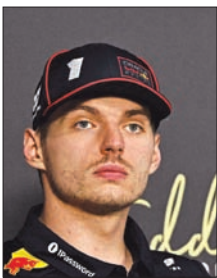


To subscribe  
**GULF TIMES**  
Newspaper  
Please call  
**444 666 35**



SPOTLIGHT | Page 2

Stars shine  
at Artistic  
Gymnastics  
World Cup



FORMULA 1 | Page 3

Verstappen  
dismisses  
Red Bull  
exit fears

To advertise here,  
PLEASE CALL  
**444 666 21**

Friday, April 18, 2025  
Shawwal 20, 1446 AH

GULF

TIMES

SPORT



CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Arteta's Arsenal  
come of age with  
thrashing of  
Real Madrid

Page 4

FOOTBALL

# Al Sadd target title, Al Duhail hold out hope in QSL finale

A victory against Al Ahli today will ensure Al Sadd defend their title



Al Sadd players train on the eve of their Qatar Stars League match against Al Ahli.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Defending champions Al Sadd are on the brink of securing back-to-back Qatar Stars League titles as they prepare to face Al Ahli in a decisive last round fixture today. The match kicks off at 6:30pm at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium. Sadd currently lead the table with 49 points, holding a narrow two-point advantage over second-placed Al Duhail. A victory against Al Ahli will seal the league title for Felix Sanchez's men, irrespective of the outcome of Duhail's simultaneous clash with Al Khor. Al Sadd, unbeaten in recent weeks, know that destiny is firmly in their hands. Head coach Felix Sanchez emphasised the importance of the mo-

ment in a press conference yesterday. "This match is like a final for us. The situation is still in our hands and that is positive, but we are fully aware that the match will be difficult," the former Qatar coach said. "Al Ahli have had a distinguished season and are among the top four. They'll want to finish strongly, but we must stay focused on ourselves. Winning the league title is very important – it's the result of consistency over 22 rounds," the Spaniard added. Midfielder Paulo Otavio echoed the coach's sentiments: "Everyone has worked hard for this game. We've had our ups and downs, but our focus never wavered. We're ready for the challenge." The first-leg encounter between the two sides had ended in a thrilling 2-2 draw. Meanwhile, Ahli, already guaranteed a fourth-place finish with

35 points, have qualified for the next season's Qatar Cup. With nothing to lose and a strong season under their belt, they'll be keen to play spoilers in Sadd's title quest. Meanwhile, Duhail travel to Al Khor Stadium knowing their title hopes hinge not only on victory but on an Al Sadd stumble. Christophe Galtier's side, on 47 points, must beat already-relegated Al Khor and hope Sadd are held or defeated. "Our last win gave us a morale boost," Galtier said. "We know it's not entirely in our hands, but football is full of surprises. If we win and Al Sadd lose, we're champions." Al Khor, relegated after a 0-3 loss to Sadd last week, sit bottom of the table with 13 points. Despite improved performances under coach Salam Shaker, including back-to-back wins before



Sadd coach Felix Sanchez and his Duhail counterpart Christophe Galtier (below) address the media yesterday.



their relegation was confirmed, their fate is sealed. Al Duhail midfielder Ahmed Abdelmaqsoud added: "It's a mistake to underestimate Al Khor. This is not an easy match, and we can't be distracted by other games. Regardless of how the title race ends, we've had a strong season across all competitions." Al Khor had defeated Al Duhail 2-1 in the reverse fixture earlier this season.

**TODAY'S FIXTURES**  
**All matches kick off at 6:30pm:**  
Al Sadd vs Al Ahli (Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium); Al Khor vs Al Duhail (Al Khor Stadium); Al Rayyan vs Qatar SC (Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium); Al Gharafa vs Al Shahania (Thani Bin Jassim Stadium) Al Shamal vs Al Wakrah (Al Bayt Stadium); Umm Salal vs Al Arabi (Grand Hamad Stadium)

HORSE RACING

## Terrific Talg'at Al Shahania wins Al Jumail Cup

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Talg'at Al Shahania captured the Al Jumail Cup with a breath-taking late run in the feature Local Purebred Arabian Graduation Plate at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. Guided by Lukas Delozier, the six-year-old mare, owned by HE Sheikha Reem bint Mohammed bin Khalifa al-Thani, swept through the field from the back once in the home straight and surged ahead to score impressively by three quarters of a length for trainer Rudy Nerbonne. Earlier, Julian Colin Smart-trained Ends Of The Earth claimed victory in the taking the penultimate race on the card, Thoroughbred Handicap 85-110 (Class 2) with Alberto Sanna in the saddle. The Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari-owned runner, which is trained by Julian Smart, clinched victory by half a length. Hadi al-Ramzani-trained Foehn under Jefferson Smith topped the Thoroughbred Handicap 75-95, while Arizona Beauty emerged winner in the Thoroughbred Handicap 0-90 with Maikon De Souza in the saddle. In the opening contest of the five-race 21st Al Uqda Race Meeting, jockey Pierre Charles Boudot piloted Mohammed Ghazali-trained Sarastro to Purebred Arabian Handicap 55-75 triumph.

- 21ST AL UQDA RACE MEETING - AL JUMAIL CUP**  
**WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)**  
1 - Al Jumail Cup - Local Purebred Arabian Graduation Plate (Fillies & Mares) (Class 4) Talg'at Al Shahania, Rudy Andre Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier  
2 - Thoroughbred Handicap 85-110 (Class 2) Ends Of The Earth, Julian Colin Smart, Alberto Sanna  
3 - Thoroughbred Handicap 75-95 (Class 3) Foehn, Hadi al-Ramzani, Jefferson Smith  
4 - Thoroughbred Handicap 0-90 (3yo Only) (Class 3) Arizona Beauty, Bader al-Balushi, Maikon De Souza  
5 - Purebred Arabian Handicap 55-75 (Class 5) Sarastro, Mohammed Ghazali, Pierre Charles Boudot



Lukas Delozier guides Talg'at Al Shahania to Al Jumail Cup win in the feature Local Purebred Arabian Graduation Plate at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. **PICTURE: Juhaïm**

## AL SAILIYA CLINCH SECOND DIVISION TITLE, SECURE PROMOTION TO QSL

**Doha:** Al Sailiya were crowned champions of the Second Division League for the 2024-2025 season following a narrow 1-0 victory over Al Waab at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium in Al Duhail. The decisive goal came from Mahab Mohammed, sealing Sailiya's return to the Qatar Stars League with 28 points for the next season. Hassan Jumaa al-Mohannadi, member of the Executive Committee of the Qatar Football Association, presented Sailiya players with medals and the championship shield. The ceremony was also attended by Mansour al-Ansari, Secretary-General of the QFA. Sailiya's triumph was cemented by a dramatic turn of events elsewhere, as their closest rivals, Al Kharaitiyat, suffered a heavy 4-0 defeat to Mesaimeer at Hamad Bin Khalifa Stadium. The loss left Kharaitiyat stranded on 23 points, dropping them to third in the final standings. Al Markhiya, meanwhile, capitalised on the opportunity with a 2-0 win over Muaither, finishing second with 25 points. They will now face Umm Salal, who finished 11th in the Qatar Stars League, in a playoff for a spot in next season's top tier. In other results from the final round, Al Bidda edged Lusail 3-2 to finish sixth in the standings.





SPOTLIGHT

# Stars shine under Aspire Dome as 17th Artistic Gymnastics WC reaches climax

The finals of the 17th Artistic Gymnastics World Cup (Taishan) are taking place today at Aspire Academy in Doha, as the competition enters its decisive phase. The event, which began on April 16 and continues until tomorrow, has brought together some of the world's best gymnasts for four days of elite-level action.

The preliminary rounds concluded last night after two intense days of qualifying across various apparatus, as athletes battled for a spot in the finals. With the tournament now at a critical stage, anticipation is building for high-level performances and dramatic finishes that will determine the champions of this year's edition.

The championship has already delivered top-class performances and featured the rise of global talents.

On the men's floor exercise, Kazakhstan's Karim Miladi and Tamberk qualified alongside Britain's Sam Mostafavi. In the pommel horse event, Jordan's Ahmad Abu al-Soud secured his place in the finals, joined by Kazakhstan's Karbanov and China's Hong Yang Ming.



Qatar's Salma Nasser (left) and another athlete in action during the second day of the 17th FIG Artistic Gymnastics World Cup in Doha yesterday.

On the still rings, Armenians Davtyan and Artur Avetisyan advanced alongside China's Yu Hao.

In the women's competition, legendary Uzbek gymnast Oksana Chusovitina reached the finals in the vault, alongside Hungary's Greta Mayer, Slovenia's Tjasa Kys-

selef, and fellow Hungarian Sára Péter. On the uneven bars, Australia's Keira McDonald, Canada's Audrey Rousseau, and Ukraine's Denali Bork advanced to the final round.

There was also a notable Arab presence. Qatar's Rakan al-Hareth

impressed throughout, while Jordan's Ahmad Abu al-Soud earned widespread praise after booking his spot in the pommel horse final.

Qatar's Salma Nasser continued her steady rise with another solid performance in her second consecutive World Cup appearance,

reflecting her growing confidence and the trust placed in her by the technical staff—a promising sign for the future of Qatari gymnastics.

Salma, speaking to media after her event, expressed her joy at participating in such a prestigious

tournament and competing alongside the world's best.

She described the event as a valuable learning opportunity, allowing her to gain experience and grow her skills. Salma emphasised her determination to improve and continue striving for excellence, adding that while the competition is tough, the knowledge and exposure it provides are equally rewarding.

Morinari Watanabe, President of the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG), commended the event's organisation, saying he was always happy to be in Qatar.

He noted that every edition of the World Cup in Doha brings something new and exciting, praising the Qatari Federation's commitment to excellence.

Watanabe added that Qatar has firmly established itself as a key destination on the global gymnastics calendar, thanks to its exceptional infrastructure, experience, and talented organising teams.

He said the qualifying rounds had already featured high-level competition, setting the stage for even more thrilling action in the finals.

CRICKET

# Jacks sparkles as Mumbai beat Hyderabad in IPL

The English all-rounder picks up two wickets and hits 26-ball 36

AFP  
Mumbai

The Mumbai Indians batters and bowlers starred in a comfortable four-wicket victory over Sunrisers Hyderabad in the Indian Premier League yesterday.

England all-rounder Will Jacks shone with both bat and ball, picking up two wickets to help restrict Hyderabad to 162 for five and then hitting a 26-ball 36 to help bolster his team's chase.

Five-time champions Mumbai won the toss and bowled on a sluggish pitch at Wankhede Stadium.

Decent knocks from openers Rohit Sharma and Ryan Rickleton helped set up the chase, while skipper Hardik Pandya smacked a quick 21 runs off nine balls towards the end to seal the game.

The match helps restore a bit of Mumbai's mojo, pushing them into a crowded mid table. They have three victories in seven matches.

Pandya said the way his team bowled was "very smart and spot on".

"We stuck to simple, basic plans," the Mumbai skipper said, adding that once the pressure to get boundaries eased in the second innings, they "pushed the pedal at the end".

Hyderabad openers Abhishek Sharma and Travis Head kicked off the first innings with a 59-run



Mumbai Indians' Will Jacks (right) celebrates with Hardik Pandya after taking the wicket of Sunrisers Hyderabad's Ishan Kishan during the IPL match at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday. (AFP)

partnership before Sharma, who hit 40 runs off 28 balls, departed in the eighth over.

The team then struggled for momentum with Kishan (2) and Head (28) falling to leave Hyderabad at 83-3 at the end of the 12th over.

Disciplined bowling from Jasprit Bumrah and Jacks continued to restrict Hyderabad's batsmen but a valiant late-innings knock from Heinrich Klaasen (37) infused a glimmer of hope.

Young Aniket Verma then smacked a quick 18 runs off eight balls.

In reply, Mumbai's openers made a solid start as Sharma hit 26 and Rickleton 31. They were 70-2 at the end of the 10th over.

Jacks helped anchor the chase with his 26-ball 36 before departing in the 15th over. Suryakumar Yadav hit 26 and the final touches were added by Pandya and Tilak Varma, who hit an unbeaten 21, as Mumbai won with 11

balls to spare. Hyderabad captain Pat Cummins admitted that it was not the "easiest" wicket.

"Got to play well away from home to make the finals, unfortunately not clicked yet".

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**Mumbai Indians 166 for 6** (Jacks 36, Rickleton 31, Cummins 3-26, Malinga 2-36) **beat Sunrisers Hyderabad 162 for 5** (Abhishek 40, Klaasen 37, Jacks 2-14) **by four wickets.**

MOTOGP

## It's a 'slow but steady' progress for Martin

AFP  
Paris

World MotoGP champion Jorge Martin is "slowly but steadily" improving, his Aprilia team said yesterday, four days after his crash in the Qatar Grand Prix.

The 27-year-old, who was making his first appearance of the season, slid out shortly after the halfway mark at Lusail and was clipped by the Italian Fabio Di Giannantonio who was just behind him.

His team said he had broken ribs and blood and air in the space round his lungs.

"Jorge Martin suffered a haemopneumothorax associated with multiple rib fractures," Aprilia said in a statement.

"The rider's clinical condition is showing a slow but steady improvement following medical examinations at the circuit's medical centre and later at Hamad General Hospital."

"He is currently under observation as the pleuropulmonary trauma required immediate drainage to allow lung re-expansion.

"The rib fractures are causing significant pain and are an addi-

tional limitation to basic physical activity."

Martin, who joined Aprilia in the off-season from Ducati-Pramac, missed the first three races because of another accident in testing.

"Thank you from the bottom of my heart to everyone who has supported me," he said in the team statement.

"These have been difficult days but now I'm starting to move a bit more and feel better, although the pain is still intense.

"I'd like to thank Aprilia, my fans and everyone who is helping me. I will continue to fight to be one of the strongest ever."

Martin, who now has next to no chance of defending his title, was first injured during pre-season testing in Sepang and had to undergo surgery at the beginning of February.

He then suffered another crash which necessitated another operation on his left hand at the end of February, just before the opening round of the season in Thailand.

The Spaniard, who will be out for an unspecified number of races, will be replaced by Italian Lorenzo Savadori for the Spanish GP at Jerez de la Frontera next week.

ANNOUNCEMENT

## Registration opens for Qatar T100 Triathlon World Championship



Visit Qatar and The Professional Triathletes Organisation (PTO) have announced that general registration for the 100km open category of the Qatar T100 Triathlon World Championship Final, taking place from December 12th-13th is now open.

The multisport festival weekend will offer a series of swim, bike, and running events including the chance for amateur athletes to participate in the new 100km triathlon distance (2km swim, 80km bike, 18km run) alongside the best professional triathletes in the world.

Earlier this year, Visit Qatar announced a five-year partnership with the PTO to establish Doha as the culminating venue of the T100 Triathlon World Tour. The Qatar T100 will see professional and

amateur athletes competing along a scenic course that begins with a swim in the Arabian Gulf, followed by cycling and running routes that span Doha and Lusail.

Qatar's global positioning as a hub for international sporting excellence continues to grow, and events such as the 2025 T100 Triathlon World Championship contribute to its sporting legacy.

By hosting globally recognised events such as the Formula 1 Qatar Grand Prix, and the AFC Asian Cup, Qatar has demonstrated its ability to captivate sport audiences and enthusiasts from around the world. For those interested in participating in the Qatar T100 Triathlon World Championship Final, registration is available through the following link: [t100triathlon.com/qatar/participate](https://t100triathlon.com/qatar/participate)

CYCLING

## Pogacar-Van der Poel duel inspires Evenepoel

AFP  
Brussels, Belgium

Double Olympic champion Remco Evenepoel has drawn inspiration during his struggle with injury and personal demons by watching his rivals Tadej Pogacar and Mathieu van der Poel in recent one-day races.

The 25-year-old tore shoulder ligaments when a postal van door was opened on him in December, an injury he said "would have ended my career if I had been a tennis or basketball player".

He also admitted he had been drained by the crash, even imagining premature retirement. He



A photo Remco Evenepoel tweeted in December 2024.

said his competitive spirit was reignited by watching races from his sickbed and sofa. Van der Poel

won Paris-Roubaix at the weekend and Pogacar won Flanders the week before.

Evenepoel returns to action today at the Brabantse Pijl and the Amstel Gold on Sunday, when he will take on Pogacar.

"Pogacar is an inspiration. But I have to be able to beat him. That's what my team pays me for," said Evenepoel.

"It was amazing to see Van der Poel and Pogacar battling it out. It motivated me to push myself in training. I too want to compete at San Remo, the Ronde, and Roubaix one day," he said.

Today, Evenepoel will be one of the favourites with Briton Tom Pidcock, Belgian Wout van Aert and Eritrean Biniam Girmay for

the 162km dash over 21 hills in this Ardennes Classic. It may be his first outing since hitting the van, but Evenepoel, who has major ambitions for winning the Tour de France in July, wants to win today too, said his coach.

"That's Remco for you. He can't turn out thinking about coming 30th," Koen Pelgrim said.

The same riders will be joined by Pogacar in the Netherlands on Sunday for the 255.9km Amstel Gold with its 34 hills, won in 2024 by Pidcock.

Evenepoel came third at the 2024 Tour de France picking up the best young rider award. He also won the Olympic time-trial and road race gold medals in Paris.



FORMULA ONE

# Verstappen plays down Red Bull departure talk

‘A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT IT, EXCEPT ME’

AFP  
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Max Verstappen has brushed aside fears of a possible Red Bull exit, saying yesterday “I’m just focusing on driving”.

The notion of the four-time world champion walking away from Red Bull was raised by the team’s adviser Helmut Marko.

Marko told *Sky Germany* that he had “great concern” Verstappen could find another team unless Red Bull upped their game.

He was speaking in the aftermath of a disappointing weekend in Bahrain where Verstappen could only finish sixth, three places ahead of his new teammate Yuki Tsunoda, behind a dominant show by McLaren’s Oscar Piastri.

Asked specifically to comment on Marko’s fears Verstappen replied: “I’m just focusing on driving and don’t think about any other scenarios. I just keep working, keep trying to improve the car. Naturally, Bahrain wasn’t a great weekend for us. I think we were all pretty disappointed with that.

“We just keep on trying to improve the car, come up with new ideas to try on the car. That’s how I go about my weeks, trying to improve the situation.”

The Dutchman’s name has previously been linked with the likes of Mercedes, Ferrari and Aston Martin, now that Red Bull’s former legendary designer Adrian Newey has joined forces with Fernando Alonso’s ambitious team.

But Verstappen wasn’t rising to the bait, saying: “A lot of people are talking about it, except me.

“Like I said before, I just want



Red Bull Racing’s Dutch driver Max Verstappen attends a press conference ahead of the 2023 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit yesterday. (AFP)

to focus on my car, work with the people in the team. “That’s the only thing that I’m thinking about in Formula One at the moment. I am happy, I am not very happy with my car. But we all want to be better, there is no secret in that. We all want to improve. I’m very relaxed.”

Verstappen and the team are looking for a change of fortune at Jeddah’s high speed street circuit where he has won in 2022 and last year.

“We’re still trying things with the car,” he said.

“Are there things that we can improve? We’re constantly trying to improve the car, I guess.

“And that’s what we’ll try to do

again this weekend. “How much we can fix it here, I don’t know.” Alonso, appearing alongside Verstappen at the press conference, said the rumours linking the F1 star with Aston were “very good for the team”.

“This says a lot about the project that we at Aston have and the future that this team has.

“Would I welcome Max as a teammate? Yes, but it’s unlikely to happen. Very unlikely!”

Verstappen and Red Bull will be counting on upcoming improvements down the road to their 2025 car to bring it closer in pace to McLaren, who have won three of the four races so far this season to take a healthy lead in

the early season team standings. Verstappen’s one bright spot so far in 2025 came in Japan when he produced a superb qualifying performance to take pole and the win in Suzuka.

“It was enough to be competitive (there). It is a very narrow window. I just go race by race. I think it will be better than Bahrain. The rest is out of my hands.

“At the moment, we are not the quickest so it is tough to fight for a championship, but it is a long road. Last year it all looked great and we know how the season ended up...” he added, referring to how Red Bull hit a mid-season wall before turning things around to clinch his fourth title.

FOCUS

## ‘Not at 50’ – Alonso sets retirement limit



Aston Martin’s Spanish driver Fernando Alonso looks on during a press conference ahead of the 2023 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Spain’s Formula One ‘golden oldie’ Fernando Alonso set a date on his retirement yesterday, saying he won’t be behind the wheel “at 50”.

The 43-year-old leads Aston Martin into their 100th F1 race on Sunday at the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix with the verve and enthusiasm of a driver half his years.

The veteran, older than the age of rookies Kimi Antonelli and Oliver Bearman combined, has an open-ended contract at the ambitious team bankrolled by Lawrence Stroll, father of Alonso’s teammate Lance. And while recent results may not have been much to right home about, Aston’s project proved appealing enough to lure design guru Adrian Newey over from Red Bull.

Given their recent lack of form – Alonso’s last podium dates back to 2023 – Aston could do with Newey imbuing some of his magic onto this season’s car.

But the man whose car design helped Red Bull to 13 titles – six drivers and seven constructors – is purely focusing on 2026 and the next big change in F1’s technical landscape.

“He’s working only on ’26, and I totally support that,” said Alonso.

“I want to drive an Adrian-designed car,” he added, when asked how long his familiar grizzled features would be part of the grid.

“Not at fifty for sure.

“After 2026, I don’t know – I will go season by season, see how

motivated I am. “Right now, I am very motivated. Let’s do it until the 2026 and then we’ll sit and talk, and check what is the best for the team.”

Alonso, preparing for his 51st race with the team he joined in 2023 from Alpine, reflected on “an incredible journey so far”.

Despite yet to score a point this term he said: “We are a much better team, a much more prepared team to fight for world championships than we were two years ago.

“Then we had a very small factory, we were using Mercedes’ wind tunnel, and maybe we didn’t have the right people and partners together in the project. So, yeah, the results on track on Sunday are not the same as they were before. But I feel very relaxed, very motivated. And this is just a transition time.”

Meanwhile Oscar Piastri – last weekend’s race winner and the first man to win two races this season – said he is thrilled with his start to the new season.

“How it looks is how I feel. It’s been a great start to the season, and last week was a very special weekend and a performance I am proud of,” said Piastri. “Happy with the team, happy with the car.”

But Piastri says he isn’t feeling the pressure.

“The best way to execute a Championship charge is by having the best weekends you can.”

When asked about his mental strength, Piastri said: “I think it is a strength of mine yes, one of hopefully a few strengths of mine. It is something I have recognised myself as a point of difference and something I try to work on.”

TENNIS

## In-form Alcaraz finds his best to reach Barcelona Open quarter-finals

AFP  
Barcelona

Carlos Alcaraz overcame a second set wobble to defeat Laslo Djere 6-2, 6-4 yesterday and reach the Barcelona Open quarter-finals.

The world number two stepped up a gear from his first round win over Ethan Quinn to dispatch his 80th-ranked opponent on the Catalan clay as he prepares for his French Open title defence.

Alcaraz, who triumphed at the Monte Carlo Masters last week, has had an inconsistent start to the year and in March fell at the first hurdle in the Miami Open.

Home favourite Alcaraz saved both break points he faced in a first

set stroll, with Djere unable to produce a single winner, to the Spaniard’s eight.

The four-time Grand Slam winner won five games straight to claim a 5-1 first set lead and sealed it with his second set point.

In the second set Djere offered more of a fight and even broke for a 4-2 lead, but Alcaraz bounced back quickly.

Djere could not handle the Spaniard in full flow and crumbled away as Alcaraz won the final four games to triumph, sealing his win when the Serb pushed a shot into the net.

“After going 4-2 down in the second, I played a bit more like what my level is,” said Alcaraz.

“I am very happy that I could step up my level and seem more

like my best, and I want to continue.”

Alcaraz will face world number seven Alex de Minaur in the quarter-finals today after the Australian eased to a 6-1, 6-2 victory over Jacob Fearnley in just over an hour.

“It’s very positive for the tournament that all the favourites are in the quarter-finals,” added Alcaraz. “I don’t know if it’s more or less difficult than in previous years, but it’s going to be a battle from now on.”

Briton Fearnley, competing on the red dirt for the first time this week made 28 unforced errors and was unable to convert either of his two break points.

The Scot got into the main draw as a lucky loser but was able to earn his first win on clay against Rob-

erto Carballes Baena in the first round.

### Rublev stunned

Earlier, in-form Alejandro Davidovich Fokina defeated world number eight Andrey Rublev 7-5, 6-4. The Spaniard, ranked 30th, had never beaten the Russian before but triumphed at the sixth time of asking in straight sets.

Monte Carlo Masters semi-finalist Davidovich Fokina broke three times in a topsy-turvy first set, with Rublev twice reacting before the Malaga native held to love in the 12th game.

Rublev went a break down in the first game of the second set, but despite securing one of his own for 2-2, he was once again broken as Davidovich Fokina took a 5-4 lead

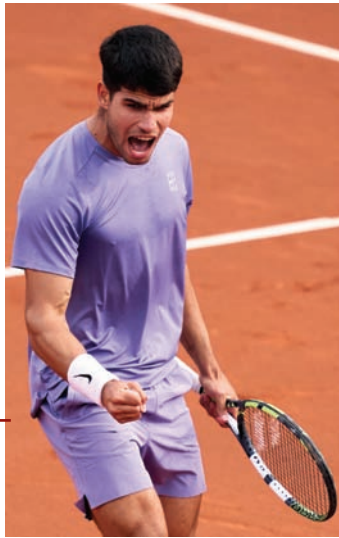
and then served out for the match, again to love.

Spain’s Jaume Munar came up short against Karen Khachanov, who also won 7-5, 6-4, and will face Davidovich Fokina in the next round.

The Russian, who trains in Barcelona, only converted four of 15 break points but eventually put the battling Munar to bed.

Defending champion Casper Ruud faces Holger Rune and last year’s runner up Stefanos Tsitsipas takes on the exciting Arthur Fils in today’s other quarter-finals.

Spain’s Carlos Alcaraz celebrates a point against Ethan Quinn at the Barcelona Open yesterday. @bcnopenbs



## Ukrainian player seeks legal justice over ‘moral abuse’

**Paris:** Ukrainian tennis player Lesia Tsurenko said she will “seek justice in court” after claiming she had suffered “moral abuse” from a senior official at the WTA.

The 35-year-old has spoken frequently about the problems of competing on tour since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

She withdrew from a match at Indian Wells in 2023 against Belarusian Aryna Sabalenka following a panic attack after talking to the then WTA chief executive Steve Simon.

Tsurenko went on to face Sabalenka in the third round of the 2024 Australian Open, losing 6-0, 6-0.

She has not appeared on the circuit since November last year and is currently ranked 239 in the world.

In August 2024, Simon was replaced by Portia Archer as CEO of the WTA.

“I spoke about it openly and directly. I tried to seek protection and justice within the

WTA,” Tsurenko wrote on X. “But in response, faced indifference and injustice, which led to a prolonged moral decline.”

She claims that she had suffered “pain, fear, panic attacks, humiliation, withholding information, harassment of my team” in a bid to silence her.

“Even in my worst nightmares, I couldn’t imagine that the professional tour, which I considered my home, would become a terrifying and alien place, where the CEO ... consciously committed an act of moral abuse against me, leading to a panic attack and the inability to do my job,” Tsurenko posted.

“The WTA tour refused to protect a woman, a player, a human being. Instead, the WTA tour chose to protect a person in a leadership position.

“My last chance to defend myself, to stand up for my rights, my dignity, and to prevent such acts of violence in sports is to seek justice in court.”

SPOTLIGHT

## Andreeva knocked out by Alexandrova in Stuttgart last 16, Gauff eases past Seidel

AFP  
Berlin

In-form teenager Mirra Andreeva crashed out of the WTA event in Stuttgart yesterday after going down in straight sets to fellow Russian Ekaterina Alexandrova in the last 16.

World number seven Andreeva, who already has two titles under her belt this season, lost 6-3, 6-2 against the 22nd-ranked Alexandrova in just over an hour.

The 17-year-old Andreeva had defeated her elder sister Erika in the previous round but Alexandrova quickly took control as she claimed her fourth win over a top-10 player this season.

In February, the 17-year-old Andreeva became the youngest winner of a WTA 1000 event in Dubai, beating Iga Swiatek and Elena Rybakina on her way to the crown. She backed it up by winning at Indian Wells in March, coming from a set down to defeat world number one Aryna Sabalenka in the final.

Italian fifth seed Jasmine Paolini beat German Jule Niemeier 6-1, 7-5 to reach the Stuttgart quarters for the second straight year on Thursday. Alexandrova will face third-ranked



Russia’s Ekaterina Alexandrova in action during her Stuttgart Open match against compatriot Mirra Andreeva yesterday. (Reuters)

American Jessica Pegula, who beat Poland’s Magdalena Frech 6-1, 6-1. Pegula won five from five break points and fought off one against her. Paolini will play Coco Gauff who beat German Ella Seidel 6-1, 6-1.

**Serena says she would have received 20-year ban if she failed drug tests like Sinner**

American great Serena Williams said she would

have been banned for 20 years and stripped of her Grand Slam titles had she failed drug tests like men’s world number one Jannik Sinner did last year. Sinner accepted a three-month ban in February following an agreement with the World Anti-Doping Agency, which challenged an independent tribunal’s decision to clear him of wrongdoing after two positive tests for the anabolic agent clostebol.

“I love the guy, love this game,” Williams, who retired in 2022 after winning 23 Grand Slam trophies, told *Time Magazine*. “He’s great for the sport. I’ve been put down so much, I don’t want to bring anyone down. Men’s tennis needs him. (But) if I did that, I would have gotten 20 years.

“Let’s be honest. I would have gotten Grand Slams taken away from me.”

Reigning Australian Open and US Open champion Sinner, whose ban will end on May 4, has always maintained his innocence though his case raised questions about whether he had received preferential treatment from the authorities. Iga Swiatek’s case also caused some surprise with the women’s world number two accepting a one-month suspension in November after testing positive for the banned substance trimetazidine.



## CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# Arteta's Arsenal come of age with rout of Madrid

A 2-1 win at Bernabeu was a significant milestone for Arteta's men

AFP  
London

Mikel Arteta's Arsenal side came of age as they dethroned Champions League kings Real Madrid with ease to reach the semi-finals for the first time since 2009. A commanding 3-0 first-leg victory last week, lit up by two stunning Declan Rice free-kicks, laid the foundations in London.

But a 2-1 win in the cauldron of the Santiago Bernabeu to complete the job on Wednesday was a significant milestone for Arteta's rising stars. Arteta's only major trophy in five and a half years in charge remains the 2020 FA Cup, just months into his reign. But the Spaniard has transformed a sleeping giant back into serious contenders for major honours.

"I sensed before I signed for the club that we were on an upwards trajectory," said Rice, who rejected the advances of Manchester City to join Arsenal for a club-record £105mn in 2023. "This club is going to do special things in the coming years. We all fully believe in it, we have full trust in this manager – he's unbelievable."

Despite never winning the competition, Arsenal were part of the Champions League furniture during Arsene Wenger's reign – between 2000 and 2017 they were ever-present in Europe's elite competition. But when that run came to an end, they spent six seasons without Champions League football.

Slowly, Arteta rebuilt Arsenal back into a force around a core of promising talent now coming into their prime. Not for the first time in his young career, Bukayo Saka did not let a missed penalty on the big stage affect him. The winger's early spot-kick was saved by Thibaut Courtois, giving Madrid belief that another miraculous Champions League comeback was on for the Spanish giants.

But the England international extinguished that hope with a sumptuous dink over the giant Belgian goalkeeper 25 minutes from time to give Arsenal the lead on the night. William Saliba's error that allowed Vinicius Junior to pull Real level tarnished an otherwise flawless display over two legs in which he shut down his French international teammate Kylian Mbappe.

But even then Arsenal were unflustered and quickly snuffed out any Madrid momentum. Full-backs Myles Lewis-Skelly and Jurrien



Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta (second right) celebrates with Bukayo Saka, William Saliba and Martin Odegaard after their win over Real Madrid. (Reuters)

Timber locked down the threat of Vinicius and Rodrygo Goes out wide and Gabriel Martinelli scored in stoppage time to seal the second-leg win. Rice won the midfield battle against his England team-mate Jude Bellingham with a virtuoso performance that sealed a second man-of-the-match award in the two-legged tie. "Tonight he was immense," said Arteta. "In the moment that the game was 50-50, he got on the ball and turned the game."

In the past two seasons, Arsenal have narrowly failed to topple all-conquering Manchester City in the Premier League title race. They are on course to finish second for a third consecutive year as Liverpool close in on the title. But the Champions League offers Arteta the chance to deliver the eye-catching piece of silverware that his project is still missing.

"It's such a special night for this club," said Rice. "We have an objective in this competition. We want to play the best teams and we want to win this competition."

One of Arteta's former clubs as a player, Paris Saint-Germain, await in the last four of a wide-open competition. None of the clubs remaining has won the competition for at least a decade as Barcelona face Inter Milan in the other semi-final. "It's the third time in our history that we've done what we've just done (reaching the semi-finals)," added Arteta.

"So we need to build on that. We are really hungry, we want more. It's a really young team that is very determined. And all these experiences, including me for sure, is going to help us a lot to try to achieve something big."

## SPOTLIGHT

## Ancelotti exposed as Madrid struggle to accommodate Mbappe



Real Madrid's Kylian Mbappe walks off the pitch after sustaining an injury as coach Carlo Ancelotti looks on during the Champions League quarter-final against Arsenal in Madrid. (Reuters)

AFP  
Madrid

Kylian Mbappe's arrival at Real Madrid was envisioned to expand their Champions League domination, but he was muzzled by Arsenal as Los Blancos crashed out in the quarter-finals, leaving coach Carlo Ancelotti on the brink.

The holders find themselves picking up the pieces after Arsenal surgically dispatched them with a 5-1 aggregate triumph on Wednesday and now it is Ancelotti who needs a miracle comeback to survive in his post.

The Gunners reached the final four with a 2-1 away win and will face Mbappe's former side Paris Saint-Germain, soaring without the French superstar, who left in search of European silverware with the record 15-time winners. Mbappe limped off with an ankle injury in the final stages against Arsenal, leaving Madrid's 'remontada' ambitions in tatters and his coach under the microscope.

The Italian's team is deeply flawed this season, a far more fragile outfit than the side which powered to a Champions League and La Liga double last season.

To put the defeat into context, this will be the just the third time in 12 seasons that Madrid have failed to reach the Champions League semi-finals. Mbappe's arrival, despite his strong form in 2025 and 33 goals across all competitions, is one of the main factors in Madrid's downturn, with Ancelotti unable to accommodate him and Vinicius Junior together without destabilising the team.

It is clear Ancelotti has not found the right strategy to use them, Jude Bellingham and Rodrygo goes together in the biggest matches. "We have to make more collective moves rather than individual ones," noted goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois after the elimination, with Madrid reliant on star power rather than consistently outplaying opponents.

Ancelotti has deployed Mbappe in a centre-forward role but he drifts frequently, and in the past has preferred to play off the left flank – Vinicius' preferred spot. Last season Bellingham and Joselu Mato both operated through the middle at times, and although the former is naturally a midfielder,

the Englishman's physicality and presence was a huge boon for Madrid.

Against Arsenal and in the absence of any better ideas to break down Mikel Arteta's rock-solid defence, Madrid slung balls into the box in search of a target man like Joselu, who left last summer to play in Qatar. "We put in a lot of crosses but this year we don't have a Joselu, a born centre-forward up there," observed Courtois.

Ancelotti has been frustrated with his side on a regular basis this season, for their lack of "collective commitment" to defending. The 65-year-old threatened Vinicius with substitution during the Copa del Rey semi-final second leg against Real Sociedad because the Brazilian was not running enough.

"That warning brought out the best in Vinicius – from then on, he increased the pace and quality," said the Italian. Ancelotti has been open about his future, knowing for weeks he may not be kept on for the last year of his contract.

For some time speculation has mounted that Madrid will look for a new coach in the summer, with Jurgen Klopp and Xabi Alonso the favourites.

"It could be that the club decide to change (coach), it could be this year – or the next when my contract expires, there's no problem," said Ancelotti on Wednesday. Madrid's defeat on Wednesday was their 12th of the season compared to just two in the whole of the 2023-24 campaign.

Toni Kroos' departure last summer is another factor, with Madrid's midfield not convincing this year. The Arsenal post-mortem and any subsequent finding that can be utilised are even more crucial given Madrid still have trophies on the line. They are four points behind Barcelona in La Liga, firmly in the title race with a Clasico to come in May which could decide the title.

Barcelona have won the previous two derbies, scoring nine goals in total to Madrid's two. Madrid also face their arch-rivals in the Copa del Rey final on April 26, and will participate in the Club World Cup this summer, although Ancelotti may not be in charge by that point. If Mbappe is to end the season with a major trophy and Ancelotti is to go out with the bang his Madrid legacy merits, there is no time to lick their wounds.

## Qatar athletes bag four medals at Asian junior meet



Qatar athletes claimed four medals (1 gold, 2 silver and 1 bronze) at Asian Junior Athletics Championship in Dammam, Saudi Arabia. Mubarak Saeed won gold in the 1500m in a time of 3:57.90 minutes. Abdullah Saad al-Abdullah, claimed the silver medal in pole vault, scaling 4.2m while Samer Moussa won silver in 400m, finishing in 48.22 secs, ahead of teammate Ahmed Saleh, who won the bronze medal (48.30 secs).

## Anger as China club plays hours after striker Boupendza's death

**Beijing:** Football fans in China were outraged by Zhejiang FC's decision to go ahead with a league match hours after the death of their Gabon international striker Aaron Boupendza.

Police have ruled out foul play in the death of the 28-year-old, who died after falling from the 11th floor of a building in the eastern city of Hangzhou on Wednesday afternoon. Boupendza's Hangzhou-based club went ahead with a home Chinese Super League fixture later on Wednesday against Meizhou Hakka, sparking grief and anger from fans.

The match, which ended 2-2, was played in a sombre atmosphere with none of the club's other foreign players taking the field. Fans chanted Boupendza's name, held up his shirt and lit up phone torches, and after the final whistle Zhejiang's players and staff approached fans in an act of

collective mourning.

Zhejiang's emotional captain Cheng Jin struggled to answer questions before cutting short his post-match TV interview. "I'm sorry, it's not that I don't respect you. I don't have anything I really want to say," he said.

Zhejiang's Spanish head coach Raul Caneda Perez said that there was "nothing to say about the game" at his post-match press conference "Today is not for talking about football," he said, through an interpreter. "Football should not be discussed in this context."

Hangzhou police confirmed Boupendza's death and said they had been called to an incident at 1:14pm. Police said they "ruled out a criminal case" after investigations which included conducting interviews and reviewing video footage. Boupendza was taken to hospital, but efforts to revive him failed, the police added.

## PREMIER LEAGUE

## Van Dijk signs new Liverpool contract

AFP  
Liverpool

Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk yesterday signed a new two-year contract with the club, ending months of fevered speculation over his future just a week after Mohamed Salah extended his stay.

The announcement comes with Liverpool potentially just days away from winning the Premier League title in Arne Slot's first season in charge. "I'm very happy, very proud," said Van Dijk, whose existing deal, like Salah's, had been set to expire at the end of the season.

"There are so many emotions obviously that go through my head right now speaking about it. It's a proud feeling, it's a feeling of joy. It's just incredible. The journey I've had so far in my career, to be able to extend it with another two years at this club is amazing and I'm so happy."

With new deals confirmed for Salah and Van Dijk, the future of defender Trent Alexander-Arnold remains unresolved. The Eng-



land international, who returned to training on Wednesday after a month out because of injury, is out of contract at the end of the season and has been heavily linked with a move to Real Madrid.

Van Dijk, 33, has made 314 appearances for Liverpool, scoring 27 goals. He has won the Premier League, Champions League, FA Cup, two League Cups, the UEFA Super Cup and the Club World Cup, all under former manager Jurgen Klopp.

Last month Van Dijk said he had "no idea"

if he would remain at Anfield but on Sunday hinted that he was set to extend his stay. The imposing centre-back had been linked with a move to Paris Saint-Germain but said his heart was set on Liverpool.

Van Dijk arrived from Southampton in January 2018 for £75mn, then a world record fee for a defender, and has been instrumental in Liverpool's rise back to the top of the English and European game. He won the Champions League in 2019 and a year later helped deliver the club's first league title for 30 years.

He also came second in the 2019 Ballon d'Or vote, losing out to Argentina star Lionel Messi, who has won the award eight times. Van Dijk, who played for Celtic before joining Southampton, took over the club captaincy in 2023 following the departure of Jordan Henderson.

Now he is on the brink of adding to his collection of silverware with Liverpool, who are set to equal Manchester United's record of 20 English titles. The Reds are 13 points clear of Arsenal with just six games remaining and could wrap up the title this weekend if the Gunners lose.