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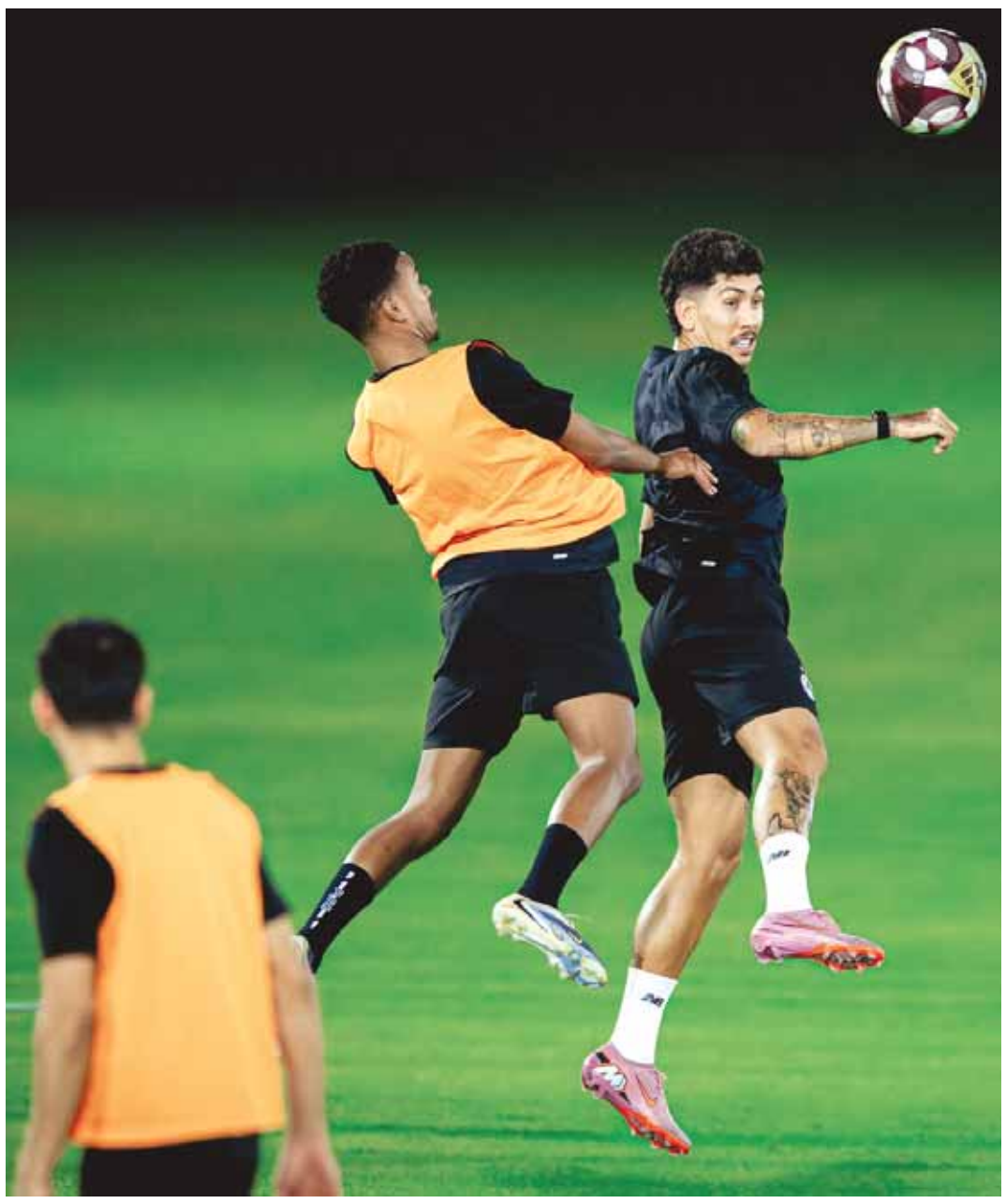
India see off Bangladesh to book Asia Cup final spot

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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Al Sadd, Al Duhail brace for heavyweight showdown

Both teams are level on seven points with Duhail in sixth place, while Sadd are just behind in seventh



Al Sadd star Roberto Firmino trains on the eve of the Qatar Stars League match against Al Duhail.



Al Duhail coach Djamel Belmadi (centre) and midfielder Marco Verratti during a training session.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Two of Qatar's football giants will collide when Al Sadd host Al Duhail in the Qatar Stars League at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium today. The clash, which kicks off at 8pm, promises to be one of the early season highlights, pitting two sides that have dominated the domestic scene over the past decade.

Both teams enter the fixture level on seven points, separated only by goal difference. Al Duhail sit sixth with two wins, two losses and a draw, while Al Sadd are just behind in seventh after recording the same results but with fewer goals scored. With the season still in its early stages, neither side can afford to lose ground in the title race, making the encounter one with potentially significant repercussions.

While the league table shows little between them, recent form tells a different story. Duhail arrive brimming with confidence after back-to-back victories, including a 4-2 win over Umm Salal and a statement 8-1 demolition of Al Arabi. These results have re-energised Djamel Belmadi's side after a patchy start, sending a message to rivals that Duhail remain serious contenders. Al Sadd, by contrast, have stumbled in their last two outings, losing to Al Shahania before being held to a draw by Al Wakrah. Felix Sanchez's men have shown flashes of their attacking quality but have struggled to convert dominance into victories.

Sanchez yesterday emphasised the need for his players to stay composed under pressure. "We have a very competitive match. We finished last season as the top two teams in the league, so we expect it to be a tough match," he said. "Unfortunately, we were not able to score many points in the last two matches, so we will try to bounce back. We know the situation is not easy, but the players are accustomed to dealing with the pressure of competition and we must achieve the desired results."

Al Sadd's veteran defender Boualem Khoukhi underlined the importance of the contest, describing it as "worth six points."

He said: "Every player will give 100 per cent to win. I know how sad our fans are with the team's current results and we will do everything in our capacity to make them happy. The match will be at our home stadium and the presence of fans will provide us with great motivation, especially before our match against Sharjah of the UAE in the AFC Champions League Elite."

Duhail coach Belmadi, on the other hand, was quick to highlight the historical weight of the rivalry. "The match against Al Sadd is always a top-of-the-range affair, regardless of the circumstances and results of the two teams," he said. "If we look back over the past 15 years, we will find that the competition has always been confined to the two teams, and this confirms to everyone the value of this match. It will be a very significant encounter."

The Algerian added: "Each match has its own unique nature and the accompanying events vary from one match to the next. We achieved a big win against Al Arabi in our last match, while Al Sadd settled for a draw in the same round. This does not mean much and does not reflect the outcome of the next match. The match against Al Sadd always has its own unique characteristics, and we will try to put in a strong performance against a strong competitor. We will strive to advance in the league competition, given our slight drop in the standings."

Duhail defender Sultan al-Breik echoed his coach's sentiments: "We will try to maintain the team's upward trend after we managed to secure six points from two consecutive victories. We will strive to achieve the match objective, which is to win with the three points."

Over the past decade, meetings between Al Sadd and Al Duhail have rarely disappointed. From title-deciding encounters to dramatic goal-fests, the rivalry has consistently delivered drama and intensity. Today's fixture carries all the hallmarks of another classic: two teams evenly matched on points, both with something to prove.

RAYYAN FACE GHARAFA

In the other match today, Al Rayyan will host Al Gharafa at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium. Both teams are currently tied on 10 points, having won three matches, drawn one and lost one. Al Rayyan hold the advantage in goal difference and occupy the third position. Al Gharafa come into the match after a 0-0 draw against leaders Al Shamal. On the other hand, Al Rayyan secured a convincing 3-0 win over Al Ahli.



QATAR, UAE BOOK U-17 GULF CUP SEMI-FINAL SPOTS

Doha: Qatar secured a dramatic 1-0 victory over Oman at the Under-17 Gulf Cup yesterday to seal their place in the semi-finals.

In a tense encounter at the Grand Hamad Stadium, Faisal Saeed struck the decisive goal in the fifth minute of stoppage time, sparking jubilant celebrations among the home crowd. The result lifted Al Annabi to six points from two matches, ensuring qualification, while Oman remain without a point.

In the group's other fixture, the UAE came from behind to defeat Yemen 2-1 in a thrilling contest at Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium. Yemen took the lead in the 30th minute through an own goal by Emirati defender Butti al-Junaibi. But the same player made amends with the equaliser in the 74th minute before Mohammed Battar struck the winner in the final minute of regular time.

The victory also lifted the UAE to six points, confirming their progress to the semi-finals alongside hosts Qatar. Yemen, like Oman, remain pointless and are out of contention. The group stage continues this week, but with two rounds completed, the identity of Group A's semi-finalists is already decided, setting up a strong run-in to the knockout phase.



SPORT

SPOTLIGHT

Stokes will be battle-ready for Ashes: Key

AFP
London

England cricket supremo Rob Key says captain **Ben Stokes** will be ready for the heat of the Ashes battle in Australia despite a lack of action following a shoulder injury.

Talismanic all-rounder Stokes has not played any cricket since July, missing the final Test against India at the Oval, which the tourists won to level the series at 2-2.

But the 34-year-old was this week named to lead the squad for the five Tests against arch-rivals Australia, starting in Perth on November 21.

Key, managing director of England men's cricket, told reporters yesterday that he had "no issues" with the skipper's lack of cricket.

"I think he had probably the best series he's had for us in the three years that (England coach) Brendon (McCullum), myself and Ben have been doing it," he said, referring to the Tests against India.

"With the ball, certainly it's the best I've seen him bowl for a long time, if not ever. And that was without playing a lot of cricket going into the summer.

"So I have no issues with Ben Stokes at all. And he's generally the type of player that builds and everything he does gets himself ready for these big moments."

England have not won the Ashes in Australia since 2010/2011, under the captaincy of Andrew Strauss, and last lifted the urn at home in 2015.

They have a terrible record on recent tours, losing 13 out of the past 15 Tests Down Under, with the other two matches finishing as draws.

PACE ATTACK

The tourists have picked an attack full of pacemen they believe can inflict damage on Australia's vulnerable top order and Key said he was excited by the prospect of unleashing express bowlers Jofra Archer and Mark Wood.

Wood returns after missing the whole of the English season with a knee injury, while fellow quick Archer is only two Tests into his comeback in the format.



"I'm probably more excited than anyone who's got to face them, really, so fingers crossed," said Key.

"We've worked so hard to get to this point. It's the last little step now. So, we get this bit right and then hopefully we've got every option available to us going into that first Test match at Perth. That may be Wood and Archer, maybe not. But to have that battery of bowlers, every single one of them fit, I'm still fingers crossed for it."

Other seamers on the plane will be Stokes, Gus Atkinson, Brydon Carse, Matthew Potts and Josh Tongue.

Key said the pace bowlers were growing in confidence.

"I think this is a bowling attack on the up," he said. "When we played against India, it was a very inexperienced bowling attack."

He added: "You're starting to see a bowling attack where some of these bowlers who haven't played 10 Test matches are now starting to think, 'This is what's required in Test cricket, this is where I need to go to be one of the best in the world.' They have the potential to do that. They're on the start of that journey."

Key said he could not wait for the Ashes to start.

"I think this is going to be one of the best series for a long, long time," he said.

"It's going to be really tough, but I'm so excited to see what's going to happen."

After the first Test in Perth, there are further games in Brisbane, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney.

CRICKET

Solid India see off Bangladesh, book Asia Cup final spot

Abhishek Sharma sparkles with 75 in a comfortable 41-run win

AFP
Dubai

India secured their place in the Asia Cup final yesterday as Abhishek Sharma starred with 75 in a comfortable 41-run win over Bangladesh in Dubai.

The holders posted 168-6 batting first after stumbling following a quick start, but their spinners helped stifle Bangladesh to 127 all out.

The result means Sri Lanka are out of the tournament, with today's Super Four match between Pakistan and Bangladesh to decide who faces India in Sunday's final.

Abhishek has enjoyed a remarkable start to his T20 international career with 783 runs from 22 matches at a strike-rate of 197.72.

The opener set up victory with another brilliant innings, striking six sixes and five fours in his 37-ball blitz, which ended with a run-out caused by a mix-up with captain Suryakumar Yadav.

Both Abhishek and fellow opener Shubman Gill, who made 29, started cautiously before the two took on left-arm spinner Nasum Ahmed, smashing 21 runs off the fourth over.

Abhishek reached his fifty off just 25 balls after Gill fell to leg-spinner Rishad Hossain.

Rishad quickly struck again with the wicket of the promoted Shivam Dube, before the dismissals of Abhishek and Suryakumar, for five off 11 balls, left India on 114-4. Hardik Pandya ensured India reached a competitive total with a 29-ball 38 with four fours and one six.



India's Tilak Varma (second right) celebrates the wicket of Bangladesh's Mohammad Saifuddin with teammates Abhishek Sharma (second left), Shubman Gill (right) and Kuldeep Yadav during their Asia Cup match at Dubai International Cricket Stadium yesterday. *(Reuters)*

Jasprit Bumrah struck first to send back opener Tanzid Hasan for one in the second over of Bangladesh's chase, before Saif Hassan and Parvez Hossain Emon, who made 21, put on 42 runs to steady the innings.

But Kuldeep Yadav dismissed Parvez and Bangladesh soon lost their way as the Indian spinners took charge. Saif, who survived four dropped catches, played a lone hand to raise Bangladesh hopes. Kuldeep struck twice with successive balls before Nasum played out the hat-trick ball. Saif finally fell in the 18th over for 69 to Bumrah and Bangladesh were bowled out in 19.3 overs.

BRIEF SCORES
India 168 for 6 (Abhishek 75, Hardik 38, Rishad 2-27) **beat Bangladesh** (Saif 69, Kuldeep 3-18, Bumrah 2-18, Varun 2-29) **by 41 runs**

COMMENT

Bumrah unlikely to be rested as India balance Asia Cup with WI series

Reuters
Dubai

India assistant coach Ryan ten Doeschate said pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah is unlikely to be rested for the remainder of the Asia Cup despite a two-match home Test series against the West Indies starting early next month.

Bumrah's workload has been managed this year due to back problems and the 31-year-old featured in only three of the five Tests during India's tied 2-2 series in England.

India, the defending champions at the Twenty20 tournament, will face Sri Lanka tomorrow and are likely to be in Sunday's final before they shift focus to two Tests against the West Indies, beginning on October 2.

"I'd say it's unlikely that he'll get a rest," Ten Doeschate said ahead of yesterday's Super Four match against Bangladesh in Dubai.

"Also bearing in mind we have a Test match starting (next) Thursday. So it's actually quite good preparation in terms of workload management. "So if we have the luxury to have that option (of resting Bumrah) in the last game, we can look at it. But I'd say we're going to pick our best team for every game. He obviously fits into that picture."

Bumrah has picked up three wickets at an economy rate of 8.36 in the Asia Cup, and endured a challenging outing against arch-rivals Pakistan on Sunday, conceding 45 runs without taking a wicket in India's victory.

"There's going to be days where he doesn't get wickets and he's going to go for runs," Dutchman Ten Doeschate said. "But in terms of how we set up the team, obviously with two seamers and going spin-heavy, we feel at the moment that's the best job."

The assistant coach said Bumrah was handling a hefty workload.

"You don't see many bowlers in this format bowling all three overs in the powerplay. So it's quite strenuous as well," he added. "But we feel it's the right amount of work going into the Test match and obviously the importance of this competition as well."



India's Jasprit Bumrah (left) celebrates with teammate Axar Patel after taking the wicket of Bangladesh's Tanzid Hasan at the Dubai International Stadium yesterday. India won by 41 runs. *(AFP)*

CYCLING

Australia riders power to gold to retain mixed relay road world title in Kigali



Team Australia celebrate on the podium after winning the team time trial mixed relay with second-placed team France and third-placed team Switzerland at the Road World Championships 2025 in Kigali, Rwanda, yesterday. *(Reuters)*

Reuters
Kigali

Australia retained their title in the mixed team relay at the UCI Road World Championships as they stormed to victory over two circuits of a hilly 20.9km course in Kigali yesterday.

After their male teammates went quickest on the first lap, the women finished it off with Amanda Spratt and Brodie Chapman hanging on up the final cobbled climb to claim victory.

They stopped the clock for a combined Australian time of 54:30 for the 41.8km – five seconds quicker than France.

Switzerland, who had women's individual TT world champion Marlen Reusser in their ranks, were 10 seconds back in the bronze medal position.

Australian rider Michael Matthews, who along with Jay Vine and Lucas Plapp, had laid the foundations for the women, said the team had focussed all their efforts on retaining the title.

"Not often we get a chance to ride with other Aussies and we had full focus for this after we won last year," he said.

"We enjoyed mixing it with the girls and putting it together today was the cherry on the cake."

Teams, including from hosts Rwanda, Benin, Uganda and Ethiopia, comprised of three men and three women.

The men rode first with the women starting their circuit when the second male of their team crossed the line.

Team times were taken on the second woman to finish.

Large crowds of enthusiastic fans cheered on hosts Rwanda and they finished in a very respectable 11th, but it was cycling's more-established nations who were always going to dominate the podium.

Australia's men's trio gave their female teammates a 33-second buffer to defend and they needed all of it.

Switzerland were left to rue a mechanical for Reusser near the end of the circuit although she re-joined her two teammates on a spare bike and roared up the Cote de Kimihurura climb to put her team in first position.

But France responded with Juliette Labous and Maeva Squiban putting in a stunning effort.

Australia were the last on the course and when Felicity Wilson-Haffenden dropped back it was left to Spratt and Chapman to bring it home.

Spratt was hanging on to her teammate in the final leg-stinging kilometre but had enough in the tank.

"I knew it was going to be hell," Spratt said yesterday.

"Brodie was so strong in the last part and I just needed to hold the wheel. The team director was screaming to 'sprint to sprint', it was incredible to pull it off for the team."

Italy, who had been in contention for a podium finish, were fourth.

The championships, the first to be staged in Africa, culminate with the elite road races at the weekend with Sunday's men's race expected to be a fight between Slovenia's Tadej Pogacar and Belgium's Remco Evenepoel.

MOTORSPORT

Marquez poised to seal seventh MotoGP crown

The Spanish Ducati rider just needs three more points in Japan

AFP
Motegi, Japan



Marc Marquez can clinch his seventh MotoGP world championship in Japan at the weekend to underline a season of dominance and match the record of motorcycle great Valentino Rossi.

The Spanish Ducati rider is on a whopping 512 points and needs just three points more than his brother Alex Marquez to win the title with five weekends to spare of the 22-race season.

Sealing a first championship since 2019 at Motegi would crown a comeback from an injury nightmare which began when Marquez broke his right arm in 2020.

The 32-year-old has been in unstoppable form this year and his points total is already a single-season record for a MotoGP rider.

The last of his three Japanese MotoGP wins came in 2019, but such is his brilliance that Marquez's victory in San Marino two weeks ago was his 11th in 16 races this campaign. He has also won 14 of the 16 sprints.

"We'll approach Motegi the same way, maintaining the same performance level we've shown in all these races," Marquez said.

"There are six events left in the season but we want to wrap up the title race as soon as possible."

Marquez suffered a rare slip-up in San Marino when he crashed while leading the sprint.

He made no mistake in the following day's Grand Prix, overtaking pole-sitter Marco Bezzecchi to move into the lead on lap 12 before calmly seeing out the win.

It was Marquez's 99th race win across MotoGP, Moto2 and Moto3.

MESSI CELEBRATIONS

His charge to the title has been helped by teammate Francesco Bagnaia's erratic form and injuries to defending world champion Jorge Martin.

Bagnaia, a twice world champion, has finished no higher than seventh in his last four races and has won only once this season.

Alex Marquez has been his brother's closest challenger and is almost 100 points ahead of third-place Bagnaia in the standings.

He knows his brother's coronation as world champion is just a matter of time, but he is looking to postpone the inevitable for as long as possible.

"We'll continue on our path to the runner-up spot in the championship, which would be a really great result," Alex Marquez said after the San Marino race.

Last year's Japanese MotoGP saw Bagnaia win both the sprint and the Grand Prix to cut Martin's championship lead with four races remaining.

Marquez, then riding for Gresini, finished third after a titanic tussle with Enea Bastianini.

Marquez was all but out of the championship picture by that time but the situation could not be more different 12 months later.

He will be hoping to give Japanese fans a glimpse of his Lionel Messi-inspired celebration, which he unveiled in San Marino.

Marquez whipped off his racing leathers and showed them to the crowd in a similar gesture to the Argentina star's celebration after scoring a late winner for Barcelona against Real Madrid in 2017.

Marc Marquez said the championship celebrations were "getting closer and closer".

"It looks like a matter of time but I want to keep the same mentality," he said.

"Now we need to close as soon as possible, but I know that Alex is also super fast, and he's also fighting for second place in the championship."

TENNIS

Alcaraz expects Sinner to come back stronger after US Open loss



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz speaks to the media during a press conference on the sidelines of the ATP Japan Open in Tokyo yesterday. *(AFP)*

AFP
Tokyo

World number one Carlos Alcaraz said yesterday that he will have to prepare for a new and improved Jannik Sinner after beating his great rival in the US Open final.

Italy's Sinner admitted he needed to overhaul his "predictable" game after losing to Alcaraz in New York earlier this month in the latest of a string of recent defeats to his Spanish nemesis.

Alcaraz is playing at the Japan Open in Tokyo this week, while Sinner will compete at the China Open in Beijing in his first appearance since the US Open.

Alcaraz said he would need to be ready for a different Sinner next time he faces the world number two on the court.

"I know he's going to change something from the last match," said Alcaraz. It's the same thing that I did when I lost to him a couple of times, I tried to be a better player the next time I was going to face him.

"I have to be focused and I have to be ready for that change," he added.

Alcaraz and Sinner have dominated men's tennis this season, with the pair contesting all four Grand Slam finals, winning two each.

Alcaraz is only 22 and Sinner is just two years older, and the two look set to monopolise the sport's top titles for years to come.

"Our rivalry is getting better, which for me and for tennis I would say is great," said Alcaraz.

"We will see in the future how many times I'm going to play against him and which circumstances we will play.

"Right now, it's going great."

Alcaraz heads to Tokyo coming off a surprise loss to American world number five Taylor Fritz at the Laver Cup in San Francisco last week.

Fritz is the number two seed in Tokyo, where Denmark's Holger Rune, Norway's Casper Ruud and the Czech Republic's Tomas Machac will also compete.

Alcaraz has won the French Open as well as the US Open this year and he said it had been "the best season that I've ever done".

"I've seen myself that I've grown up a lot as a player on the court," he said.

"For me, it could be better, of course it could be better, but I can't complain about the season I'm having so far."

Alcaraz is playing at the Japan Open for the first time in his career.

He said he wanted to play in Tokyo to "see the culture and see everything here".

"I'm really excited about playing in different places, in different stadiums, and feel the energy from the Japanese people," he said.

GOLF / RYDER CUP

Europe ready for McIlroy taunts from rowdy US fans

AFP
Farmingdale, United States



Rory McIlroy of Team Europe leaves the 18th green through a player tunnel during a practice round prior to the Ryder Cup 2025 at Black Course at Bethpage State Park Golf Course in Farmingdale, New York. *(AFP)*

Europe's golfers are ready for world number two Rory McIlroy to become a heckling magnet for raucous United States supporters when the Ryder Cup begins tomorrow at Bethpage Black.

McIlroy, who won the Masters in April to complete a career Grand Slam, leads holders Europe into his eighth Cup showdown, the most of any player in this week's matches. He has aimed some choice remarks at US star Bryson DeChambeau and is known for emotional moves such as cupping his hand to his ear after sinking long putts to silence US crowds in past Cups on American soil.

"Rory is very comfortable with himself. I think he has thick skin. I think that he can handle the blowback of if he says something that he believes and it is not taken in the right way," England's Justin Rose said.

"He's happy to see it how he sees it and call it how he sees it. And I think he has the freedom on the golf course to just roll with that. What he says I don't think layers into his golf game, and that's an amazing talent. He always plays incredibly freely, and I think that's probably the line where Rory can tiptoe better than most."

Sweden's Ludvig Aberg knows fans in New York will be doing their best to unsettle his team. "There's always going to be a little bit of chirping going on," he said. "You're going to be hearing a lot of things, which is a part of it."

Being partnered with McIlroy, however, is not something European players will shy away from because of heckling, England's Tommy Fleetwood said. "Whoever gets to play with Rory this week, what a privilege. What an amazing thing to be able to do," he said. "If I'm one of them that gets a chance to play with him, I would love that opportunity."

Having families face such issues, however, is another matter.

"That energy, that passion and that home team environment is something that plays such a big part in the Ryder Cup, and you have to embrace that," Fleetwood said. "We've all discussed as a team who feels comfortable, how the family would feel comfortable, what they want to do. It's just do they want to be out there and support."

Sometimes family members avoid watching their own relatives. "The families aren't just here for you. We're all part of Team Europe, and whatever that involves and whoever that involves supporting out there, that could be very different," Fleetwood said. "It's something we've all discussed, and it's one of those things. It'll be very fluid throughout the week. I'm sure it's all going to be great."

World number five Justin Thomas, a US two-time major winner, has said family insults is where hecklers must draw the line. "You definitely hear some stuff. It's tough," Thomas said.

"A Ryder Cup, you kind of know what you're going to get. (Where) I think all the players are in the same boat is once it ever gets to a point of being a little bit more personal of families, family members. If we're not playing well and you're talking trash about us, we probably deserve it, but if you start getting into the loved ones, that's I think when everybody starts really getting a little bit chippy.

"There's obviously never in any sport a time to get personal or disrespectful, but at the same time it's the Ryder Cup, and it's a home game for a reason. There has been plenty of good, plenty of bad on both ends, and you hope to give them reason to cheer for the good."

Sinner taking time with tactical tweaks to tackle Alcaraz



Carlos Alcaraz (left) of Spain hugs Jannik Sinner of Italy at the net after their singles final of the 2025 US Open at USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center.

Madrid: World number two Jannik Sinner said he is making small tweaks to his game following his defeat by Carlos Alcaraz in the US Open final earlier this month and the Italian is confident it is only a matter of time before he implements the changes in matches.

Sinner fell 6-2 3-6 6-1 6-4 at Flushing Meadows to surrender his crown and the top ranking to Alcaraz before admitting he had to be a lot more unpredictable to become a better player against his main rival.

"We've been reflecting a lot on that final," Sinner said yesterday, ahead of his China Open campaign in Beijing.

"We're working on new things and changing a lot of small things. The amount of mistakes at the moment is a little bit higher, but I hope that this recovers.

"It's just a question of time. I don't know how much I'm able to (implement changes) on the actual match court because one thing is practice and one thing is match. I'm very motivated. It's great to work on something new, then we see how this ends up."

POTENTIAL ENCOUNTER

While the Australian Open and Wimbledon champion sharpens his skills ahead of another potential encounter with Alcaraz at the Shanghai Masters next month, the Spaniard is gearing up for a tournament in Tokyo.

Alcaraz, who also beat Sinner in an epic French Open final this year, improved his head-to-head record to 10-5 at New York but believes that the Italian will be a better player the next time they meet.

"I know he's going to change," Alcaraz said.

"He's going to change something from the last match. It's the same thing that I did when I lost to him a couple of times. I tried to be a better player.

"The next time I face him ... I have to be focused and I have to be ready for the changes. I'll try to overcome those changes and be ready for that rivalry.

"It's getting better for me and for tennis.

"We'll see in the future how many times I'm going to play against him and in which circumstances we play. Right now it's going great."

LEAGUE CUP

Slot blasts 'stupid' Ekitike for red card after scoring

Forward apologised after he was sent off for removing his shirt

Reuters
Liverpool

Liverpool manager Arne Slot blasted Hugo Ekitike for a stupid sending-off after tapping home a winner against Southampton in the League Cup on Tuesday and then removing his shirt in celebration. The Frenchman, who replaced record signing Alexander Isak at half-time, had been booked already for kicking the ball away in frustration and the second yellow five minutes from time left Liverpool defending a 2-1 third-round lead with 10 men.

Liverpool captain Andy Robertson told said it was a stupid thing to do when on a yellow card and Slot doubled down afterwards. "I think it's also stupid if you haven't had a yellow card yet," he said.

"Maybe I'm a bit old-fashioned, maybe a bit old school, but I did score a few goals – not at this level – as well and if I maybe outplay three players, which I never did, and then hit it in the top corner, then maybe you can say 'oh, this is all about me.'

"But if I had to score a goal like he did tonight, I would have turned around and walked up to Federico Chiesa and would say 'It's all about you, Federico. Great assist, great run and I didn't have to do a lot'. It was stupid, not smart in every sense... he's now suspended for Saturday and that is far from ideal."

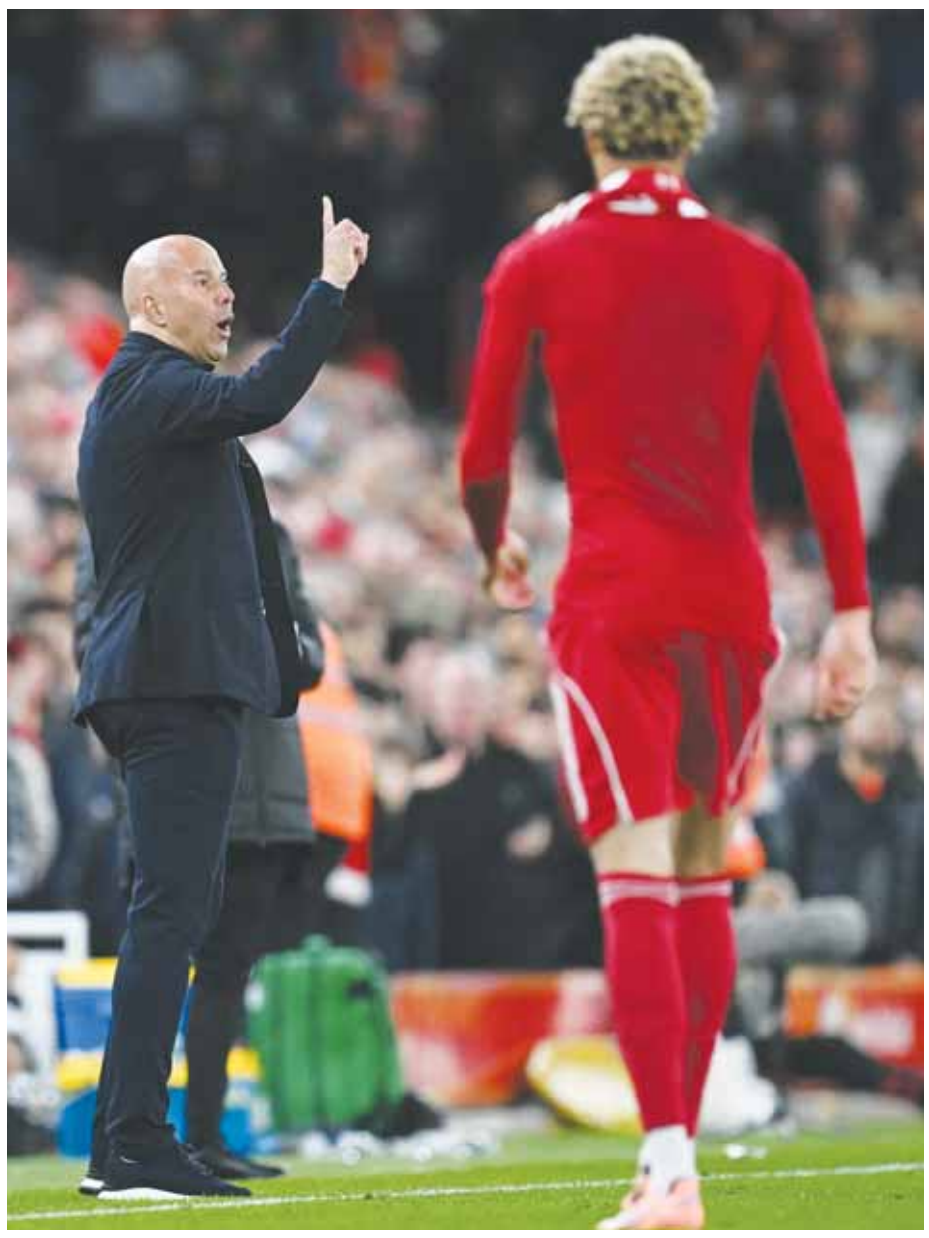
Ekitike later apologised on Instagram: "The emotion got the better of me tonight," he said. "My apologies to all the Red family..."

League leaders Liverpool, with a 100% record so far this season, have a tricky away trip to unbeaten Crystal Palace next in the league. Slot fielded a completely changed starting lineup on Tuesday from the side that played Everton on Saturday, with Isak starting and scoring his first goal for the club.

"It wasn't our best performance, which probably has a lot to do with players that haven't played for a long time or for the first time," he said. The manager said Isak would get increasing game time, with Liverpool trying to build him up faster than usual, but did not expect him to be fully up to speed until after the next international break.

Club World Cup champions Chelsea suffered an early scare at third tier Lincoln City but came back from a goal down at half-time to win 2-1 with teenager Tyrique George equalising in the 48th and providing the assist for Facundo Buonanotte's 50th-minute winner.

League One (third tier) Cardiff City provided the upset of the eight games on the programme by beating top flight Burnley 2-1 at Turf Moor. Premier League bottom side Wolverhampton Wanderers won their top flight clash 2-0 against Everton, who had James Garner hit the bar with a second-half free kick and Jack Grealish coming off the bench.



Liverpool's manager Arne Slot gestures on the touchline as striker Ekitike leaves the pitch after being sent off after picking up his second yellow card during the League Cup third-round match against Southampton at Anfield in Liverpool on Tuesday. *(AFP)*

Paraguayan midfielder Diego Gomez scored four, including a 24-minute first-half hat-trick, as Premier League Brighton & Hove Albion thumped third tier Barnsley 6-0 at Oakwell to reach the fourth round for the fifth time in six seasons. Second tier Wrexham gave their Hollywood owners another home night to savour by beating Reading 2-0, with Nathan Broadhead scoring both – his first for the Welsh side who go through to the fourth round for the first time since 1977.

Premier League Fulham beat fourth tier visitors Cambridge United 1-0 at Craven Cottage with Emile Smith Rowe scoring the 66th-minute winner. Championship side Swansea City and fourth tier giantkillers Grimsby Town are already through to the fourth round along with Premier League Brentford and Crystal Palace.

LA LIGA

Mbappe and Vinicius shine as Real Madrid dispatch Levante

Reuters
Valencia

Real Madrid maintained their flawless start to the season with a swashbuckling 4-1 victory over Levante on Tuesday, as Vinicius Jr orchestrated the first-half demolition before Kylian Mbappe's second-half brace sealed a comprehensive win.

The result keeps Real Madrid comfortably atop the standings on 18 points after six matches, stretching their lead to five points over reigning champions Barcelona, who have a game in hand ahead of today's clash at Real Oviedo. Levante languish in 16th place on four points.

It was a particularly satisfying night for Vinicius Jr, who was under scrutiny after a mixed start under new manager Xabi Alonso. Before Tuesday, he was yet to complete a full 90 minutes for Real Madrid at the start of the season and started on the bench on two occasions.

But he produced an excellent performance against Levante and was rewarded by playing the full game and finished the match wearing the captain's armband. Vinicius Jr set the tone with a moment of brilliance in the 28th minute, unleashing a strike from the right side of the box using the outside of his right boot that went in just inside the far post.

The Brazilian turned provider 11 minutes later, threading Franco Mastantuono through down the right channel in a lightning-fast counter-attack. The youngster burst into the box and unleashed an unstoppable strike into the top corner from close range to double Madrid's advantage.

Real could have entered the break with an even more commanding lead had it not been for Levante's Australian goalkeeper Mathew Ryan, who produced crucial saves to deny efforts from Vinicius, Federico Valverde and Mbappe in the opening 45 minutes.

Levante briefly threatened a comeback when Ivan Romero's 54th-minute effort deflected off Dean Huijsen and lobbed over the wrong-footed Thibaut Courtois, allowing Etta Eyong to head home the loose ball at the far post. However, Mbappe restored Madrid's two-goal cushion nine minutes later, converting from the penalty spot with a cheeky chip down the middle after Levante captain Unai Elgezabal fouled him in the box, as Ryan dived helplessly to his left.

The French forward completed his brace three minutes later, collecting Arda Guler's long pass through the middle before rounding the goalkeeper and tapping into an empty net. Real Madrid face a stern test away at city rivals Atletico Madrid on Saturday, while Levante play Getafe in the Spanish capital on the same day.

"Vinicius has played a decisive and very important role tonight," coach Alonso told a press conference. "We are in a phase of growth, of construction. We are in the beginning of the season and there is still a long way to go. We are still building a solid foundation to be competitive in the Champions League, La Liga and the Copa del Rey.

"I see the players feeling energised and connected, which is important. There are still things to improve, things we can do better, but we are on the right track."



Real Madrid's Kylian Mbappe vies for the ball with Levante's Unai Elgezabal during the La liga match in Valencia. *(AFP)*

SPOTLIGHT

Formula 2 set for action at Lusail International Circuit

Formula 2, the premier feeder series to Formula 1, is once again set to bring the next generation of racing stars to Lusail International Circuit (LIC) this year. Often deemed as the ultimate proving ground for young drivers, Formula 2 delivers high-intensity, wheel-to-wheel racing where talent and racecraft are on full display – often shaping the careers of future Formula 1 champions.

Last season, LIC hosted one of the final rounds of the F2 calendar, where fans witnessed a dramatic showdown featuring Gabriel Bortoleto, Isack Hadjar, Zane Maloney, and Paul Aron in their hunt for the title. Bortoleto ultimately claimed the championship, ahead of Paul Aron in second and Isack Hadjar in third. Both Bortoleto and Hadjar have since progressed to the pinnacle of motorsport, joining the 2025 F1 grid – a testament to how F2 serves as the final stepping stone to F1, where every overtake, pit stop, and podium finish can shape a career.

As the 2025 season builds momentum, LIC once again takes its place as the penultimate round on the calendar, promising another weekend of intense racing. The 5.38km circuit, with its flowing corners and 1.068km straight, offers a true test of driver skill – one that pushes the grid to its limits in both sprint and feature races.



Last season, LIC hosted one of the final rounds of the F2 calendar, where fans witnessed a dramatic showdown.

DRIVERS TO WATCH IN 2025

This year's F2 championship is proving as competitive as ever, with several standout talents emerging at the top of the standings:

Leonardo Fornaroli (188 points) – The Italian continues to lead the standings and remains the benchmark thanks to his consistency across both Sprint and Feature races. Fornaroli's 2025 wins include Silverstone Sprint, Spa Sprint, Budapest Feature, and Monza Sprint. In Baku, he crossed the line third but dropped to fifth after a 10-second time penalty, losing ground in the championship fight.

Jak Crawford (169 points) – The American strengthened his championship bid with a commanding Feature Race win in Baku—his fourth victory of the year — after converting pole position and fending off Joshua Duerksen in a tense finish. Crawford's season tally also includes triumphs in the Imola Sprint, Monaco Feature, and Silverstone Feature. As Aston Martin's development driver, he's now Fornaroli's closest challenger.

Luke Browning (161 points) – The British driver remains firmly in contention. His maiden Feature Race victory at Monza and a string of consistent podiums keep him within striking distance of the leaders.

Richard Verschoor (151 points) – The Dutchman has enjoyed a strong campaign, highlighted by three wins (Jeddah Feature, Barcelona Sprint, Spielberg Feature). In Baku, he added more points with a solid eighth-place finish, keeping him in touch with the top group.

Alex Dunne (130 points) – The Irish rookie continues to shine. With Feature Race wins in Sakhir and Imola plus multiple podiums, Dunne underlines his aggressive but controlled style, cementing his place as one of the season's breakout stars.

Further down the order, Josep Martí (112 points) and Arvid Lindblad (109 points) continue to impress — Marti with his early-season Sprint win and Lindblad with standout performances like his charge from P14 to sixth in Baku. Dino Beganovic (96 points) also made waves in Azerbaijan, adding a Sprint Race victory and a Feature Race podium to his risumi, while Roman Stan k (81 points) remains a consistent points-scorer.

A PROVEN PATHWAY TO FORMULA 1

Looking ahead to 2026, F2 drivers are already being linked to full-time F1 seats. Jak Crawford is confirmed to be in active talks with Cadillac's F1 team for 2026, positioning him as one of the foremost candidates should an opportunity arise.

Meanwhile, Red Bull is preparing Arvid Lindblad for a likely promotion to their Racing Bulls outfit, having granted him an early super-licence and placed him behind the wheel in F1 practice sessions. These developments underscore F2's role as the proving ground for motorsport's next generation. With the new Dallara F2 chassis introduced in 2024 – lighter, more powerful, and designed to mimic modern F1 handling characteristics – drivers are developing skills directly transferable to the F1 grid.

THE STAGE IS SET AT LIC

As the championship battle tightens, LIC will once again provide a decisive stage. The Qatar round being the second last of the season, running as part of the Formula 1 Qatar Airways Qatar Grand Prix 2025 weekend, offers fans the unique opportunity to witness both F1 and F2 in action – seeing today's heroes and tomorrow's stars compete on the same track. Tickets for the Formula 1 Qatar Grand Prix 2025 are available now at https://tickets.lcsc.qa

Ballon d'Or disappointment will inspire Yamal: Barca coach Flick

Barcelona: Barcelona star Lamine Yamal will be driven to greater heights after being beaten to the Ballon d'Or by Ousmane Dembele, the club's coach Hansi Flick said.

The 18-year-old winger finished second behind Paris Saint-Germain attacker Dembele in the battle to be crowned the world's best player, but won the Kopa Trophy for best young player. "I spoke with him yesterday, and I think he sees it (in the) right (way), so it's for him also motivation for the next years," Flick said.

"Dembele, he deserved it also, it's a vote and a lot of things can happen and I think he accepted this in a good way, and he's motivated to show it this season. Maybe next season he also will be an option for the Ballon d'Or, but I really appreciate that a lot of players from our team are in this situation, and it's great for our team. It shows a lot how your last season was, and this is also our goal for this season."

Yamal starred as Barcelona won a domestic treble of La Liga, the Copa del Rey and the Spanish Super Cup. The winger is set to miss today's clash at Real Oviedo with a groin issue as the champions try to keep pace with La Liga leaders Real Madrid, who beat Levante on Tuesday to move five points clear of Barca.

Last season the Catalans struggled in games without the teenager but they thrashed Valencia and Getafe without him in their previous two games.