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SPORT



TENNIS

Djokovic cruises into French Open second round

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Duhail beat Arabi in a nail-biter to clinch Amir Cup handball tournament





Qatar Olympic Committee President HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani crowned Al Duhail as champions of the Amir Cup handball tournament after they defeated Al Arabi 29-27 in a thrilling final at Duhail Sports Hall yesterday. Al Duhail reigned supreme in the decisive moments of a nail-biting title clash, with both teams locked at 17-17 by halftime. The closely contested battle saw momentum swing both ways before Al Duhail sealed victory in the final stages. The triumph marked Al Duhail's fifth Amir Cup title, adding to their previous wins in 2016, 2019, 2021, and 2023. Earlier this month, the side also clinched the Qatar Cup after defeating Al Arabi 30-26 – securing their third title in that competition.

FOOTBALL

PSG see end in sight in quest for elusive title

French giants face Inter in Champions League final

AFP
Paris



PSG's Khvicha Kvaratskhelia trains in Paris yesterday.

It has taken almost 15 years of huge spending and an overdue shift away from signing glamorous superstars, but Paris Saint-Germain go into Saturday's Champions League final against Inter Milan as favourites to finally win the coveted trophy for the first time.

A club that for years made a habit of collapsing in spectacular fashion in big Champions League games has been transformed this season as a thrilling young team, brilliantly coached by Luis Enrique, has taken the continent by storm. Once they might have been ridiculed by football fans around Europe who dismiss their domestic dominance due to the huge financial advantage they enjoy – PSG have just won their 11th Ligue 1 title in 13 years and eighth French Cup in a decade.

Now, however, they draw admiration from rivals – "This is the most complete team we have faced," said Arne Slot, whose Liverpool team lost to PSG in the last 16 in March. The Parisian bid to dominate Europe began in 2011, when Qatar Sports Investments (QSI) bought a club in dire straits.

Their investment immediately catapulted PSG into the top-10 wealthiest clubs in Europe and the rise has been vertiginous since. More than 2bn euros has been spent on transfers, and by last year, PSG's annual revenue of over 800mn euros had made them the third-richest club in the world according to analysts Deloitte, behind only Real Madrid and Manchester City.

Those two clubs are the last two winners of the Champions League, while PSG's only previous appearance in the final came in 2020, when they lost to Bayern Munich behind closed doors in Lisbon during the Covid pandemic. PSG's Qatari president Nasser al-Khelaifi had initially said the plan was to win the Champions League within five years of buying the club.

That did not happen, while signing both Neymar, for a world-record 222mn euros, and Kylian Mbappe in the same summer in 2017 was also not enough to deliver Europe's biggest prize. Indeed PSG even went backwards after signing Lionel Messi in 2021. "It is a trophy the club have been waiting a long time for, but it is very difficult to win," insisted Pedro Miguel Pauleta, a star PSG striker in the first decade of this century.

The genesis of their current success goes back to 2023, when the chronically-unfit Neymar and the ageing and unmotivated Messi departed. That was the summer Luis Enrique arrived, replacing Christophe Galtier to become the eighth coach of the Qatar era.

With their all-time record scorer Mbappe spearheading the attack, PSG got to last season's Champions League semi-finals, losing to Borussia Dortmund.

By then Mbappe had made it clear he would be leaving, yet Luis Enrique kept insisting his team would be better without the France superstar. "Last season we were also a proper team. I said we were going to improve the side. Players came in and all the stats say we are a better team now," the Spaniard said last week.

The former Barcelona boss needed a young, energetic and hungry squad to make a success of his preferred style of football and they have recruited some of the world's most exciting young players. Centre-back Willian Pacho, midfielder Joao Neves, and wingers Bradley Barcola and Desire Doue have been outstanding additions.

Ousmane Dembele has been turned by Luis Enrique into a clinical finisher who has 33 goals this season. Khvicha Kvaratskhelia joined from Napoli in January for good measure, and the oldest player in the squad now is Marquinhos, at 31. "We have the players to win the Champions League this year, next year or in eight years. We have the base on which to build a great team for the future," al-Khelaifi said in a interview with German media. "The new star at Paris Saint-Germain is the team and I am really proud of the way in which we have transformed the philosophy of the club in such a short space of time."

SPOTLIGHT

Sheikh Joaan, Ricci Bitti exchange perspectives on sport governance

On the sidelines of the ITTF Summit and Annual General Meeting in Doha, HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC), met with Francesco Ricci Bitti, Honorary Life President of the International Tennis Federation (ITF) and former President of the Association of Summer Olympic International Federations (ASOIF) for a strategic discussion on sport governance and international tennis development.

The meeting provided an opportunity to exchange perspectives on the evolving landscape of international sport governance, particularly in the context of the ASOIF governance framework. Ricci Bitti, who has played a central role in shaping and advancing these standards globally, shared his experience leading governance reform across Olympic federations.

The discussion reflected Qatar's efforts to align its national sporting bodies with internationally recognised principles of integrity, transparency, and autonomy.

HE Sheikh Joaan underlined the importance of strong, credible governance structures as the foundation for the sustainability and legitimacy of sport organisations. He also emphasised the QOC's commitment to ongoing institutional development and its readiness to contribute to wider global efforts to strengthen governance at all levels of the sport ecosystem.

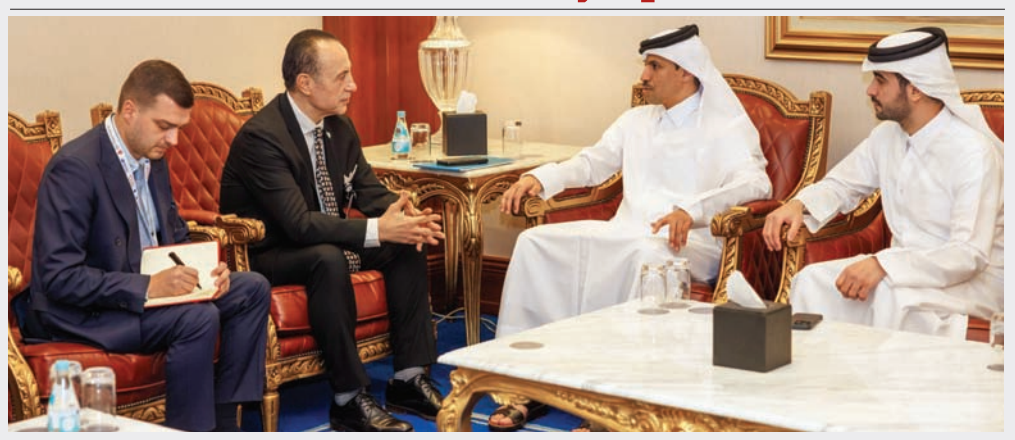


The meeting also addressed the future of international tennis. As Honorary President of the ITF, Ricci Bitti remains closely engaged with the sport's global development.

The conversation touched on pathways for growth, including in emerging markets, and the role of national and regional institutions in supporting both elite performance and broader participation. HE Sheikh Joaan reaffirmed Qatar's long-term engagement with tennis, both through its professional events and its support for youth development and regional co-operation.

Ricci Bitti will be formally named an Honorary Member of the International Olympic Committee on June 24 in recognition of his decades of service to the Olympic Movement. HE Sheikh Joaan extended his congratulations, acknowledging Ricci Bitti's enduring influence on the evolution of international sport and his contributions to institutional excellence.

QOC Secretary-General meets with President of the Albanian National Olympic Committee



Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain, Secretary-General of the Qatar Olympic Committee, met with Fidel Ylli, President of the Albanian National Olympic Committee, who is currently visiting Doha. The meeting reviewed aspects of sports co-operation between the QOC and its Albanian counterpart and explored ways to strengthen this collaboration in the coming period.

SPORT

CYCLING

Scaroni wins in Alps as Roglic quits Giro

AFP
Brentonico San Valentino, Italy

Christian Scaroni won stage 16 of the Giro d'Italia while Isaac Del Toro wobbled but clung on to first overall as several contenders fell or faltered on a crash-filled day in the Alps.

One of those was the former winner Primoz Roglic whose troubled Giro ended in abandonment after a fourth crash in this year's race. Richard Carapaz was also involved but picked himself up to carry on.

Scaroni and fellow Italian and Astana team-mate Lorenzo Fortunato, the two survivors of a long breakaway, crossed the line holding hands at the end of a mountainous 203-kilometre push from Piazzola sul Brenta to San Valentino.

"We spoke about it. He said he would give the stage to me. He's an incredible mate," said Scaroni. Scaroni became the first Italian to win a stage on this year's Giro, while Fortunato tightened his hold on the king of the mountains classification.

Behind them, Carapaz, Derek Gee and then Simon Yates, one after another, launched late attacks that Del Toro could not match.

The 21-year-old Mexican plugged away and did enough to save his pink jersey, but his overall lead dropped to 26sec over Yates and 31sec over Carapaz.

STRUGGLED IN RECENT SEASONS

Carapaz, a former Giro winner and Olympic road race champion, has struggled in recent seasons.

"I haven't been healthy the past few years, as well as bad luck with crashes and the like. I just wanted to give it a try again, I'm here to fight and I'm never going to give up," the 31-year-old Ecuadorean said at the finish.

Yates was also happy. "Things are looking positive, and luckily I had good legs today," he said on his Visma team's social media feed.

On a day when pre-race favourite Roglic, who had started the day in 10th nearly 4min off the lead, crashed out and Juan Ayuso, who had been third overall, cracked, Gee rose to fourth, 1min 31sec off the lead. Ayuso, in theory the leader of Del Toro's Team UAE, lost the thread on the penultimate climb, Santa Barbara.

He crossed the finish line almost 15min after Scaroni and dropped out of the top 10.

Two other riders were withdrew yesterday after crashes. Josh Tarling of Ineos hit a guardrail and Italian Alessio Martinelli slid across wet the road and into a ravine after falling during a descent. The 24-year-old was strapped into a stretcher and taken away by ambulance.

"Fortunately, medical tests ruled out fractures, only an injury to the chin and right buttock and was in 'stable' condition," his team, Bardiani, posted on social media after the stage.

On a day of intermittent showers, former Tour de France winner, Egan Bernal of Ineos, crashed on a descent when another rider's rain jacket appeared to become tangled in his wheel.

He changed bikes and rode on, climbing to sixth overall.

"It was a hard day. I suffered a crash and it was quite difficult to get the good feeling back," Bernal told his Ineos team's web site. "All things considered, we can say I came away all right."

"The GC has changed quite a lot in just one mountain stage, and there are still three left," he added. "I will keep fighting. Even if I am a bit cracked up."

Today brings a 155km run from San Michele all'Adige to Bormio that organisers rate three out of five for difficulty.

Friday and Saturday offer two five-star days with a string of huge climbs which will decide who can enjoy a triumphal entry to Rome at the end of a flat final stage.



XDS Astana Team's Italian rider Christian Scaroni (right) celebrates alongside second-placed Italian rider Lorenzo Fortunato after victory as he crosses the finish line of the 16th stage of the 108th Giro d'Italia cycling race of 203km from Piazzola sul Brenta to San Valentino yesterday. *(AFP)*

CRICKET

Jitesh and Kohli power Bengaluru into IPL qualifier 1

RCB CHASE DOWN 228 TO GO SECOND IN THE 10-TEAM TABLE

AFP
Lucknow

Skipper Jitesh Sharma hammered an unbeaten 85 and Virat Kohli hit 54 as Royal Challengers Bengaluru stormed into qualifier one of IPL playoffs with a six-wicket win over Lucknow Super Giants yesterday.

Bengaluru chased down 228 to go second in the 10-team table in the last league match of this season and set up a meeting with table-toppers Punjab Kings tomorrow.

The result pushed Gujarat Titans into third spot. They will face Mumbai Indians in the eliminator on Friday.

The top two teams have two shots at reaching the final on June 3 as the loser of qualifier one will face the winner of eliminator in qualifier two to decide the second finalist.

Lucknow skipper Rishabh Pant signed off with an unbeaten 118 off 61 balls in his team's 227-3, but in reply Bengaluru achieved victory with eight balls to spare.

Kohli set up the chase with his 30-ball knock and after his departure stand-in-skipper Jitesh put on an unbeaten stand of 107 with Mayank Agarwal, who hit 41, to trump Lucknow, who were already out of the playoffs.

The 36-year-old Kohli, who earlier this month announced his Test retirement alongside Rohit Sharma, went past 9,000 runs for Bengaluru - the most by a batsman for one team in men's T20 cricket. The next is Rohit for Mumbai with 6,060.



Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Jitesh Sharma in action during an IPL match against Lucknow Super Giants in Lucknow yesterday. *(Reuters)*

Kohli put on 61 runs with opening partners Phil Salt, who made 30, but the chase wobbled after Lucknow hit back with wickets. New Zealand quick Will O'Rourke took two in two.

Jitesh turned things around with his first IPL fifty. He hit eight fours and six sixes, including the winning hit over the fence, in his 33-ball knock.

Earlier Pant, who struggled for runs after being brought by Lucknow for a record $3.21mn in the auction, saved his best for last as he hit his season-best score.

Wicketkeeper-batsman Pant, a swashbuckling left-hander, reached his 100 in 54 balls and celebrated with a somersault. He had scored only 151 runs from 12 previous innings and averaged just 13.72.

Pant led the charge in a 152-run second-wicket stand with Mitchell Marsh, who hit 67 off 37 balls, after the captain promoted himself to number three in the batting order. Pant hit 11 fours and eight sixes in his 61-ball knock.

BRIEF SCORES

Royal Challengers Bengaluru 230 for 4 (Jitesh 85*, Kohli 54, O'Rourke 2-74) **beat Lucknow Super Giants 227 for 3** (Pant 118*, Marsh 67, Thushara 1-26) **by six wickets.**

FIXTURES FOR THE PLAY-OFFS AND FINAL

May 29 - Punjab Kings v Royal Challengers Bengaluru in Qualifier 1 at Mullanpur, near Chandigarh
May 30 - Gujarat Titans v Mumbai Indians in Eliminator at Mullanpur, near Chandigarh
June 1 - Loser of Qualifier 1 v winner of Eliminator in Qualifier 2 at Ahmedabad
June 3 - Winner of Qualifier 1 v winner of Qualifier 2 in the Final at Ahmedabad

FOCUS

Atkinson to miss ODI series with West Indies

AFP
London

England quick bowler Gus Atkinson is to miss this week's one-day series against the West Indies with a hamstring strain, it was announced yesterday.

Atkinson was in clear discomfort during the closing stages of the innings victory over Zimbabwe in the Trent Bridge Test, bowling only three tentative overs on the final day.

After assessing the problem, England have decided not to risk the Surrey seamer in Harry Brook's first assignment since taking over as white-ball captain.

Atkinson, who took three wickets against Zimbabwe, is not thought to be a major doubt for the forthcoming Test series against India, beginning at Headingley on June 20, but no risks are being taken with the 27-year-old.

He was the most experienced member of the pace attack in Nottingham, with the likes of Mark Wood, Jofra Archer, Brydon Carse and Chris Woakes all absent on fitness grounds, and England do not want any further setbacks ahead of a marquee series.

No replacements have been called up for the ODI leg, which starts at Edgbaston tomorrow and takes in games at Cardiff and the Oval.

England's fast bowling options for those games include a fit-again Carse, Saqib Mahmood, Jamie Overton, Matthew Potts and the returning Luke Wood.

A statement from the England and Wales Cricket Board read: "Gus Atkinson has been ruled out of the upcoming Metro Bank one-day internationals against the West Indies due to a right hamstring strain. He will now undergo a period of rehabilitation under the supervision of the England medical team. No replacement will be added to the ODI squad."

COMMENT

Ponting tells Punjab players not to ease up

Reuters
New Delhi

Punjab Kings coach Ricky Ponting was delighted that his side had qualified for the Indian Premier League (IPL) playoffs for the first time in 11 years but said he had told his players not to lose focus as they "haven't achieved anything yet".

Punjab registered their best performance in 2014 when they finished runners-up to Kolkata Knight Riders but failed to make the playoffs in the subsequent 10 seasons.

They have looked formidable under Ponting and captain Shreyas Iyer this season, however, securing a top-two finish following nine wins in 14 matches.

"I think it's pretty obvious that this is a really talented team and they are all on the same page and heading in the same direction," Ponting told the host broadcasters after Punjab beat Mumbai Indians in their final regular season match on Monday.

"It's a great achievement till now but really, if you look back, we haven't achieved anything yet. That's the one thing I've been saying to the players since the moment we qualified.

"The vision for me was always to finish in the top two, and we've got there now. It's a really happy group and we've enjoyed our time in each other's company for the last 10 weeks, but we've got another week to go yet."

Iyer, who captained Kolkata to the title last year before moving to Punjab, attributed their excellent season to a happy dressing room.

"I personally feel we need to maintain that relationship throughout, irrespective of what the situation is," Iyer said.

SPOTLIGHT

Edgy Pakistan and Bangladesh look to future with T20 World Cup on horizon

AFP
Lahore, Pakistan

Next year's World Cup is in sight as a new-look Pakistan under Mike Hesson host a young Bangladesh team in Lahore in three Twenty20 internationals from today.

The 2009 world champions Pakistan have endured a significant downturn in the last 12 months and crashed out in the first round of the World Cup in 2024.

They have won only three of their last 13 T20Is, two against minnows Zimbabwe, and slumped to eighth in the T20I rankings.

With a new head coach in New Zealand's Hesson they are looking to younger players with the World Cup in India and Sri Lanka just eight months away.

Star batsmen Babar Azam and Mohammad Rizwan, and pace spearhead Shaheen Shah Afridi, have all been axed.

Salman Agha will lead the side, having lost a series in New Zealand 4-1 two months ago.

"We've been really clear around the style of play we want and then it's about picking players that can do that," Hesson, who coached New Zealand from 2012-2018, said.

"We've got a good number of T20Is between now and the World Cup. We will develop a depth of squad playing the way we want and the rankings will come in time because it is about the way we want to play."

Bangladesh, ranked ninth, are in the same boat.

They have won just four of their last 12 T20Is and lost series against lower-ranked United States (2024) and United Arab Emirates earlier this month.

They also have a new coach in West Indian Phil Simmons, who will be missing senior players including Tamim Iqbal, Shakib Al Hasan, Mohammad Mahmudullah and Mushfiqur Rahim, all either fully retired or from the T20Is.

"We're aiming to improve our cricket by performing well in this series," said Simmons, who took over in October.

Frontline fast bowlers Taskin Ahmed and Mustafizur Rahman are nursing injuries while new pace sensation Nahid Rana withdrew from the tour over security fears following the cross-border conflict between India and Pakistan over the course of last five weeks.

The conflict put the tour in doubt but Bangladesh finally agreed to play three T20Is instead of the scheduled five.

The remaining matches are on Friday and Sunday, also in Lahore.



Pakistan team coach Mike Hesson chats with the squad at Lahore ahead of the three-match T20I series against Bangladesh. *(@TheRealPCB)*

TENNIS / FRENCH OPEN

Djokovic powers through as Norrie stuns Medvedev

Women's contenders Coco Gauff, Mirra Andreeva get their campaigns under way at windy Roland Garros

AFP
Paris

Novak Djokovic made a clinical start to his latest pursuit of a record-breaking 25th Grand Slam title at the French Open yesterday, while women's contenders Coco Gauff and Mirra Andreeva successfully got their campaigns under way at a windy Roland Garros.

The 38-year-old Djokovic had little trouble in seeing off 98th-ranked American Mackenzie McDonald 6-3, 6-3, 6-3, three days after becoming only the third man to win 100 ATP titles with his victory in Geneva.

"I don't know how many more Grand Slams I've got left in my body," said Djokovic, seeded sixth and playing in Paris for the first time since winning Olympic gold last August.

"I'm just trying to enjoy every moment in this magnificent stadium."

The three-time French Open champion lost his opening matches in both Monte Carlo and Madrid earlier in the clay-court season, but was dominant against McDonald, with his only hic-cup coming when he failed to serve out the second set in the eighth game.

The Serb, who withdrew injured before the quarter-finals in 2024, will meet a Frenchman in either Corentin Moutet or Clement Tabur in round two.

SAME HALF OF DRAW

Djokovic is on the same half of the draw as world number one Jannik Sinner and last year's runner-up Alexander Zverev, who saw off American teenager Learner Tien 6-3, 6-3, 6-4.

World number three Zverev is hoping to go a step further than 12 months ago when he lost the final to Carlos Alcaraz in five sets, his third defeat in as many Grand Slam finals.

His preparation has been far from ideal after his plane was struck by lightning on the journey to Paris following a last-16 loss in Hamburg.

The 19-year-old Tien, who knocked out Daniil Medvedev en route to the Australian Open last 16 in January, was overpowered on Court Suzanne Lenglen.

Zverev, who has reached at least the semi-finals in each of the last four French Opens, will next face Dutchman Jesper de Jong.

FORMER US OPEN CHAMPION SHOWN THE EXIT BY NORRIE

Former US Open champion and five-time Grand Slam runner-up Medvedev was dumped out in the first round for the sixth time in Paris, losing a dramatic clash with Cameron Norrie 7-5, 6-3, 4-6, 1-6, 7-5.

Grigor Dimitrov retired injured for a fourth consecutive Grand Slam tournament, calling it quits due to a leg injury when leading American Ethan Quinn by two sets to one.

Ninth seed Alex de Minaur, a quarter-finalist at each of the past four majors, started well with an accomplished 6-3, 6-4, 7-6 (8/6) win over Serbia's Laslo Djere.

Miami champion Jakub Mensik came through an entertaining match against Frenchman Alexandre Muller, repeatedly taunting the home crowd during a 7-5, 6-7 (5/7), 7-5, 6-3 victory.

GAUFF, ANDREEVA IMPRESS

In the women's draw, 2022 runner-up Gauff brushed aside Australia's Olivia Gadecki 6-2, 6-2.

Gauff, the 2023 US Open winner, has not won a tournament since last year's WTA Finals but reached the finals at both Madrid and Rome this month.

The 21-year-old American has reached the quarter-finals or better in each of her past four visits to Roland Garros.

"I knew it wasn't going to be a clean match with how windy it was," said the second seed, who initially forgot her racquets which had to be collected by a ball boy.

"Honestly, it was two different matches depending on which side of the court you were on."



Serbia's Novak Djokovic goes for a backhand retrieve during his first-round match against Mackenzie McDonald of the US on day three of French Open in Paris yesterday. *(Reuters)*

Rising Russian star Andreeva is eyeing her maiden Grand Slam crown after WTA 1000 titles in Dubai and Indian Wells and recovered well after falling 3-0 down to Spaniard Cristina Bucsa in the first set.

The 18-year-old quickly overturned the double-break deficit and eventually cruised to a 6-4, 6-3 victory over the world number 98.

"With time I played better and better, so I felt like closer to the end of the match was playing good, not like in the beginning," said the sixth seed.

Andreeva, who reached the semi-finals last year, will play American Ashlyn Krueger in the second round tomorrow.

Third seed Jessica Pegula also made serene progress with a 6-2, 6-4 success against Romania's Anca Todoni as the American returned to Roland Garros after missing the 2024 edition due to injuries.

Two-time former Australian Open champion Victoria Azarenka hammered Belgium's Yanina Wickmayer, who will retire after Wimbledon, 6-0, 6-0 on Court 6, while Magdalena Frech knocked out three-time Grand Slam finalist Ons Jabeur.



Britain's Cameron Norrie celebrates his victory over Russia's Daniil Medvedev during their singles match on day 3 of the French Open in Paris yesterday. *(AFP)*

FOOTBALL

Qatar Stars League, Doha Bank sign three-season sponsorship agreement

The Qatar Stars League (QSL) announced the signing of a three-season sponsorship agreement with Qatar's leading bank Doha Bank as the official sponsor of QSL and official banking partner of Qatar Cup.

The agreement reflects the commitment towards leveraging the capabilities available to both entities and achieving common goals.

On the occasion, Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain, President of QSL, said: "In our commitment towards developing our tournaments, particularly on the commercial and marketing fronts, through co-operation with national companies and institutions, we're pleased to announce the signing of a new sponsorship agreement with one of the leading banks in Qatar and the region, Doha Bank, a prestigious banking institution. We're proud of this strategic partnership and look forward to achieve our goals and serve Qatar's professional football and QSL tournaments. In this regard, I can only extend my thanks and appreciation to the management of Doha Bank, and I wish them continued success."

On his part, Sheikh Abdulrahman bin Fahad al-Thani, Group CEO of Doha Bank, said: "We, at Doha Bank, are pleased to co-operate with QSL to support national sports activities and benefit from distinguished national talent in this field. This is part of our social responsibility and our role in supporting various sports."



Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain, President of QSL, and Sheikh Abdulrahman bin Fahad al-Thani, Group CEO of Doha Bank, after signing the sponsorship deal.

Berlin eyes Olympic bid with centenary of Nazi Games in sight

Berlin: Berlin yesterday presented its proposal to hold the Summer Olympics, including a bid for the Games in 2036 that would fall exactly a century after the event was hosted by Adolf Hitler's Nazi Regime.
"No matter where they take place, the 2036 Games will bring the Nazi Olympic Games from 1936 back into focus," Berlin's Mayor Kai Wegner said at the presentation.
Hosting the 2036 Games would show "a city which has changed in the past 100 years", Wegner said in the event held at the city's Olympic Stadium, built for the 1936 Games.
"No longer do we stand for exclusion and hate, but we instead are a colourful, diverse metropolis which is open to the world," he said.
Berlin joins Munich, hosts of the 1972 Olympics, Hamburg and a joint bid by cities in the heavily populated Rhine-Ruhr region vying to host the festival of sport.
The hosts have until Saturday to submit their concepts to the German Olympic Sports Confederation (DOSB), who will decide on a bid to be submitted to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) by autumn 2026.
Berlin said it was also open to hosting the Games in 2040 or 2044, as well as 2036, without indicating a preference.
The capital's proposal would see events held across the north and east of the country and at urban locations - mirroring the approach taken in Paris in 2024.
Berlin officials said the beach volleyball would take place next to Berlin's Brandenburg Gate in the centre of the city.
The skateboarding would be at the disused Tempelhof airport, already popular with casual skaters, while sailing events would be held on Germany's Baltic Sea coast in Kiel or Rostock.
Previous bids in Germany have been undermined by local opposition. Munich, in an attempt to illustrate public support for the bid, have scheduled a referendum for October 2025.

FOCUS

Nadal tribute T-shirt re-sales 'a shame', says French tennis boss

AFP
Paris

French tennis federation president Gilles Moretton says it "is a shame" that some fans were selling the T-shirts handed out for Rafael Nadal's tribute at Roland Garros online.

Organisers gave all 15,000 people at Court Philippe Chatrier for a ceremony celebrating Nadal's career on Sunday free T-shirts printed with the words 'merci, Rafa'.

The different colours spelt out the message '14 RG, Rafa', referencing Nadal's record 14 French Open titles.

The simple orange or white T-shirts, also including the date "25/05/2025", were listed for sale on websites including Vinted and Leboncoin for prices ranging from 150 euros ($170) to 500 euros ($569).

"What do you want me to say, that we shouldn't have made them?," Moretton told a press conference yesterday.

"Some people are trying to make money out of it, with the 'Merci Rafa', the 'Thank You Rafa'.

"It's a bit of a shame, but we did not think of getting the T-shirts back at the end of the ceremony, that wouldn't have been right.

"I really appreciated the fact that about 98 percent of people wore the T-shirts to pay tribute to Rafa.

"It is because of the uniqueness of Roland Garros, something that hasn't been seen anywhere else, and this is precisely what has led people to want to buy these shirts at staggering prices."

Nadal fought back tears during the emotional ceremony and was joined on court by old rivals Roger Federer, Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray.

COMMENT

Ledecka mulls 'heliskiing' to battle schedule at 2026 Winter Games

AFP
Prague

Three-time Olympic champion Ester Ledecka said yesterday she was contemplating all options including "heliskiing" to compete in two sports scheduled for the same day at the 2026 Winter Olympics.

The 30-year-old Czech won the Alpine skiing super-G at the Pyeongchang Olympics in 2018, before winning the snowboarding parallel giant slalom there a week later.

This year, she won the downhill bronze at the world ski championships and gold and silver at the world snowboarding championships shortly afterwards. But the programme of the 2026 Olympic Games in Italy prevents her from competing in both downhill and the snowboarding parallel giant slalom as they are scheduled for the same day.

"I have sent letters to everyone," Ledecka told reporters in Prague. Johan Eliasch, the president of the International Ski and Snowboard Federation (FIS), has so far proposed to change the times but not the days of the races, she added.

"Being a pilot, he even offered to take me from Cortina to Livigno by air, which is terribly cool," Ledecka said. "I first tried heliskiing last year so this might be the second experience," she chuckled.

"But I don't just want to take part but also to perform as best I can," said Ledecka, who also won the snowboarding parallel giant slalom at the Beijing Games in 2022. "And it's tough when you do the downhill and an hour later they drop you off on a snowboard to do the qualification ride at once."

Ledecka said she could learn to adapt to such fast changes in training but added that it normally takes her two to three days to adjust and perform.

She said she would discuss a change in the programme with Eliasch and International Olympic Committee head Kirsty Coventry in a call "in the next two weeks".

"So we'll see how it goes. I'm still pushing for the snowboarding race to be moved," Ledecka said, adding her rivals showed understanding.

"It's also a good story for them. It can boost TV viewing rates if I'm the only athlete doing two sports at the Olympics," said Ledecka.

She said the "heliskiing" option could also be thwarted by poor weather and no-fly zones over the Olympic venues, in which case she would have to take a six-hour car ride between Cortina and Livigno. "Although we could make it in four hours if my mum is driving," Ledecka added.

SPOTLIGHT

Ronaldo says Al Nassr chapter 'over'

AFP
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia



Questions swirled over Cristiano Ronaldo's future in Saudi Arabia yesterday, hours after the superstar indicated he might be leaving Al Nassr in a social media post, just hours following the end of the Saudi Pro League season.

The 40-year-old Portuguese forward joined Al Nassr in 2022 from Manchester United and his contract with the Saudi club ends this summer. A special transfer window runs from June 1-10 to allow the 32 clubs involved in the Club World Cup to sign players.

Al Nassr are not at the Club World Cup unlike fellow Saudi side Al Hilal.

FIFA president Gianni Infantino last week said "there are discussions" over the former United, Real Madrid, Juventus and Sporting Lisbon star playing at the enlarged tournament in the United States starting on June 14.

"This chapter is over," Ronaldo cryptically said on social media with a photo of him in an Al Nassr shirt. "The story? Still being written. Grateful to all."

Ronaldo's potential exit from Saudi Arabia will likely raise fresh questions about how the Saudi Pro League would fare in his absence, with rumours already circulating of other ageing football stars eyeing opportunities in the kingdom. On Monday, Simone Inzaghi played down rumours he is set to leave Inter Milan after the Champions League final amid widespread reports of interest from Saudi Pro League club Al Hilal.

Ronaldo's announcement comes just months after Brazilian star Neymar ended his injury-plagued 18 month stay in the kingdom, where he played just seven times with Al Hilal after joining the club in August 2023 – despite a reported salary of around $104 million a year. The cryptic post from Ronaldo comes after Al Nassr lost in the semi-finals of the Asian Champions League last month to Japan's Kawasaki Frontale and finished third in the Saudi Pro League.

Ronaldo was the league's top goal scorer on 25. Last year, the five-time Ballon d'Or winner said he could end his career with Al Nassr. Ronaldo's great rival Lionel Messi will play at the Club World Cup with Inter Miami.

During a recent interview with YouTuber and streamer IShowSpeed, Infantino said: "And Ronaldo might play for one of the teams as well at the Club World Cup. "There are discussions with some clubs, so if any club is watching and is interested in hiring Ronaldo for the Club World Cup... who knows, who knows."

Saudi Arabia has shaken up football by spending heavily on stars from Europe, starting with Ronaldo's move in late 2022, and the desert nation will host the World Cup in 2034. For nearly two years, Saudi football fans could watch the likes of Ronaldo and Karim Benzema, with six Ballons d'Or between them, on any given weekend during the football season in the kingdom.

However, the oil-fuelled Saudi football project has drawn comparisons with the Chinese Super League, which imported players on exorbitant salaries until team owners went bust as the Chinese economy fizzled. But with Saudi Arabia set to host the 2034 World Cup, and desperate to re-model itself as a tourism and business magnet before global oil demand falls for good, there is probably more to come from the Pro League.

The Portuguese great appeared to trade an end-of-career payday for football obscurity when he moved to Riyadh's Al Nassr two years ago in a deal said to be worth $250mn. But his influence became clear when he was followed by a parade of ageing superstars to the big-spending Saudi Pro League.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Al Duhail part ways with coach Galtier



Al Duhail have parted ways with French coach **Christophe Galtier** following the expiration of his contract, the Qatar Stars League (QSL) club announced yesterday.

The former Paris Saint-Germain coach joined Al Duhail in October 2023, replacing Hernan Crespo. "The management of Al Duhail Sports Club extends its sincere thanks and appreciation to the technical director of the first football team, Mr. Christophe Galtier, and his assistant staff, following the end of his contract with the club. We wish them all the best in their next endeavours," Al Duhail said in a statement on X.

Al Duhail ended the season without a trophy, finishing as runners-up in both the QSL and the Qatar Cup, with Al Sadd claiming both titles. They were also eliminated from the Amir Cup at the quarter-final stage after a loss to Al Rayyan.

Sorling re-elected ITTF President

Doha: Sweden's Petra Sorling was re-elected President of the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) at the Annual General Meeting in Doha yesterday. Sorling received 104 votes, while the other candidate, Qatar's Khalil al-Mohannadi, received 102.

The AGM was held following the nine-day ITTF World Table Tennis Championships Finals at two venues in Doha. Prior to the President's elections, the AGM yesterday finalised host countries of the next three ITTF World Table Tennis Championships.

Astana, Kazakhstan will host the ITTF World Table Tennis Championships Finals 2027 whereas it was decided that Fukuoka, Japan will host the ITTF World Team Table Tennis Championships Finals 2028. Rio, Brazil will host the ITTF World Table Tennis Championships Finals 2029.

CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Chelsea Maresca wants title to show progress

'Every game is a chance to show we have improved and that we want to win titles'

Reuters
Wroclaw, Poland



Chelsea players take part in a training session yesterday, on the eve of the UEFA Conference League final against Real Betis in Wroclaw, Poland. *(AFP)*

Chelsea manager Enzo Maresca says today's Conference League final against Real Betis is a chance to make history, reinforce a winning mentality and prove his young side belong at the top. Chelsea finished fourth in the Premier League on Sunday to qualify for the Champions League, which they have won twice along with two Europa League trophies, raising questions about where the Conference League stands in their list of priorities.

"The Conference is important. For us it's been important since day one. And the reason why is because it's the European competition that we are currently in," Maresca told reporters. "... also because Chelsea can become the first club in Europe to win all the European competitions. If we are able to win, I think it's a good thing because we continue to build the winning mentality."

Maresca added that his side have proved themselves this season, with a final victory set to confirm their progress. "Every game is a chance to show we have improved and that we want to win titles," he said. "We are the youngest squad in the history of the Premier League, but also they are men. We are mature enough, and we can compete."

Chelsea have had little time to prepare for the final but Maresca insisted their focus had never slipped. "The message in the last 48 hours has been, we did something important (by qualifying for the Champions League). But if we want to confirm we're becoming an important club, we need to show the desire to win the title and to win the game," he added.

BETIS BELONG HERE SAYS PELLEGRINI AS CLUB'S FIRST EUROPEAN FINAL LOOMS

Meanwhile, Real Betis manager Manuel Pellegrini has downplayed any suggestion that his side are big underdogs in Conference League final against European heavyweights Chelsea.

Betis, who are playing in their first European final, face a side who have won two Champions League titles, two Europa League trophies and six English league crowns, but Pellegrini believes his team have just as much chance of lifting the trophy.

"I don't think it's David v Goliath – we've got the same chance as they do of winning the title," Pellegrini told reporters. "The emotional side has to be controlled because one mistake can be costly. If we play them as equals, we have a chance to win. We mustn't make errors through over-motivation."

Earlier this month, Chelsea manager Maresca expressed his displeasure after La Liga approved a request from Betis to push their final match forward two days, giving them more time to prepare for the final, and Pellegrini was sympathetic. "I read what Enzo said and I completely agree, not just about Betis vs Chelsea but in football in general – you can't give any rival an advantage," Pellegrini said.

He was also asked about his starting team for the final after he rotated players for La Liga and Europa League matches. "I think one of the important things has been making rotations in both competitions. It allowed us to qualify for Europe and reach the final," he said. "Tomorrow is different – we've had enough rest, it's the last match of the season, and everyone will try to field their best eleven to win."

The final caps off a strong season for the Seville-based side, who finished sixth in La Liga and are guaranteed a place in next season's Europa League regardless of today's result. "It's been a year-long effort to qualify for Europe with four games to spare, and we've had the ability to reach this final. It's Betis' first international final, and we feel confident."

Teenage Barca star Yamal signs new contract to 2031

Barcelona: Barcelona's teenage star Lamine Yamal signed a new contract until 2031 with the Catalan giants after a spectacular season. The 17-year-old winger is already one of the club's key players and helped them land a domestic treble of La Liga, the Copa del Rey and the Spanish Super Cup.

Spanish media reported the new deal makes him one of Barcelona's best paid players. After triumphing at Euro 2024 with Spain last summer, Yamal scored 18 goals and provided 25 assists in 55 matches across all competitions during a sensational campaign.

Operating on the right flank and a prodigious dribbler, Yamal's skill and speed contributed greatly to Barca netting 102 league goals this season as they reclaimed the crown from rivals Real Madrid. Yamal, who came through the club's feted La Masia youth academy and is often compared to all-time Barcelona great Lionel Messi, made his debut in 2023 under Xavi Hernandez at just 15.

By the end of the 2023-24 campaign he had emerged as the team's main attacking weapon, the bright spot in a poor campaign where Barca finished empty-handed. Following his exploits at the Euros, Yamal fitted Flick's attacking style to perfection and adding more consistency, showed he has become one of the world's best players.

Yamal put in two brilliant Champions League semi-final performances against Inter Milan but his team were edged 7-6 on aggregate and must wait to end their European drought.

Despite his youth the winger has already played over 100 times for Barcelona. Yamal, who turns 18 in July, follows teammate Raphinha and coach Flick in signing contact extensions in the last few days.

Spanish media report his contract includes various bonuses for different achievements, including winning the Ballon d'Or, as well as a significant pay rise. Yamal is a candidate to win the trophy for the world's best player this year.

ZIDANE 'CAN'T WAIT' TO TAKE 'DREAM' FRANCE JOB

Zinedine Zidane, widely tipped in France to take over as national coach after the 2026 World Cup, said the job would be "a dream" and that he was "looking forward" to taking it. Zidane, who is 52, was speaking at an event, French media reported.

"I feel qualified for the French team, where I played and spent practically 12, 13, 14 years as a player. Of course it's a dream. I can't wait," said Zidane, a former captain of Les Bleus and the scorer of two goals as they won the 1998 World Cup final.

Qatar's Ibrahim reaches 400m final at Asian Athletics Championships





Qatar's athletes made a strong start on the opening day of the 26th Asian Athletics Championships in Gumi, South Korea, with standout performances across track events. Ammar Ismail Ibrahim stormed into the men's 400m final after winning his semi-final in 46.05 seconds, while teammate Ashraf Osman also qualified. In the men's 100m, Salah Nur Yunis clocked 10.36 to reach the semi-finals. Abdirahman Saeed Hassan and Hatim Ait Oulghazi advanced in the 1500m. Over 2,000 athletes from 43 nations are competing in the championship, which runs until May 31 at Gumi Civic Stadium.