real Madrid or Arsenal.

"We can savour this because it is always difficult to get through to the Champions League semi-finals. It is the second consecutive year and we are very happy," added Luis Enrique. A year ago, PSG lost to Borussia Dortmund in the semis. Kylian Mbappe has since departed, but Luis Enrique has succeeded in making the Qatar-backed side stronger without him, Tuesday's second half notwithstanding. "There were lots of doubts about the team but I think the team is even better than last year and we

will fight for every trophy right to the end," said the coach.

This is PSG's fourth Champions League semi-final in six seasons, the only two years in which they failed to get to the last four in that time coming in 2022 and 2023. Those were the years in which they had Lionel Messi alongside Neymar and Mbappe in attack. The superstar approach did not deliver the success they hoped for, and the current side is undoubtedly more impressive.

They have not lost a domestic game since last May, have already clinched the Ligue 1 title and are through to the French Cup final. However, PSG are still not finding it easy to make the step up in continental competitions. Tuesday's defeat was their fifth in 14 Champions League matches this season, and their 10th loss in 26 games in Europe since the beginning of the last campaign. Villa are the fourth Premier League team to beat PSG after Newcastle United, Arsenal and Liverpool. And Arsenal could be up again next.

## HORSE RACING

# Safeer Al Shahania storms to victory

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Safeer Al Shahania stormed to victory in the feature race of the day, claiming the Athbah Cup in style at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

The four-year-old colt, representing Al Ghazali Stud and trained by Jassim Ghazali, produced an electrifying burst in the final stretch, pulling away under Marco Casamento to win by a decisive two lengths.

Earlier in the card at the 20th Al Uqda Race Meeting – Athbah Cup (Division 2), Khalil Du Croate put up a commanding display in the 2,300m Purebred Arabian Handicap 70-90 (Class 3), edging out Sakher by three-quarters of a length. The Julian Colin Smart-trained runner was ridden by jockey Alberto Sanna.

Trainer Hamad al-Jehani also made his mark on the meeting, celebrating a double. Ajaan, with Lukas Delozier aboard, captured the Purebred Arabian Novice Plate, while Muhab Al Uraiq triumphed in the Local Thoroughbred Maiden

Plate (Class 6), guided confidently by Pierre Charles Boudot.

The day began with a close finish in the opening race, where Monapia, ridden by Szczepan Mazur, claimed short head win in the Thoroughbred Handicap 60-80 (Class 4).

**20th Al Uqda Race Meeting - Athbah Cup (Div 2)**  
**WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)**

- 1 - Athbah Cup - Purebred Arabian Premium Maiden (Class 6) Safeer Al Shahania, Jassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento
- 2 - Purebred Arabian Handicap 70-90 (Class 3) Khalil Du Croate, Julian Colin Smart, Alberto Sanna
- 3 - Purebred Arabian Novice Plate (4yo Only) (Class 5) Ajaan, Hamad al-Jehani, Lukas Delozier
- 4 - Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate (Class 6) (3yo Only) Muhab Al Uraiq, Hamad al-Jehani, Pierre Charles Boudot
- 5 - Thoroughbred Handicap 60-80 (Class 4) Monapia, Zuhair Mohsen, Szczepan Mazur



Marco Casamento rides Safeer Al Shahania to Athbah Cup win at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. PICTURE: Juhaim

## Barcelona suffer morale blow in Dortmund amid quadruple hunt

**Barcelona:** Barcelona reached the Champions League semi-finals for the first time since 2019 but Tuesday's defeat by Borussia Dortmund gave the Catalans cause for concern. Hansi Flick's side lost their unbeaten start to 2025, falling at the 25th hurdle, and were given a scare in the 3-1 defeat by Dortmund, progressing 5-3 on aggregate after their emphatic first-leg rout.

Barca have been the competition's most entertaining side and for the first time in years are serious contenders to lift the trophy, but their undoing in Germany sapped at their confidence. "There was not a great atmosphere in the dressing room... it was only when I told them, 'Lads, we're in the semi-finals,' that it lifted a bit," said Flick. Barcelona started well this season before a dismal slump towards the end of 2024 when they lost momentum and belief, before recovering after the winter break.

As quickly as things changed for the better, they can change again for worse, particularly given Barcelona's hectic schedule as they battle for a potential quadruple. "It will be important to analyse this game, but we've accumulated a lot of matches, and it could be normal (to have a dip)," said Flick.

The visit to Dortmund was their seventh game in a 20-day spell and unfortunately for Flick, this match showed the coach he cannot afford to rest key players. The German benched midfielder maestro Pedri Gonzalez and Barcelona suffered for it, unable to control the game, pushed back by the hosts.

Inigo Martinez was also rested, with Ronald Araujo stepping in, and the Uruguayan had an uncomfortable night, still not finding his footing under Flick after injury. Gerard Martin is limited at left-back but must play in the next few weeks with Alejandro Balde injured and unlikely to return by the time Barca face Real Madrid in the Copa del Rey final on April 26. "We were not up to it today, we made mistakes, switched off... Flick told us we had to improve at half-time," admitted defender Jules Kounde.

Serhou Guirassy could have netted a treble in the first leg but fluffed his lines, so Barcelona can't say they weren't warned this time. The Guinean striker's three goals gave Barcelona flashbacks to their dark recent history in the Champions League, with the 4-0 defeat at Anfield by Liverpool, and capitulation against Roma coming to mind.

After Guirassy's brace, Ramy Bensebaini's 54th minute own-goal helped ease Barcelona concerns before the forward bagged his third to set up a tense finale.

Despite the defeat, Flick tried his best to see the positives ahead of Barcelona's La Liga clash with Celta Vigo on Saturday. "Today we didn't show what we want, we will analyse that - but we have improved this season," said the coach. "We are still in three competitions. We are in the Champions League semi-finals. This is a huge success and something we should be very happy about."

Barca hold a four-point lead on Real Madrid in La Liga but still have to face the second-placed champions on May 11.

## EUROPA LEAGUE

# Onana to return in goal for Man United against Lyon: Amorim



Manchester United's Andre Onana during training. (Reuters)

AFP  
London

Andre Onana will be recalled for Manchester United's season-defining Europa League quarter-final second leg against Lyon after his costly goalkeeping errors in the first leg, manager Ruben Amorim confirmed.

The 29-year-old Cameroonian international, who was to blame for the two goals that United conceded in last week's 2-2 draw in France, was axed for Sunday's 4-1 defeat at Newcastle. Back-up goalkeeper Altay Bayindir played at St James' Park but Amorim told his pre-match press conference that Onana would be back in

goal on Thursday, saying he was confident he would be "really good".

"Onana, he will play tomorrow," Amorim said at his pre-match press conference. "As a coach, and also as a former player, I try to do things that can help a player in this situation," added the United boss. "Sometimes we talk about managing players physically. We have to manage them also mentally but then they have to return to competition, and Onana is ready. He had one weekend that I felt it was better for him to not play, and a good thing for Altay to play. This week, my thinking was to put Onana to play."

Amorim was pressed on whether United would need to sign a new goalkeeper in the summer transfer window after an inconsistent season from his number one. "My answer is that

we need to improve every position on the field," he said. "Goalkeeper is the same, we can work with Andre. If our team scores more goals and is more dangerous on the forwards and the strikers, we will defend better. Andre Onana already proved that he is a top player at Inter (Milan)."

Former United captain Harry Maguire also defended Onana, saying he had proved during his career that he is an "excellent goalkeeper". "He's going to be there tomorrow night," he told reporters. "He is a big personality, a big character and he will be looking forward to the game. He will want to show everyone again what he is about. Playing in front of Andre, it's great. I have confidence in Andre, he has had a fantastic career. He has got great experience and we all know he is an excellent goalkeeper."