

To subscribe
GULF TIMES
Newspaper
Please call
444 666 35



CRICKET | Page 2

Buttler and Gill shine as Gujarat beat Hyderabad in IPL



TENNIS | Page 3

Ruud downs Cerundolo to book spot in Madrid final

To advertise here,
PLEASE CALL
444 666 21

Saturday, May 3, 2025
Dhul-Qi'dah 5, 1446 AH

GULF TIMES

SPORT

FOOTBALL

'Pain' for Arteta as Arsenal fall short in Premier League title race

Page 4

FIA MIDDLE EAST RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

Al-Attiyah leads after opening day of Rally Saudi Arabia

Qatari rally icon endures high temperatures to win three punishing stages in the east of Jeddah

By Sports Reporter
Jeddah

Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and his co-driver Candido Carrera moved into a lead of 24.2 seconds after the opening day's action at Rally Saudi Arabia yesterday.

The Qatari endured the high temperatures on round three of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) and guided his Autotek Skoda Fabia RS to three stage wins over punishing stages to the east of Jeddah. Flying Finn Juho Hanninen and his co-driver Janni Hussi were the nearest challengers in a Toyota Yaris entered by the Toyota Gazoo Racing WRT for WRC evaluation purposes. The Finn won stage three.

Local driver Rakan al-Rashed teamed up with Hugo Magalhaes to hold third place in his Toyota and stay on the coat tails of al-Attiyah in the battle for the regional Drivers' Championship.

Al-Attiyah said: "The stages were really nice. It's new for everyone and we had to be careful from the beginning. Now we have the reference and the good pace notes we can push more. But it is easy to get punctures. We were smart in the second stage and we only lost one second to Juho in the last one."

Qatar's Abdulaziz al-Kuwari continued his recent run of good form to hold fourth with Lorcan Moore, but the joint 2023 regional champion Abdullah al-Rawahi lost time during the morning with a series of punctures and slipped to fifth.

MERC2 front-runner Abdullah al-Zubair, Qatari veteran Nasser Khalifa al-Atya, SSV category entrant Hamza Bakhshab, Jordanian driver Shaker Jweihan and Bassel Abu Hamdan rounded off the top 10.

Top seed al-Attiyah launched his attack from the start of the 12.94km of the Wadi Al-Matwi stage. The Qatari set the quickest time of 7min 58.2sec to snatch an early advantage of 10.6 seconds over the regional debutant Hanninen. Oman Rally Team's Abdullah al-Rawahi came home in third.

Um Al-Jerem was the second stage of the morning's loop and another tough challenge for competitors with Hanninen recovering strongly to set the quickest time to reduce al-Attiyah's lead to 9.4 seconds on the return to Jeddah for service.

Despite his co-driver Janni Hussi feeling unwell in the heat, Hanninen was upbeat after his morning's work. He said: "It was



Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and his Spanish co-driver Candido Carrera in action at Rally Saudi Arabia yesterday.

okay, No big issue just really slippery, both stages. Everything went smoothly. For us, coming from Finland, where it is zero degrees, this is different. I was not expecting it to be so rough, more than Safari actually."

Rakan al-Rashed settled into third place in his Toyota Yaris. "It was quite challenging. The two stages were surprising in places. I thought the grip would have been better. It was loose and there were many rough places and we needed to manage the challenge ahead of us."

Al-Kuwari and MERC2 leader Abdullah al-Zubair settled into fourth and fifth but al-Rawahi slipped to sixth after a series of punctures. Al-Rawahi said: "We had a puncture. The second stage we were pushing, the pace was good and I was happy with the car. At the end of the stage, maybe three kilometres to go, we hit a rock and bent the rim. I thought it was a puncture. I lost focus a bit and we lost time. The third stage, we were pushing and we hit a rock after 5km and we had to change the puncture immediately. We lost a lot of time because it was very narrow and soft and we had to find a place to stop and change the wheel. Then we had a puncture at the end of the stage but we were happy to make the end of the loop."

Al-Kuwari said: "Stages two and three were nice. I catch Abdullah al-Rawahi after five kilometres in stage three. He had changed a tyre. I could not pass him. I was in the dust for 15 or 16km. It was unfair. I was doing very well. They are difficult and challenging. It's for everyone but nice stages, except for stage one."

Rashid al-Muhammadi led the way from Payyaakkal 'Saneem' Panikkaveetil and Saad al-Harqan in the MERC4 category after Qatar Academy driver Mohammed al-Marri stopped near the end of the third stage. Sheikh Bader al-Fayez suffered throttle issues on his Skoda.

Al-Marri said: "We managed to get some time back on Rashed al-Muhammadi but there were some loose stones. We hit them and lost an axle and could not finish

the stage. We will continue on Saturday."

Drivers concluded the day's action in the punishing heat of the afternoon. Al-Attiyah shaved eight seconds off his morning run through Wadi Al-Matwi and increased his lead over Hanninen to 24.2 seconds. Al-Rashed tightened his grip on third but Qatar's Saad al-Harqan failed to start the afternoon section in his Peugeot 208 Rally4.

Today, competitors tackle two loops of three new special stages to the north of Jeddah, starting with the first pass through the Al-Ghulal (11.70km), Asfan (26.55km) and Thahban (8.46km) stages from 7.30hrs, 8.08hrs and 9.56hrs, respectively.

The second passage through Thahban from 15.22hrs also acts as the event's Power Stage with bonus points available for the fastest crews.

POSITIONS AFTER LEG 1

1. Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Candido Carrera (ESP) Skoda Fabia RS Rally 2; Time: 29min 56.1sec

2. Juho Hanninen (FIN)/Janni Hussi (FIN) Toyota GR Yaris Rally 2; 30min 20.3sec*
 3. Rakan al-Rashed (KSA)/Hugo Magalhães (POR) Toyota GR Yaris Rally 2; 31min 12.3sec
 4. Abdulaziz al-Kuwari (QAT)/Lorcan Moore (IRL) Citroen C3 Rally 2; 31min 39.4sec
 5. Abdullah al-Rawahi (OMA)/Ross Whittock (GBR) Skoda Fabia RS Rally 2; 34min 00.4sec
 6. Abdullah al-Zubair (OMA)/Taha al-Zadjali (OMA) Subaru Impreza WRX Sti; 34min 17.5sec
 7. Nasser Khalifa al-Attiyah (QAT)/Ziad Chehab (LBN) Ford Fiesta Mk II Rally 2; 34min 51.9sec
 8. Hamza Bakhshab (KSA)/Marcin Pasek (POL) Can-Am Maverick R (SSV); 35min 04.2sec
 9. Shaker Jweihan (JOR)/Aisvydas Pallukenas (LTU) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 35min 49.7sec
 11. Bassel Abu Hamdan (KSA)/Firas Elias (LBN) Skoda Fabia Rally 2; 37min 25.7sec
 10. Shadi Shaban (JOR)/Samer Issa (JOR) Lancer Evo IX (NAT); 37min 34.1sec
 12. Ihab al-Shurafa (JOR)/Ahmad Jankhout (JOR) Skoda Fabia RS Rally 2; 38min 30.5sec
 16. Sheikh Bader Al-Fayez (JOR)/Vili Oslaj (SLO) Skoda Fabia Rally 2; 38min 37.4sec
 15. Rashid al-Muhammadi (QAT)/Szymon Gospodarczyk (POL) Peugeot 208 Rally 4; 38min 48.1sec
 13. Shadi El Fakih (LBN)/Joseph Kmeid (LBN) Lancer Evo X ; 38min 52.5sec
 14. Jassim al-Muqahwi (KUW)/Suleiman al-Helal (KUW) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 39min 20.2sec
 17. Joanna Hassoun (LBN)/Dolyne Schlink (LBN) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX (NAT); 40min 43.9sec*
 19. Zakariya al-Aamri (OMA)/Mohammed al-Mazroui (OMA) Subaru Impreza WRX Sti; 41min 28.9sec
 18. Payyaakkal 'Saneem' Panikkaveetil (IND)/Musa Sherif (IND) Ford Fiesta Rally 4; 42min 34.1sec
 20. Mohammed al-Shorafa (JOR)/Yazan Juma (JOR) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX (NAT); 42min 38.3sec*
 - Saad al-Harqan (QAT)/Pierre Delorme (FRA) Peugeot 208 Rally 4 RETIRED - AFTER SS3
 - Mohammed al-Marri (QAT)/Giovanni Bernacchini (ITA) Peugeot 208 Rally 4 RETIRED - SS3
- *denotes not registered for the MERC

Younousse, Tijan cruise into Doha Open final

Qatar's Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan breezed into the final of the AVC Men's Beach Tour Doha Open at the Al Gharafa Beach Complex yesterday. The Tokyo Olympic bronze medallists sailed past Thailand's No 6 seeds Dunwinit Kaewsai and Banlue Nakprakhong 21-8, 21-7 in just 31 minutes in the quarter-finals. Later in the semi-finals, the World No 9 duo outplayed another Thai pair Netitorn Muneekul and Wachirawit Muadpha 21-10, 21-14 in 28 minutes. In the final today, Younousse and Tijan will take on Australia's third seeds Paul Burnett and Luke Ryan. The four-day Doha Open features 21 elite pairs from 10 Asian nations, offering ranking points, qualification credits, and prize money.

SPOTLIGHT

Guardiola to take break from football when he leaves City

AFP
London

Pep Guardiola says he will take a break from football when he leaves Manchester City but does not know if he will retire from the game. The 54-year-old signed a two-year contract extension in November keeping him at the Etihad until June 2027, which would be 11 years after he joined the club.

It is by far the longest coaching spell of his career - he spent four years at Barcelona, for whom he also played, and three in charge of Bayern Munich.

The Catalan has spearheaded an unprecedented period of success for City, leading them to six Premier League titles and delivering a first Champions League crown as part of a treble in 2022/23, but this season has been tough.

"After my contract with City, I'm going to stop. I'm sure," Guardiola said. "I don't know if I'm going to retire, but I'm going to take a break. How I want to be remembered, I don't know. All coaches want to win so we can have a memorable job, but I believe that the fans of Barcelona, Bayern



Munich and City had fun watching my teams play. I don't think we should ever live thinking about whether we're going to be remembered. When we die, our families cry for two or three days and then that's it - you're forgotten. In the careers of coaches, there are good and bad ones, the important thing is that the good ones are remembered for longer."

Fourth-placed City were favourites to wrap up a fifth straight Premier League title this season but suffered a dramatic slump. With four league games of the season to go they are 21 points behind champions Liverpool and locked in a fight to qualify for the Champions League next season.

Guardiola, whose team are through to a third successive FA Cup final, against Crystal Palace, said it had been a season of "great learning" and he had not expected City's decline to be so steep. "I knew there would be a moment when we would fall, but we fell a lot," he said. "We didn't expect to be so far, but we can't win them all. What we did during 10, nine years was exceptional, but now we have to sit down and learn to try to understand what we need to produce in the future."

Guardiola said in December that he would not "take another team" after leaving City, though he left open the possibility of becoming a national coach.

CRICKET

Buttler, Gill shine as Gujarat beat Hyderabad in IPL

‘In the end it was a bridge too far... We left a bit too much for the batters’

AFP
Ahmedabad

Jos Buttler and Shubman Gill hit half-centuries to power Gujarat Titans to a 38-run victory over Sunrisers Hyderabad in the IPL yesterday.

Gujarat posted 224-6, on the back of Gill's 38-ball 76, after being invited to bat first at the world's biggest stadium in Ahmedabad.

Their bowlers then combined to restrict Hyderabad to 186-6, despite a valiant 74 from Abhishek Sharma. With the big victory, Gujarat moved up to second on the points table.

Hyderabad remain in the running to qualify for the IPL playoffs, but their chances look slim.

Gill said everyone on the team played a role in the victory.

"The way our top order plays, we know how to keep the scoreboard ticking," the Gujarat skipper said.

Gujarat openers Gill and Sai Sudharsan started the first innings with fireworks, forging a 87-run partnership before Sudharsan, who blasted 48 runs off 23 balls, departed in the seventh over.

Gill kept up the attack, with the help of Jos Buttler, and smacked a 38-ball 78 before being run out in the 13th over.

Gujarat's run rate dipped after the skipper departed but Buttler refired the team's momentum to hit 64 runs off 37 balls before falling in the 19th over.

Left-arm pacer Jaydev Unadkat struck thrice in the last over, but not before Washington Sundar (21), Rahul Tewatia (6) and Shahrulkh Khan (6 not out) pitched in to set Hyderabad a chase of 225.

In reply, Hyderabad openers Abhishek Sharma and Travis Head came out swinging, hitting a combined 45 runs in the first five overs.

Head (20), departed in the sixth over after a spectacular catch by Rashid Khan, leaving the team at 49-1.

Hyderabad's momentum started to stall, with Kishan (13) struggling to make a mark. Abhishek



Gujarat Titans' Shubman Gill celebrates after reaching his half-century against Sunrisers Hyderabad yesterday. (Reuters)

picked up the slack from the 11th over, smacking a fiery 41-ball 74 before falling in the 15th over.

While the middle order mostly

failed to fire, skipper Pat Cummins hit an unbeaten 19 and Nitish Kumar Reddy 21 to offer some hope before ultimately failing to hit the

required target. Cummins admitted his team were not at their best.

"In the end it was a bridge too far... We left a bit too much for the batters. We have to cling onto some hope," the Hyderabad skipper said.

Gujarat captain said: "Idea was to continue to play like we have. Black soil, we've seen it's not easy to hit sixes. But the way our top order plays, we know how to keep the scoreboard ticking. (On GT's top-loading) We've never had the conversation for one of the top-three to always be there at the end. We're just eager to score runs and do our best.

"As a side, our fielding had been below average this season but it was great today. Everyone is chipping in - Prasidh, Ishant, even Coetzee - makes it easier defending a score. (On his chat with ump) There are so many emotions, you give 110% on the field, sometimes you're bound to show emotions."

Gujarat pacer and purple cap holder Prasidh Krishna was adjudged player of the match.

"Purple cap doesn't feel any different. Winning was key. We've had two long breaks. Getting a win at home was important. My control over length has been good. Lots of support from the team to get where I am now. (Pre-match work and conditions assessment) Prep would start with controlling what I can in the nets. Do what I'd do during the game. On game day, you watch every ball of the first innings if you're bowling second. Take all that you can. Then have chats with the experienced players around, then hit the right areas and take it from there. I have a red ball in my room, playing around with it. Didn't get it to the ground. Looking to take this tournament first and then look at what's coming later," the pacer said.

BRIEF SCORES: Gujarat Titans 224 for 6 (Gill 76, Buttler 64, Sudharsan 48, Unadkat 3-35) **beat Sunrisers Hyderabad 186 for 6** (Abhishek 74, Klaasen 23, Prasidh 2-19, Siraj 2-33) **by 38 runs.**

FOCUS

Stokes fit to captain England against Zimbabwe

AFP
London

Ben Stokes was given the all-clear to captain England in their one-off Test against Zimbabwe later this month as he was named in a 13-man squad announced yesterday.

The 33-year-old all-rounder has been recovering from hamstring surgery after breaking down in New Zealand in December, his second hamstring tear in five months.

Stokes has not featured for county side Durham so far this season but is set to skipper England in the opening Test of their home season, which is a four-day game rather than the standard five, at Trent Bridge from May 22 to 25.

England selector Luke Wright expects Stokes, a lively seamer, to play a full part with both bat and ball against Zimbabwe even though he is not due to play any competitive cricket before the Test.

"All things being equal, he's going to be fine to play a full part," Wright said.

"We might have to restrict him bowling a certain amount of overs just to be careful with him coming back but he will be at full pace.

"He's been non-stop now in the nets getting ready, he's ready and raring to go and excited about getting stuck in."

Uncapped Essex seamer Sam Cook is also in the squad and could be in line for a Test debut in Nottingham, with pacemen Mark Wood, Brydon Carse, Chris Woakes and Olly Stone all injured. Express quick Jofra Archer is not yet considered ready for red-ball international cricket.

Cook, 27, has taken 318 first-class wickets at an impressive average of under 20, though doubts have persisted over whether he is quick enough to be

effective at Test level. But Cook, with England greats James Anderson and Stuart Broad retired, and Woakes out of action, could now fill the vacancy in the attack for an accurate swing and seam bowler of lesser pace.

"He is not just a swing bowler, he swings and seams the ball," said Wright.

"He gets bounce. He's a highly skilled bowler, yes he's not up there at 85, 86 mph and that's fine but what he has got is incredible skill."

Cook is one of two uncapped players in the squad, together with Jordan Cox, his Essex teammate, who may end up as the reserve batsman.

Batter Jacob Bethell, who impressed on England's tour of New Zealand, is currently playing in the Indian Premier League.

Nottinghamshire paceman Josh Tongue will hope to make a return to Test action on his home ground, having last featured for England during the 2023 Ashes, and could form part of a pace attack that also includes Gus Atkinson.

Off-spinner Shoaib Bashir has kept his place despite mediocre displays so far this season in the County Championship.

It will be the first Test in England since 2003 for Zimbabwe.

The African nation are bottom of the Test rankings but last week won their first Test in four years, beating Bangladesh by three wickets in Sylhet.

"With anyone, you never underestimate them," said Wright. "For them to beat Bangladesh is a great effort."

"It will be great welcoming them over here, it's been a long time. It's a great opportunity for the guys to get stuck in."

The Trent Bridge match marks the start of a busy home summer for Stokes's men, with England also facing India in a five-Test series before the 2025/26 Ashes in Australia



SNOOKER

O'Sullivan's eighth title dream dims after Zhao whitewash

Reuters
Sheffield

Ronnie O'Sullivan's dream of a record eighth world snooker title faded yesterday after an eight-frame whitewash by China's Zhao Xintong left the Briton 12-4 down in his semi-final at the Crucible Theatre.

The 49-year-old 'Rocket' started the day 4-4 but missed a string of chances and goes into the evening session with his 28-year-old opponent only five frames away from the final in the best of 33 match. World number one and 2019 champion Judd Trump was leading three times champion Mark Williams 5-3 overnight in the other semi-final.

O'Sullivan struggled with his cue, changing the tip, but the switch made little difference as

he missed a series of pots and slumped to a fourth career 8-0 session defeat at the Sheffield venue. Scotland's John Higgins and Graeme Dott both achieved the feat on their way to titles in 1998 and 2006 while fellow-Englishman John Parrot pulled off the other whitewash in 1994.

"Ronnie is probably a little bit embarrassed about what's happening out there," Ireland's 1997 world champion Ken Doherty told BBC radio.

"He's not fighting. He could have come to the table and played some snookers but is not bothering and that's worrying."

Zhao, who ended a 20-month ban last year after a match-fixing investigation, is bidding to become the first Chinese player to win the championship.

He enjoyed breaks of 112 and 115 and drew a standing ovation from the crowd.

Olympic medallist Kerley arrested, out of Miami Grand Slam meet

Former world 100m champion Fred Kerley has withdrawn from this weekend's Grand Slam Track meeting in Miami after being arrested for battery, officials confirmed yesterday. The 29-year-old American sprinter, who won 100m gold at the 2022 World Championships, was detained on Thursday by police in Broward County, Florida. Arrest records showed Kerley had been arrested on a charge of touch or strike battery and remained in jail as of early Friday. The Letsrun.com track and field news website said Kerley had been arrested following an incident at the official hotel for this weekend's Grand Slam Track meeting, the second event of Michael Johnson's new circuit. Grand Slam Track said Kerley would play no part in the meeting. "Fred Kerley was arrested last night," Grand Slam Track said in a statement.

SWIMMING

Ledecky out-duels McIntosh in sizzling 400m freestyle

AFP
Miami

US freestyle great Katie Ledecky posted the second-fastest 400m free time of her storied career on Thursday, clocking 3min 56.81sec to run down Summer McIntosh for a second stunning victory in as many days at the TYR Pro Swim Series meeting in Florida.

Ledecky, who posted the second-fastest 1,500m free time in history on Wednesday, overshadowed the return to action of Paris Olympic star Leon Marchand, who posted a personal best in finishing third in the men's 400m free in his first competition in four months.

With the World Championships in Singapore coming up July 27-August 3, nine-time Olympic gold medallist Ledecky produced the fastest women's 400m ever in a US pool - and her fastest since she set the American record of 3:56.46 in winning Olympic gold in Rio de Janeiro in 2016.

"I don't know if I ever thought I would be 3:56 again," a beaming Ledecky said in a poolside interview. "It wasn't even in my head for tonight for sure."

For most of the race Ledecky was chasing McIntosh, who was under the pace of Titmus's world record through 300 meters. Ledecky stayed in touch and as McIntosh began to fade on the penultimate lap she pounced.



Katie Ledecky reacts after winning the 400m freestyle in 3:56.81s at a Tyr Pro Series meet in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. (AFP)

"I just tried to stick with her and just stay calm and just stick with my race, trust my tempo at the end which is my bread and butter," Ledecky said.

Canada's McIntosh, who had traded the world record with Ariarne Titmus in 2023 before finishing runner up to the Aussie at the Paris Olympics, finished second in 3:58.28.

The World Championships promises to be another Ledecky-McIntosh duel with Titmus on an "extended break" before resuming training in preparation for the 2028 Olympics.

Meanwhile France's Marchand made a solid return to competition in an event that didn't feature among his four individual gold medals at the Paris Games.

The 22-year-old, who opted out of the short course world championships in December then sought a change of pace by training in Australia before rejoining coach Bob Bowman in Texas, clocked 3:48.97 to finish third in the 400m free won by American Kieran Smith in 3:47.04, with Ryan Eisman second in 3:48.57.

Among other events on Thursday, American Shaine Casas won the men's 100m freestyle in 48.47sec then returned to win the 50m backstroke in 24.41.

US veteran Regan Smith won the women's 200m butterfly 2:05.38 - second fastest this season behind the 2:04.00 that Olympic champion McIntosh posted in March.

Minutes after a runner-up finish in the 50m backstroke, Smith was

able to hold off a pair of American teenagers in Alex Shackell and Audrey Derivaux.

American Gretchen Walsh won the women's 100m free in a career-best 52.90sec, edging Paris Olympics silver medallist Torri Huske (52.95). They posted the first sub-53sec times of the year.

Denis Petrashov of Kyrgyzstan, who swims in the States for the University of Louisville, won the men's 100m breaststroke in a personal best of 59.23. Lithuania's Aleksas Svickas was second in 59.72.

Austrian Martin Esbernberger won the men's 200m butterfly in 1:55.71, storming from sixth at the halfway point to grab the victory over American Carson Foster, who clocked 1:55.84.

TENNIS

Ruud fends off Cerundolo to book spot in final

'I wasn't sure I was going to be able to finish the match, honestly'

AFP
Madrid

Casper Ruud squeezed into the 25th tour-level final of his career with a 6-4, 7-5 victory over Argentina's Francisco Cerundolo at the Madrid Open yesterday.

The Norwegian saved a whopping 15 of 18 break points faced during the one-hour 54-minute clash to reach a third Masters 1000 final, and first since Monte Carlo last year.

Overcoming early chest discomfort and in the face of a rowdy pro-Argentinian crowd, Ruud was proud of how he handled the adversity to book a final against Jack Draper or Lorenzo Musetti.

"There's a lot of things to deal with as a player. It's a lot of fun, of course, travelling the world and living this life is like a dream, don't get me wrong. But of course you have struggles all along, almost every single week you're dealing with some kind of minor pain or fatigue or stress somehow," said the 26-year-old Ruud.

Ruud had to save four break points before he held serve in the opening game.

At the 2-1 changeover, the Norwegian asked for a medical time-out and told the trainer he felt a sharp pain in his chest while warming up with the medicine ball before the match, and it extended all the way to his back. Ruud received treatment and took painkillers before stepping back on court.

Unnerved by the interruption, Cerundolo took the next two games, breaking Ruud at love to move ahead 3-2 but the Argentinian's lead was short-lived as his opponent struck right back.



Casper Ruud celebrates winning his semi-final against Francisco Cerundolo yesterday. (Reuters)

Ruud upped the pressure in game 10 with a signature inside-out forehand and snatched the set on the 48-minute mark.

The second set was a see-saw affair that witnessed a combined five breaks of serve from 18 break point opportunities.

During a marathon 13-minute game, Ruud saved seven break points to hold for 3-2, but not before he had an argument with the chair umpire, over Argentinian fans disrupting him ahead of his serve.

The pivotal moment came in game 12 as Ruud converted a second match point to reach his first Madrid final.

"Too good, huh. Good luck," Cerundolo told Ruud at the net.

After dropping to 15 in the world, Ruud is projected to return to the top 10 by virtue of reaching the final. "I wasn't sure I was going

to be able to finish the match, honestly," said the Norwegian.

"I felt something in my rib during warm-up, just towards the end, before going out and I felt it on almost every shot, especially the serve. And luckily I got some quick treatment on it. Of course I'll go and check it out more now. I took a couple of painkillers, which is not ideal but in a situation like this, you have to do that every now and then."

SABALENKA ENDS SVITOLINA'S WINNING RUN TO RETURN TO FINAL

Madrid: Last year's runner-up Sabalenka sealed a return to the Madrid Open final after battling past Ukraine's in-form Elina Svitolina 6-3, 7-5. Sabalenka won four of the first five games and a second break of serve was enough to pocket the

opening set. The Belarusian led 4-2 in the second set but was broken when serving for the match a few games later. Sabalenka responded right away with another break before sewing up victory at the second attempt. Sabalenka is the first WTA player

to reach 30 match wins this season and is through to her fourth final in five years in Madrid, having won the tournament in 2021 and 2023 before losing to Swiatek last year. "It's hard to beat Svitolina, it was a very tough battle," said the

26-year-old as she reached her fifth final of the year. "But I'm very happy to reach the final. (Svitolina) makes you fight every point, to beat her you have to play your best tennis. And winning it gives you great confidence and means you're in good shape."

BADMINTON

China and Japan reach semis, South Korea to face Indonesia

Reuters
Xiamen, China

Hosts and defending champions China booked their place in the Sudirman Cup semi-finals with a 3-0 win over Malaysia yesterday, setting up a clash with Japan, who also advanced after beating Taiwan by the same score.

South Korea and Indonesia will contest the other semi after 3-1 wins over Denmark and Thailand respectively at the biennial mixed team championship. In a rematch of the Olympics, China's Feng Yanzhe and Huang Dongping avenged their Paris Games defeat by beating Malaysian mixed doubles pair Chen Tang Jie and Toh Ee Wei 21-17 21-17 in the opening match.

World number one Shi Yuqi then dismantled Malaysia's Leong Jun Hao 21-6 21-14 in men's singles, before Tokyo Olympic champion Chen Yu-fei completed the sweep with a dominant 21-8 21-7 win over Letshanaa Karupathevan in women's singles.

The remaining doubles matches were not played, with China wrapping up victory in under two hours.

Japan needed three hours to overcome Taiwan, with Hiroki Midorikawa and Arisa Igarashi winning the mixed doubles 21-18 21-18 against Ye Hong-wei and Hu Ling-fang, followed by Koki Watanabe's 21-13 20-22 21-14 triumph over Chou Tien-chen.

Akane Yamaguchi sealed Japan's sixth consecutive semi-final appearance by defeating Hsu Wen-chi in the women's singles.

Europe's last remaining hope, Denmark, were swept aside by South Korea.

South Korea took the lead as Seo Seung-jae and Chae Yu-jung overcame Denmark's Jesper Toft and Amalie Magelund in the mixed doubles, before An Se-young dominated Line Kjaersfeldt in the women's singles, winning 21-8 21-7.

Denmark fought back as Anders Antonsen claimed a gritty victory over Jeon Hyeok-jin in the men's singles.

Yet Korea's women's doubles pair Baek Ha-na and Lee So-hee sealed the tie in commanding fashion against Alexandra Boje and Natasja Anthonisen.

Indonesia claimed the final semi-final spot with victory over Thailand, recovering after losing the opening match to win three consecutive contests.

FORMULA 1

Piastri on top in Miami Grand Prix practice

Reuters
Miami

Formula One championship leader Oscar Piastri was fastest in sole practice for the Miami Grand Prix yesterday while McLaren teammate Lando Norris had to pit and jettison tools left in his car.

The Australian, chasing a third win in a row on Sunday, lapped on the quickest soft tyres with a best time one minute 27.128 seconds with Ferrari's Charles Leclerc next best but 0.356 slower.

Red Bull's reigning champion Max Verstappen, arriving in Miami after celebrating the birth of his first child with partner Kelly Piquet, was third quickest and 0.430 off the leading pace. The Miami round is a sprint weekend, with qualifying for the Saturday 100km race later on Friday instead of a second practice session.

Norris, last year's Miami winner who lost the championship lead to Piastri in Saudi Arabia two weeks' ago, was only 12th on the timesheets after red flags prevented him completing a lap on soft tyres. He had to pit earlier after he found tools, including a torch, left in the cockpit when he took to the track for his first lap.

Stewards said they were investigating the team for releasing the car in an apparently unsafe condition, with the risk of a fine. The session was stopped with four minutes remaining after Haas rookie Ollie Bearman hit the wall at Turn 12, before some drivers had completed quick laps on the soft tyres.

"I'm fine, sorry," said the Briton. Norris and Haas's Esteban Ocon had earlier had a near-miss when the McLaren came up fast on the Frenchman going slow on the racing line at the end of the straight. That incident was also being investigated.

CYCLING

Vine escapes to Tour of Romandie 3rd stage win as Baudin keeps lead

AFP
Cossonay, Switzerland

Australian rider Jay Vine made a solo break to win yesterday's third stage of the Tour de Romandie as French rider Alex Baudin retained the overall race leader's yellow jersey. Vine broke away with one kilometre to go of the 183.1km circuit around Cossonay. He crossed the line two seconds ahead of the peloton led by Frenchman Lenny Martinez of Bahrain.

Vine's UAE Portuguese teammate Joao Goncalves finished third at the same time. Olympic champion Remco Evenepoel, in his first stage race since a heavy fall in training in December, finished seventh on the day and sits ninth in the overall standings, 52sec off Baudin's pace.

The race's penultimate stage today over 128.4km between Sion and the Thyon 2000 ski resort, and features three category-one climbs, including a summit finish.

Win machine Matthews claims Eschborn-Frankfurt sprint

Australian cyclist Michael Matthews finished his Spring campaign in style with victory in the Eschborn-Frankfurt one-day race on Thursday ahead of Uno-X Mobility's Magnus Cort Nielsen and Movistar's third-placed Jon Barrenetxea. The 34-year-old Jayco AlUla cyclist sprinted to his 43rd career win after his team split the peloton at the tough, hilly section of the 198 km race known as the 'German Classic'.



UCI WorldTeam UAE Team Emirates XRG's Australian rider Jay Vine celebrates after crossing the finish line to win the third stage of the Tour of Romandie UCI cycling World tour, 183.1km loop from the start to the finish in Cossonay, near Vullierens, yesterday. (AFP)

A four-times Tour de France stage-winner, Matthews burnished his impressive record of winning at least one race in each of his last 16 seasons barring Covid-hit 2021.

"I think my shape through the Spring was good, I just wasn't on the top step," said Matthews, who was fourth in Milan-San Remo and fifth at the Amstel Gold Race

this season. "It's nice to finish off this block with a win here in Frankfurt.

"It's a race that has really suited me for a lot of years and I haven't been able to win it, so to come here with the team and the way we rode - we rode perfectly - and to execute a performance like my team did today it was the icing on top of the cake."

GOLF

Scheffler grabs lead with sizzling 61 at CJ Cup Byron Nelson

AFP
Houston

Top-ranked Scottie Scheffler fired a 10-under-par 61 on Thursday, his lowest round of the year, to seize a two-stroke lead at the CJ Cup Byron Nelson tournament.

The 28-year-old American, seeking his first victory of 2025 after taking nine titles last year, finished a bogey-free opening round with back-to-back birdies in his hometown event at TPC Craig Ranch in McKinney, Texas, near Dallas.

"I hit the ball really well," Scheffler said.

"I gave myself a lot of opportunities, hit a lot of fairways, hit some really good iron shots in there close. A lot of it had to do with my ball-striking. I hit it really nice."

Scheffler, who was one off the course record held by South Korean Noh Seung-yul, fired his second-best 18-hole score in a PGA Tour event.

Filipino veteran Rico Hoey, seeking his first PGA title, fired his lowest PGA score to share second on 63 with Venezuela's Jhonattan Vegas. On 64 were Germany's Stephan Jaeger and Americans Michael Thorbjornsen, Eric Cole, Andrew Putnam, Patton Kizzire, Will Gordon and Cameron Champ.

"I drove the ball great," Hoey said. "I've had some pretty good days where I drove it, but today was one of the best ones I've seen. Having ball in hand helped



Scottie Scheffler of the United States reacts after making eagle on the ninth green during the first round of The CJ CUP Byron Nelson 2025 at TPC Craig Ranch in McKinney, Texas. (AFP)

a lot, so took advantage of it."

Two-time Masters champion Scheffler, who struggled with a hand injury early this season, fired a seven-under 29 on the front nine and shot 32 on the inward nine and his eighth bogey-free round of the year ranks second on tour to Tom Hoge's 10.

"This is a golf course that you've got to make some birdies on, especially a day like today when there wasn't much wind," Scheffler said.

"There are some scoring opportunities that you need to take advantage of and fortunately I was able to take advantage of those holes."

Scheffler reeled off four birdies in a row starting with a five-foot birdie putt at the third hole, then a four-footer at the par-three fourth and two-footers at the par-five fifth and par-four sixth.

He added a birdie from just inside 17 feet at the eighth hole and sank a four-foot eagle putt at the par-five ninth after dropping his second shot onto the green.

Scheffler followed three pars with a birdie putt from just outside 11 feet at the 13th to match Hoey for the lead, then dropped his tee shot inches from the hole at the par-three 17th and tapped in for birdie to seize the lead alone. At the par-five 18th, Scheffler missed a 28-foot eagle putt but tapped in for birdie to stretch his advantage.

Hoey, a 29-year-old from Manila, didn't miss a fairway in a bogey-free round. He holed out for eagle from just beyond 35 feet at 18, then reeled off five consecutive birdies from the second through sixth holes before closing with a birdie putt from just inside 10 feet at the ninth.

"It felt great out there," Hoey said. "I just kept plugging away. I knew the birdies would come. I'm glad I stayed patient. I rattled off five straight birdies and that was awesome."

Hoey has triumphs on the Canadian and Korn Ferry developmental tours but years for a PGA breakthrough victory.

"Nice to get the momentum rolling now. This is the season to really kick it into gear," he said. "It would be great (to win), but it's just the first round."

SPOTLIGHT

‘Pain’ for Arteta as Arsenal fall short again in title race

Gunners last won the Premier League title in 2004 under Wenger

AFP
London

Mikel Arteta says seeing Liverpool win the Premier League has been “painful” after Arsenal fell short in the title race for a third successive season. Liverpool’s thumping 5-1 win at home to Tottenham last Sunday put them out of reach of nearest challengers Arsenal with four games to go in the season.

It is a huge blow for Arsenal, who have missed out yet again after pushing Manchester City all the way for the past two seasons.

Arteta congratulated Liverpool on their triumph, which he said was fully deserved, but he said it hurt “big time”.

“I understand that (Liverpool) are a team that is being more consistent and they have a lot of ingredients that you need to win it, but it’s very painful,” he said. The Spaniard added: “I take the opportunity as well to congratulate Liverpool and what they’ve done in the manner that they’ve done, how consistent they’ve been. And I think they fully deserve to win it. They were the better team. They had so many attributes. They had consistently their squad available. And we’re going to try again. But up to that moment next season, now we’re going to have to finish the season very strong.”

Arsenal have not won the Premier League since 2004, under Arsene Wenger. The Gunners’ title bid has been weakened by a rolling injury crisis, with six first-team players still out. Arteta, who was also without the suspended Thomas Partey for their 1-0 defeat in the Champions League semi-final first leg against Paris Saint-Germain on Tuesday, underlined the scale of the problem.

“I was very shocked just before the game against PSG at home because I was walking into the dressing room and suddenly I saw all of them together sitting,” he said. “It was (Takehiro) Tomiyasu, next to him (Riccardo) Calafiori, next to him Gabriel Magalhaes, next to him Thomas Partey, next to him Kai Havertz, next to him Gabriel Jesus, next to him Jorginho. I said, ‘That’s a starting line-up! And we don’t have them. We haven’t had them for many, many months. And then I felt joy about the team and what they are doing and how they’re trying and nobody’s talking about it in the building at all.’

Arteta, whose side host mid-table Bournemouth today, said finishing second in the Premier League was the target now. Arsenal are five points clear of third-placed Newcastle with four games to play, with the top five all qualifying for next season’s Champions League.



Arsenal's Declan Rice (left) and Leandro Trossard at a training session in London yesterday.

SLOT SAYS LIVERPOOL PREMIER LEAGUE WIN WAS ONE OF ‘BEST DAYS OF MY LIFE’

Liverpool manager Arne Slot said that winning the Premier League title at Anfield was one of the best days of his life as he turned his thoughts towards next season. The Reds crushed Tottenham 5-1 on Sunday to seal a record-breaking 20th English league title with four games to spare, basking in a sensational atmosphere at their packed home ground.

“Maybe for all the Liverpool fans, but for many of them, one of the best days of their lives, and I think it was the same for me,” said Slot. “The way the whole day went, arriving at the stadium, how intense the fans already were,

then during the game going 1-0 behind, so it even felt like, ‘Oh, they’re not going to give it to us, we have to work for it! Scoring the goals, seeing how much it meant to the players but also to the fans, for me, was really special to be part of.’

Liverpool travel to face fifth-placed Chelsea tomorrow before taking on Arsenal, Brighton and Crystal Palace in their remaining games.

“It’s nice that we play some very strong teams with Chelsea, Arsenal, Brighton and Palace, so that gives immediate challenge to those games,” said Slot, 46. “It’s the end of the season but we also have to look at this as the start of next season already.”

PSG’s Dembele to miss Strasbourg trip, eyeing return for Arsenal

Paris: Paris St Germain forward Ousmane Dembele will miss their Ligue 1 trip to Strasbourg with a hamstring strain, manager Luis Enrique said yesterday as the French side look to have him back for next week’s Champions League semi-final second leg against Arsenal.

Dembele is PSG’s top scorer this season with 33 goals in all competitions and also netted the winner in their 1-0 first leg victory at Arsenal, but the 27-year-old came off in the 70th minute, going straight down the tunnel with an apparent injury. PSG confirmed he had a hamstring strain and that his “condition is progressing well”, with further assessments to be conducted in the coming days. “Tomorrow he won’t play, that’s for sure,” Enrique told reporters, while also declining to confirm if he will rotate his squad with the Ligue 1 title already in the bag. “We’re going to do what we’ve been doing up to now, with the same idea. Nothing has changed. The most important thing is that every minute spent wearing the PSG jersey is useful for matches in other competitions.”

PSG lost their chance to go an

entire league season unbeaten when they suffered a 3-1 defeat by Nice last weekend. Enrique’s side can still finish the season unbeaten on the road but the Spaniard has no interest in that record as they prepare to face Arsenal on Wednesday and Reims in the French Cup final later this month.

“It’s a match we’re preparing for in the Champions League, in the Coupe de France, not for the unbeaten record,” he said.

“It would be great to win the match in Strasbourg, but the motivation is to prepare for the Champions League match, not to break an unbeaten record.”

PSG have fallen in the Champions League knockout stages in recent years and have the opportunity to return to the final for only the second time as they chase a treble.

“We want to achieve this objective of playing this final, but there is still the semi-final second leg,” said Enrique, who previously won the treble coaching Barcelona. “There is no time to rest, you have to manage all of this. We, the coaches, go for the best. I’ve been a top-level coach for several years and it’s part of the job.”

LA LIGA

Barcelona’s Ter Stegen to return from long lay-off for Valladolid trip

AFP
Barcelona

Barcelona coach Hansi Flick said goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen will start against Real Valladolid in La Liga today, his first appearance since September following a severe knee injury.

The 33-year-old German international required surgery after he ruptured the patella tendon in his right knee during a game against Villarreal early in the season. “Marc is on the right track, at a good level. He has been training fantastically well for some time,” Flick told reporters, confirming Ter Stegen would play this weekend.

Ter Stegen returned to the squad for Barcelona’s Copa del Rey final win over Real Madrid on April 26 but was an unused substitute.

He will replace Wojciech Szczesny, who came out of retirement to sign for Barcelona after Ter Stegen got hurt, as Flick looks to keep his players fresh while

chasing a potential quadruple.

Szczesny is expected to regain his place for Tuesday’s second leg of the Champions League semi-final tie away to Inter Milan after a 3-3 draw this week in Spain. Flick was less forthcoming about injured top goal-scorer Robert Lewandowski, who missed the first leg against Inter with a hamstring problem.

Barcelona are four points clear of Real Madrid in La Liga with five games to play. Today’s opponents Valladolid are bottom of the table and destined for relegation. “La Liga is most important now, it is the best possible recognition for being at the highest level throughout the season,” said Flick. “That’s why a win is vital, games like these decide the competition.”

Barcelona still have to play Real Madrid one more time this season, on May 11, at the Olympic stadium. The Catalans have won all three previous meetings this term, with a 4-0 victory in La Liga last October and a 5-2 triumph in the Spanish Super Cup final in Saudi Arabia.



Barcelona’s goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen required surgery after he ruptured the patella tendon in his right knee during a game against Villarreal early in the season.

PREVIEW

Mahrez calls on Ahli to embrace opportunity in Asian CL final

Reuters
Jeddah

Al Ahli winger Riyad Mahrez has called on his teammates to avoid complacency as the Saudi Pro League side look to win the Asian Champions League Elite title for the first time today with victory over Japan’s Kawasaki Frontale.

The Jeddah-based club, who have the advantage of playing the final in front of their own fans at the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium, will be making a third attempt to lift the trophy after final defeats in 1986 and 2012.

But while a squad boasting high-profile signings such as Mahrez, Roberto Firmino, Ivan Toney and Franck Kessie will go into the decider as favourites, the Algeria winger emphasised the need to embrace the opportunity provided by the occasion.

“When you play in this type of competition you are ready to win, especially when you play at home,” said Mahrez. “We have a good opportunity to bring the first Champions League to Al Ahli and we will give everything. Of course the opponent is not an opponent that we play every week, it’s from Japan and it’s a different team. We have seen them play and we know what approach we can have. The most important is to give everything and to enjoy it because maybe some people think finals are every season, but some people might only play one final in their career. So we have to give everything to win the trophy for Al Ahli.”

Mahrez, 34, is no stranger to success, having been part of the



Manchester City side that won the treble of UEFA Champions League, Premier League and FA Cup in 2023 as well as four other English league titles, including with Leicester City in 2016. He was also a key part of Algeria’s Africa Cup of Nations success in 2019 but is looking to claim his first silverware since switching to Al Ahli from City last year.

“This is a trophy in another continent, in Asia,” said Mahrez, who has scored nine times in the competition so far.

“I’ve been lucky enough to play in teams that have won a lot of tro-

phies with big players. When you play, any trophy, any cup you play for is always exciting. I’m really looking forward to it. I really want to win a trophy with this team, this club and I’ll give everything tomorrow.”

Frontale booked their place in their first Asian final and prevented an all-Saudi showdown by stunning Cristiano Ronaldo’s Al Nassr 3-2 on Wednesday.

The J1 League side, who had never before progressed beyond the quarter-finals, are only the fifth Japanese club to play in a Champions League final.

Inter’s Martinez doubtful for Barca clash

Milan: Inter Milan captain Lautaro Martinez is expected to miss the second leg of their Champions League semi-final against Barcelona next week after picking up a hamstring injury. The Argentina striker was replaced at half-time of Wednesday’s 3-3 draw in the first leg in Spain, after which coach Simone Inzaghi said he doubted Martinez would be fit for the return clash next Tuesday at the San Siro.

Inter yesterday confirmed Martinez had suffered a hamstring strain but did not say how long he would be sidelined.

No love lost as Rangers not to give Celtic a guard of honour

Glasgow: Rangers will not give arch rivals Celtic a guard of honour when the Scottish champions visit Ibrox Stadium for tomorrow’s Premiership match, interim boss Barry Ferguson has said, keeping the fierce rivalry very much alive.

Celtic clinched a 13th Scottish Premiership title in 14 seasons last weekend when Brendan Rodgers’s side took an unsailable lead with four games to spare. Celtic also drew level with Rangers on 55 Scottish league titles each, a feat that will sting the blue half of Glasgow ahead of the Old Firm Derby.

“It (guard of honour) has never happened in the past and there’s been this huge clamour about it,” Ferguson said. “If I put myself in the shoes of a champion, it wouldn’t really bother me. I think if you ask any

of the Celtic players, I don’t think it would bother them either. It’s always been that way. Let’s just continue that way.”

It was the same case when Steven Gerrard’s Rangers clinched their 55th title in the 2020-21 season, with Celtic’s then-interim boss John Kennedy saying they would not even clap their rivals who denied them a 10th straight title.

“But one thing I will do is I will shake Brendan’s hand and say, ‘Well done for being so dominant,’ as there’s no doubt that’s been the case this year and that’s got to hurt,” Ferguson added. “It certainly hurts me and the staff and it’s got to hurt the players as well.”

Celtic’s manager was relaxed either way about a guard of honour. “It’s not in the rules that you have to do it. I think that when

two clubs and the rivalry’s so emotional, it’s always difficult for the team that comes up short,” said Rodgers, who has won four Premiership titles with Celtic in two stints.

“I always think if you’re a champion or not a champion, showing that humility to the other team, whatever the rivalry is, it’s a mark of respect. Celtic-Rangers is an emotional rivalry and if you come up short quite a lot then it can be a challenge for you and to justify that with your supporters. But, as I said, I’m a traditionalist.”

England, however, will stick with tradition. Chelsea boss Enzo Maresca confirmed that his side would give newly-crowned Premier League champions Liverpool a guard of honour at Stamford Bridge when they meet tomorrow.