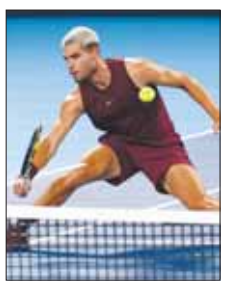
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Alcaraz sweats on ankle injury after opening win in Japan



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CRICKET

Pakistan down Bangladesh to set up Asia Cup final with India

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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Sadd, Duhail in stalemate after high-intensity clash

BRAHIMI'S STOPPAGE-TIME PENALTY HELPS AL GHARAFA EDGE AL RAYYAN IN A THRILLER

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Sadd and Al Duhail played out a goalless draw in a high-intensity Qatar Stars League clash at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday. The highly-anticipated encounter lived up to its pre-match billing as both sides created plenty of scoring opportunities to the delight of fans who thronged the stadium in large numbers.

Yet despite several attempts, neither team could break the deadlock in the first half, with both defensive lines doing a resolute job of blocking every attack.

Al Sadd almost went ahead in the 23rd minute when Akram Afif attempted a spectacular overhead kick. The effort beat the onrushing goalkeeper Bautista Burke, but Al Duhail defender Jean-Charles Castelletto cleared off the line, leaving The Wolves' bench and fans in disbelief.

The second half unfolded in similar fashion with plenty of chances created but squandered. Al Sadd midfielder Mohammed Waad had the final opportunity to tilt the match in his side's favour in the 83rd minute. Latching onto a clever assist from Roberto Firmino, Waad unleashed a left-footed strike from outside the box, only to miss the target to the right. That ensured the match ended without a clear winner despite the intensity and drama on display.

After the match, Al Sadd defender Tariq Salman admitted the result was frustrating given the chances his side had to seal victory. "We wasted a lot of opportunities and could have scored in a match in which both teams played well," he said. "Al Sadd and Al Duhail were physically strong in the midfield, and we know our fans were expecting us to win. We will make up for it in the upcoming match and in the Champions League."

Al Duhail's Youssef Ayman also reflected on the cautious nature of the contest. "The match brought together two great teams, and in the second half we were the better team and played well despite suffering from some injuries," he said. "Al Duhail will return stronger. The caution in the match was normal, as neither team wanted to lose, and we have to build on this in the Champions League matches."

While the Al Sadd–Al Duhail clash produced no goals, drama was in no short supply at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium, where Al Gharafa edged Al Rayyan 3-2 in a thrilling, high-tempered encounter. Al Gharafa's goals came through Dame Traore (17th minute), Ahmed al-Ganehi (44th minute) and Yacine Brahimi (90+1 penalty). Roger Guedes was the standout for Al Rayyan, scoring both his team's goals in the 42nd and 83rd minutes, the latter from the spot.

The Cheetahs drew first blood when Traore headed home a superbly delivered kick from Brahimi. Al Rayyan struck back moments before half-time as Guedes stretched to convert an Aleksandar Mitrovic assist. Al Gharafa restored their advantage in the 44th minute when al-Ganehi deflected in a strong cross from Saifeldeen Fadlalla near the right post, giving his side a 2-1 lead at the break.

The second half saw both sides battle for control, with tempers flaring in midfield challenges. In the 82nd minute, Fabricio Diaz's reckless challenge on Gabriel Pereira proved costly for Al Gharafa. Following a VAR review, Diaz was shown a red card and conceded a penalty. Guedes made no mistake from the spot to level the scores at 2-2, sparking wild celebrations among the Al Rayyan fans.

But the home side's joy was short-lived. In stoppage time, Ferjani Sassi was brought down inside the box by David Garcia, giving Al Gharafa a penalty of their own. Brahimi calmly converted to seal the 3-2 win. The victory, Al Gharafa's fourth of the season, lifted them to 13 points, keeping them firmly among the leaders, while Al Rayyan remain on 10 points after suffering their second defeat.



Al Sadd's Roberto Firmino (left) and Sultan al-Brake go for a header during the Qatar Stars League match at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.



Al Gharafa's Yacine Brahimi celebrates after scoring the winning penalty against Al Rayyan at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium.

Younousse and Tijan make winning start



Qatar's Cherif Younousse and Ahmad Tijan began their campaign at the Volleyball World Beach Pro Tour Elite16 in Rio de Janeiro with a solid victory, defeating the Dutch pair Ruben Penninga and Matthew Immers 2-0 (29-27, 21-14) in their Pool C opener. The Tokyo 2020 bronze medallists held their nerve in a tense first set, before raising their level in the second to close out the match comfortably.

FOOTBALL

Afif shortlisted for AFC Player of the Year award, eyes record third title

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's and Al Sadd forward **Akram Afif** has been named among the three nominees for the AFC Player of the Year award for the 2024-25 season, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) announced yesterday. The 29th annual AFC Awards ceremony will take place on October 16 at the King Fahd Cultural Centre in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. This year's awards cover 20 categories, including the prestigious men's and women's player of the year honours.

Afif is competing against Saudi Arabia and Al Hilal winger Salem al-Dawsari and Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim forward Arif Aiman. The Qatari star is aiming to become the first player in Asia to win the award three times, having previously been crowned in 2019 and 2023.

Last season, Afif played a pivotal role in guiding Al Sadd to the Qatar Football League title, the 18th in the club's history. He also earned the Best Player of the Qatar Stars League award for the fifth time and contributed to 33 of his team's 62 goals, scoring 18 and providing 15 assists. On the continental stage, he helped Al Sadd reach the AFC Champions League quarter-finals. With the national team, Afif continues to spearhead Qatar's qualification campaign for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, with the next round of Asian qualifiers set to be played in Doha next month.



Al-Dawsari will hope to add to his 2022 win after a sparkling for Al Hilal, whom he led to the semi-finals of the AFC Champions League Elite with a tournament-best 10 goals. The attacker, 34, also impressed as Hilal reached the last eight of the FIFA Club World Cup 2025, while he continues to be irresistible at the international level as Saudi Arabia chase FIFA World Cup qualification.

Aiman – the first ever Malaysian to be nominated – enjoyed a stunning 2024/25 campaign. He rose to the occasion on the continent's brightest stage for Johor Darul Ta'zim, bagging five goals as they reached the round of 16 of the AFC Champions League Elite, while also winning the domestic treble. The 23-year-old forward is a key figure for his country as well, as they look to reach the AFC Asian Cup 2027.

The nominees for the AFC Asian International Player of the Year award, will pit South Korea's Lee Kang-in (Paris Saint-Germain) against Iran's Mehdi Taremi (Inter Milan and Olympiacos) and Japan's Takefusa Kubo (Real Sociedad).

SPORT

ASIA CUP

Pakistan down Bangladesh to set up final with India

BANGLADESH SUCCUMBED TO THE PRESSURE OF A MUST-WIN GAME

AFP
Dubai

Pakistan will face India in the Asia Cup final for the first time after their bowlers made amends for poor batting to upstage Bangladesh in an 11-run victory yesterday.

Bangladesh fast bowler Taskin Ahmed grabbed 3-28 as Pakistan batters were sloppy on a sticky Dubai stadium pitch in their last Super Four match, managing a modest 135-8 in 20 overs.

Pakistan staged a fight back through pacers Shaheen Shah Afridi (3-17) and Haris Rauf (3-33) to keep Bangladesh down to 124-9 in 20 overs and book a place in Sunday's showpiece against India.

Shamim Hossain top-scored for Bangladesh with a 25-ball 30 and Saif Hassan scored 18.

Pakistan's second win in the Super Four stage set them up for a third encounter against archrivals India. They have lost both previous meetings with their neighbours so far in the tournament, with the two matches marred by controversy.

India players refused to shake hands with Pakistan after the first game and the two sides also did not shake hands after the second.

Pakistan skipper Salman Agha said he looks forward to meeting India again. "We are very excited," said Agha. "We know what we need to do, and we are a good enough team to beat anyone, and we will come on Sunday and try to beat them," Agha said.



Pakistan's Shaheen Shah Afridi (centre) celebrates with teammates after taking the wicket of Bangladesh's Towhid Hridoy during the Asia Cup 2025 Super Four match in Dubai yesterday. *(AFP)*

Earlier, Taskin was well supported by spinners Rishad Hossain (2-18) and Mahedi Hasan (2-28) to keep Pakistan in check after they were sent in to bat.

Pakistan lost wickets at regular intervals as Taskin removed opener Sahibzada Farhan off the fourth ball of the match for four while Hasan had Saim Ayub for his fourth duck of the tournament.

Fakhar Zaman scored 13 and captain Salman Agha 19 as Pakistan tottered at 49-5. It was a seventh-wicket stand of 38 between Mohammad Haris (31) and Mohammad Nawaz (25) that helped Pakistan add 52 in the last five overs. Haris hit two boundaries and a six while Nawaz's 15-ball knock had two sixes and a boundary. Shaheen, dropped twice by Bangladesh fielders, hit two sixes in his rapid 13-ball 19.

BRIEF SCORES: Pakistan 135 for 8 (Haris 31, Nawaz 25, Taskin 3-28, Rishad 2-18) **beat Bangladesh 124 for 9** (Shamim 30, Afridi 3-17, Rauf 3-33, Ayub 2-16) by 11 runs.

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE WIN COUNTY CHAMPIONSHIP TO END SURREY REIGN

Nottinghamshire clinched the County Championship title for the first time since 2010 yesterday, ending Surrey's three-year reign as English champions.

Sitting top of Division One heading into their match against Warwickshire, Nottinghamshire secured the two points required to clinch the trophy by scoring 300 in their first innings.

Having bowled out Warwickshire for 258 in their first innings at Trent Bridge, the hosts powered to the title on the second day of the four-day match.

Haseeb Hameed has been a key figure in Nottinghamshire's title charge and the skipper was back in the runs with 122 against Warwickshire.

South Africa wicket-keeper Kyle Verreynne added a half-century to ensure Nottinghamshire would be able to start their title celebrations.

Fittingly, Verreynne got the party started with a huge six to ease Nottinghamshire past 300.

They had moved within touching distance of the title with a crucial 20-run victory against second-placed Surrey at The Oval in their previous match.

Nottinghamshire have now been crowned English champions seven times.

Head coach Peter Moores has won County Championships with three different teams after his prior successes at Sussex and Lancashire.

"It's incredible. It's a fantastic feeling," Nottinghamshire director of cricket Mick Newell told the BBC.

"We knew these last three games were absolutely crucial and we've been blessed with some good weather to allow us to get on the field and get the points we need.

"Anyone who comes ahead of Surrey has played some pretty good cricket because they are really good. It's a great tribute to our players."

CRICKET

India drop Nair for Test series against West Indies

Reuters
Dubai

India wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant will miss their Test series against West Indies next month as he continues to recover from a foot injury, with all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja taking over as vice-captain, the country's cricket board said yesterday.

Batsman Karun Nair and seamer Akash Deep have been dropped from the squad. Nair, 33, scored just 205 runs in four Tests in the recent drawn series in England, with one half-century, and loses his place to up-and-coming Devdutt Padikkal.

"We expected more from Karun Nair. Can't be just one innings. Padikkal offers more," chairman of selectors Ajit Agarkar said in Mumbai while announcing the team in Dubai.

Pant has been out of action since fracturing his foot during a test match against England in September. Dhruv Jurel, one of two specialist stumpers named in India's 15-man squad, is set to don the gloves against West Indies.

Agarkar said Jadeja was the obvious choice for vice-captain when Pant was ruled out.

"He has lots of experience. I don't know about Pant's injury timeline. But he will be hopefully back for South Africa series," he added.

India, led by Shubman Gill, have packed their side with spin options including all-rounders Jadeja, Washington Sundar and Axar Patel as well as left-arm wrist-spinner Kuldeep Yadav.

Mohammed Siraj and Prasidh Krishna will join Jasprit Bumrah in the pace attack, which also includes all-rounder Nitish Kumar Reddy.

Bumrah, who played only three of the five Tests in England to manage his workload, is currently part of the Indian side defending their Asia Cup title and Agarkar said the right-arm seamer was likely to play both test against West Indies.

"We've had a fair break after England. He didn't play the fifth test either. So there's been a five-week break," Agarkar said.

"Even this tournament (Asia Cup) has been fairly spaced out till the last week. So he's ready and keen to play both test matches."

The first Test begins on October 2 in Ahmedabad before the teams move to Delhi for the second and final match from October 10.

TEST SQUAD: Shubman Gill (captain), Yashasvi Jaiswal, KL Rahul, B Sai Sudharsan, Devdutt Padikkal, Dhruv Jurel (wicketkeeper), Ravindra Jadeja, Washington Sundar, Jasprit Bumrah, Axar Patel, Nitish Kumar Reddy, Mohammed Siraj, Prasidh Krishna, Kuldeep Yadav, N Jagadeesan (wicketkeeper).

India spin great Ashwin joins Australia's BBL in first

Veteran spin great Ravichandran Ashwin joined Sydney yesterday as the first Indian men's international to feature in Australia's Big Bash League.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) does not allow any current player in Indian international or domestic cricket to feature in overseas leagues. But Ashwin retired in December during India's Test tour of Australia and quit the Indian Premier League in August, freeing him up to be "an explorer of the game around various leagues".

"Thunder were crystal clear about how they'd use me and brave enough to back it," said the 39-year-old in a statement. "My conversations with the leadership were excellent and we're fully aligned on my role."

Ashwin will be available from early January, joining David Warner as Thunder bid to make back-to-back BBL finals. "I love how Dave Warner plays the game and it's always better when your leader shares your mindset," he added. Ashwin, who played for five IPL franchises, finished his India career with 537 wickets in 106 Tests at an average of 24.00. He also played 116 one-day and 65 Twenty20 internationals. "From the first time we spoke, Ashwin impressed everyone at the Thunder with his passion, desire to win and understanding of what makes our club special," said Thunder general manager Trent Copeland. "He will bring an injection of fresh energy and world-class bowling mid-tournament while his presence as a leader and mentor will be invaluable for our young players."

The BBL gets under way on December 14.

GOLF

McIlroy becomes Europe's inspirational Ryder Cup cornerstone

AFP
Farmingdale, United States

Rory McIlroy learned what it meant to be on Europe's Ryder Cup squad watching teammates cry in a locker room as a 21-year-old rookie in 2010.

Now the five-time major champion from Northern Ireland, who completed a career Grand Slam by winning the Masters in April, is the talismanic leader of a veteran side ready to follow him into an emotional showdown against the United States at Bethpage Black.

"He's a leader. He's potentially the greatest European golfer of all time. I mean, these things speak for themselves," Scotland's Robert MacIntyre said.

"I've looked up to him since I was young, and I've got no problem walking behind Rory McIlroy if he's leading the charge. He's a guy that's special to the game of golf but very special to the European side."

World number two McIlroy, 36, has won the Ryder Cup five times in seven appearances but longs to deliver a fifth Europe victory on US soil in a way he couldn't imagine 15 years ago.

"I watched Ryder Cups growing up. I cried whenever America won – at Brookline. It's not as if I didn't feel something when I watched Ryder Cups. But I got into that team room at Celtic Manor and I just saw how much it meant to everyone. I was like, maybe I got this wrong."

He was there when the 2010 team had a conference call with Spanish legend Seve Ballesteros, who would die the next year of brain cancer at age 54.



Team Europe's Rory McIlroy signs autographs for fans during a practice round at the Bethpage Black Golf Course, Farmingdale, New York, yesterday. *(Reuters)*

"Seve was sick," McIlroy said. "He's speaking to the team and we're all in the team room... and I look around and the majority of the team is crying as Seve is talking to us.

"And I'm like, that's it. That's the embodiment of what the European Ryder Cup team is."

The legacy Europe captain Luke Donald talks up is more than words. It's work passed down through generations of Europe golf greats with McIlroy now at the forefront.

"He's the biggest name we have in Europe," Spanish star Jon Rahm said. "He's the better player we have in Europe and he's definitely the biggest presence. That's his role.

"It's special to have him around. He's a heck of a superstar. My respect for his game only grows the more time I spend with him.

"He has gone from being an incredibly good player to a great Ryder Cup player to now being, I would say, the cornerstone that team Europe needs."

McIlroy, who has a match record of 16-13-4 in Cup play, boosts the confidence of his teammates, Norway's Viktor Hovland said.

"He's obviously a great player and very skilled, very experienced, but also he carries a lot of weight in the team room," Hovland said. "He's very comforting to have there.

"I think he brings out the best in everyone in there. It's great to have a person like that in the team room."

England's Matt Fitzpatrick, the 2022 US Open champion, says McIlroy is inspiring.

"You can see it every day in the practice we have, the discussions we have, his attitude towards the week and how important it is to him that he wants to succeed," Fitzpatrick said. "That gets everyone else going around him and we want to be part of that."

Ireland's Shane Lowry, the 2019 British Open champion, says close pal McIlroy is one who will "lead from the front."

"Just to have one of the greatest golfers of your generation in your team room, as well, is pretty cool," Lowry said. "Everyone feels very lucky to have him on our team."

DeChambeau yearns to face McIlroy, sees Trump as Ryder Cup force

Bryson DeChambeau sees President Donald Trump as a motivational force for United States golfers in the 45th Ryder Cup at Bethpage Black, where he longs to face Europe's Rory McIlroy.

Two-time US Open champion DeChambeau is excited for Trump's visit during today's opening matches between the Americans and holders Europe in the biennial team showdown. "I hope he will inspire us to victory," DeChambeau said yesterday. "I think he'll be a great force for us to get a lot of people on our side. It will be interesting and exciting to see how the crowd and everybody reacts. It's going to be an electric environment."

About the only thing that could make the moment more thrilling for the 32-year-old would be a matchup between DeChambeau and Europe star McIlroy, who completed a career Grand Slam by winning the Masters last April.

"Rivalries are good for the game of golf," DeChambeau said. "I have the ultimate respect for Rory as a player. It's going to be fun to go up against him this week, whether it's against him directly or through other players. I think it going to be a fun challenge this week."

There has been verbal sparring between DeChambeau and McIlroy since the Masters, where the American said he would chirp in McIlroy's ear at the Ryder Cup.

World number two McIlroy, a five-time major winner, said last month that DeChambeau, who plays in the Saudi-backed LIV Golf League, just talks about other golfers to gain attention.

DeChambeau, popular with US fans for his YouTube video series and a high-fiving flamboyance on the course, responded on Monday, saying: "Whatever Rory says and whatnot is great. He didn't mean anything by it. I hope we can have some good banter back and forth."

McIlroy said yesterday he does not care who he plays but, "If I come up against Bryson at some point, I think that's great. That's wonderful for the championship and wonderful for us, as well, in some ways."

DeChambeau agrees. "Would I love to go up against him? Yeah. It would be a lot of fun," he said. "Is it going to happen? It's not likely. I mean, maybe once. You never know. I don't know if there's planning behind the scenes or whatnot.

"He's a fierce competitor, a great competitor, one I would love the opportunity to play against this week."

DeChambeau won't mind using his popularity to inspire the New York crowd. "New York fans are incredible. I've been up here a few times playing and as rowdy and ruckus as they get, they still love the game of golf," DeChambeau said."I couldn't be more excited for the opportunity to hopefully get them riled up and excited for what's to come."

TENNIS

Alcaraz sweats on injury after opening win in Japan

'I WAS WORRIED BECAUSE THE FIRST MINUTES OF PLAYING, MY ANKLE DIDN'T FEEL GOOD AT ALL'

AFP
Tokyo

World number one Carlos Alcaraz is sweating on his fitness at the Japan Open after injuring his ankle in a 6-4, 6-2 opening win over Argentina's Sebastian Baez yesterday.

US Open champion Alcaraz crumpled to the ground chasing a shot in the fifth game of the opening set in Tokyo and sat on the court grimacing for several minutes.

The Spaniard had his left ankle heavily strapped during a medical timeout before gingerly returning.

He soon began to move comfortably and broke world number 41 Baez to take a 5-4 lead.

The match was then delayed for a further half an hour as organisers closed the stadium roof with rain falling.

Six-time Grand Slam champion Alcaraz returned strongly and closed out the first set before breezing past Baez in the second.

The Spaniard was unclear afterwards as to the extent of the injury, saying "if it can affect the rest of the tournament, I don't know".

"It's going to be an important day and a half that I have ahead for me before the next match," he said.

"We will see what happens. I will do whatever it takes to be in good shape and ready to play in the next round."

Alcaraz is playing at the Japan Open for the first time and the crowd gave him a warm cheer as he emerged in a burgundy sleeveless outfit.

Their applause soon turned to concern when he went down injured halfway through the first set, with his reaction suggesting he may be unable to continue.

"I was worried because the first minutes of playing, my ankle didn't feel good at all," said Alcaraz.

"But then after all I started to feel a little bit better. I could walk to the bench, which for me was a relief."

Alcaraz faces world number 45 Zizou Bergs of Belgium in the next round tomorrow.

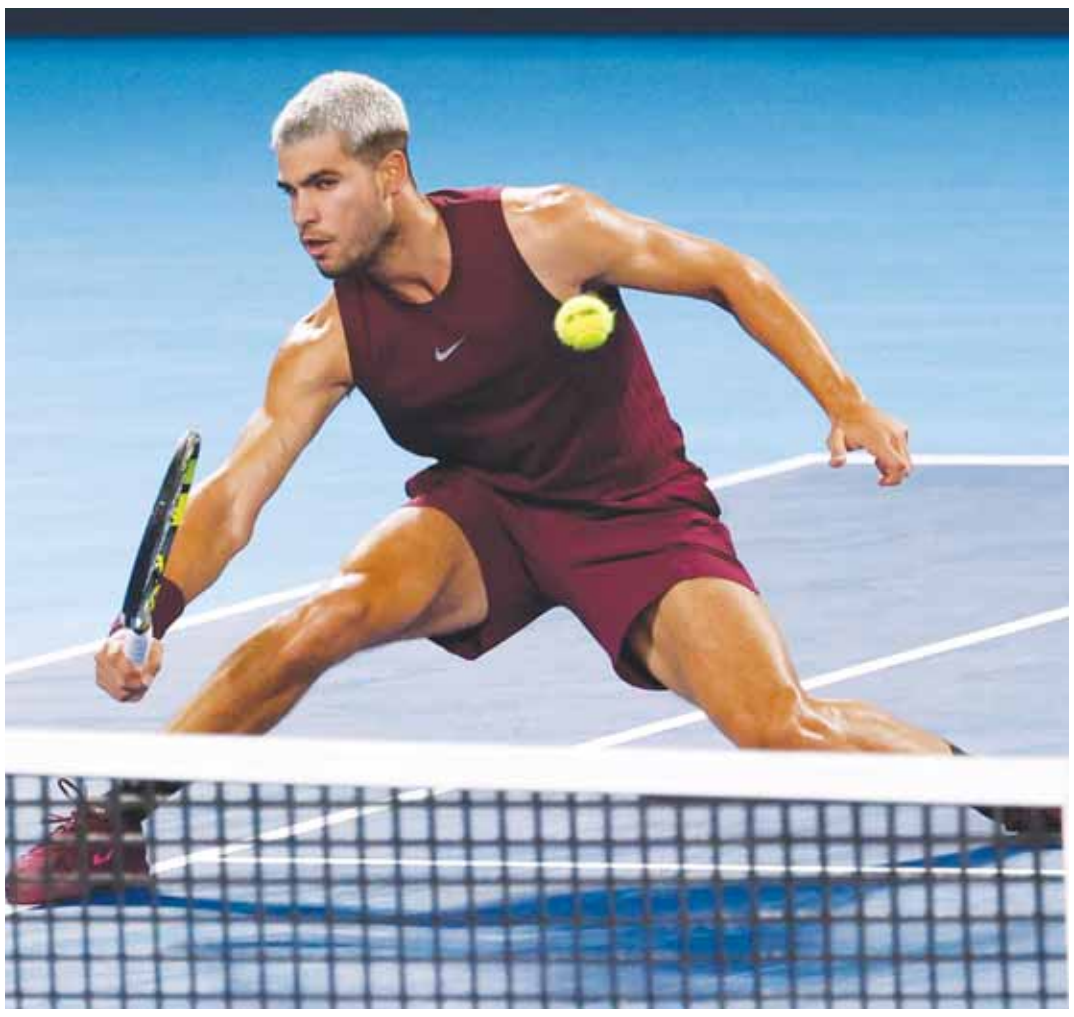
Number two seed Taylor Fritz of the US survived a tough opening test against Canada's Gabriel Diallo to go through 4-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7/3).

Fritz, the world number five, beat Alcaraz at the Laver Cup in San Francisco last week.

"In general, from the two matches I played at the Laver Cup it does give me a lot of confidence," said Fritz.

"I know that I'm playing good tennis but it's not easy to come here, fly that far, jet lag, one day practice then play, switch different court conditions, different balls."

Norway's number four seed Casper Ruud also advanced, with a 4-6, 6-1, 6-1 win over Japan's Shintaro Mochizuki. Number three seed Holger Rune of Denmark beat Serbia's Hamad Medjedovic 7-6 (9/7), 6-1, but number five Tomas Machac of the Czech Republic went out after losing 6-3, 7-6 (7/4) to Japanese qualifier Sho Shimabukuro.



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz in action during his round of 32 match against Argentina's Sebastian Baez at the Japan Open in Tokyo yesterday. *(Reuters)*

'A MESS': ALCARAZ SAYS PLAYERS WANT BETTER DEAL FROM GRAND SLAMS

Carlos Alcaraz yesterday called it "a mess" and said that tennis players are fighting "to have something better" after an elite group sent letters to the Grand Slam tournaments asking for more influence and money.

A group of leading players including men's world number one Alcaraz is pushing for a greater share of revenue, more benefits and a bigger say in how the sport's four major tournaments are run.

Alcaraz, playing at the Japan Open in Tokyo, said the current situation was "a mess" and believes players deserve a fairer deal. "We are all tennis players and we are fighting to have something better for us," the Spaniard said. "I think right now, it's a little bit a mess between everything, between the ATP (men's tour), between the Grand Slams.

"What we want, all the players, is to have everything together."

The letter, reportedly signed by other top stars including Jannik Sinner, Coco Gauff and Aryna Sabalenka, is the second sent by the group of players.

(AFP)

Sinner eases past Cilic to launch China Open title bid

Jannik Sinner beat Croatia's Marin Cilic 6-2, 6-2 yesterday to cruise into round two in Beijing on his first showing since losing the US Open final.

Next at the China Open the world number two from Italy faces qualifier Terence Atmane of France.

"We did a lot of work to be back in this position again, so I'm very happy," Sinner said.

"I missed the competition. Of course, you are nervous, you have doubts and it's normal... but you have to be also excited to go again on court.

"At the moment I feel great physically and mentally, which is the most important."

The 36-year-old Cilic was looking to snap a winless run stretching back to the Wimbledon last 16.

The two were evenly matched in the first set until the 24-year-old Sinner broke for a 3-2 lead.

The Italian added the next two games without losing a point and closed the set with minimum fuss.

Sinner broke early to take control of the second set for a 2-1 lead and pushed that to 5-1, overpowering the 97th-ranked former US Open champion.

Four-time major champion Sinner secured a routine win when Cilic returned into the net.

"Big respect to him," Sinner said.

"I managed to break him quite early, which then gave me the confidence to continue."

Sinner has vowed to introduce some unpredictability to his play after losing the New York final – and top ranking – this month to Carlos Alcaraz.

"I don't think it's pressure off or on," Sinner, who won the Australian Open and Wimbledon this year, said of their rankings swap.

"I'm very, very happy with the season I have played, or am playing, because it was remarkable for my side what I did, but also for what Carlos is doing.

"At the moment he deserves to be there, you know, it's as simple as that. He played more tournaments and he played all tournaments very, very well."

Sinner is vying for a third straight Beijing final after winning on his China Open debut in 2023, before losing last year's decider to Alcaraz.

A WTA 1000 event is also taking place in Beijing.



Italy's Jannik Sinner hits a return to Croatia's Marin Cilic during their China Open match in Beijing yesterday. *(AFP)*

Alonso says leaving F1 will be easier if Aston are competitive

LONDON: Formula One's oldest driver Fernando Alonso says he is more likely to retire next year if his Aston Martin team have a competitive season.

The double world champion will be 45 next July and out of contract at the end of a season that sees a major technical change, with a new engine era and Honda joining as Aston Martin's partner.

"If things go well, I think it's a very good moment to stop," the Spaniard said in an interview published on the team's website.

"I've been chasing a competitive car and a competitive racing for many, many years, and if I have that I think it's a very good way to close my career.

"Let's say that if we are competitive, there is more chance that I stop. If we are not competitive, it will be very hard to give up without trying again."

Alonso has not won a race since the 2013 Spanish Grand Prix, when he was at Ferrari, and took his championships with Renault in 2005 and 2006.

He joined Aston Martin, who now have multiple-title-winning designer and technical ace Adrian Newey working for them, in 2023 from Renault-owned Alpine after a previous stint with McLaren.

The Spaniard is also a double winner of the Le Mans 24 Hours with Toyota and has competed in the Indianapolis 500 and Dakar Rally.

MOTORSPORT

Grosjean to drive Haas F1 car for first time since 2020 crash

Paris
Reuters

Romain Grosjean will drive a Haas Formula One car in Italy today for the first time since a 2020 fireball crash ended the French racer's grand prix career and nearly killed him.

Haas said the 39-year-old, who raced for the US-owned team for five seasons, would test a 2023 Haas VF-23 at the Mugello circuit.

Members of his original crew, including current team principal Ayao Komatsu, who was previously a race engineer, will be in attendance. "To say I'm excited to get back behind the wheel of a Formula One car would naturally be an understatement," said Grosjean in a statement.

"I really can't believe it's been almost five years, but to come back and have this outing with my old team is truly something special.

"My kids had designed my helmet for what was meant to be my final grand prix in Abu Dhabi back in 2020 – I'm at last going to be able to give it a go in a Formula One car on Friday."

Grosjean's car, loaded full of fuel, speared through the metal barriers after a 192kph impact – ripping in half before erupting in a fireball – on the opening lap of the November 29 race at Bahrain's desert Sakhir circuit.

Haas said the 39-year-old, who raced for the US-owned team for five seasons, would test a 2023 Haas VF-23 at the Mugello circuit

The Frenchman, whose left foot was initially trapped and who suffered burns to his hands, miraculously managed to extricate himself after 27 seconds. He said later he thought he was going to die but willed himself out of the inferno for the sake of his children. "I'm absolutely thrilled to be welcoming Romain Grosjean back into a Formula One car for the first time in five years but especially proud he's returning in one of our cars – it's only fitting," said Komatsu in a statement. "I'm delighted he embraced the opportunity to come and get back behind the wheel with us, a day that's going to be made extra special by having so many members of the original crew back together to witness it."

Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff had offered Grosjean a farewell test in one of his cars but that never happened due to Covid and the Frenchman's busy schedule racing in the US IndyCar series.

Canadian former IndyCar driver James Hinchcliffe, now 38, will also attend the test and drive a Formula One car for the first time as part of a feature for Formula One television.

FOCUS

Marquez looking to crown comeback with title in Japan

AFP
Motegi, Japan

Marc Marquez said he wanted to celebrate his "second life" in MotoGP by clinching his first world title since 2019 this weekend in Japan after a nightmare struggle with injuries.

The Spanish Ducati rider can win his seventh world title if he finishes the weekend in Motegi with at least three more points than his brother and nearest championship rival Alex Marquez.

The 32-year-old is back on top after an injury saga that began when he broke his right arm in 2020 and almost convinced him to hang up his helmet.

Marquez has a huge championship lead over his brother and still has five weekends left to clinch the title if he fails to get the job done in Japan.

But he said he is looking to "celebrate something big" this weekend after coming back from what he described as the biggest challenge of his career.

"Right now it's my second life in MotoGP and this will be important if we can close all that circle in the best way possible," Marquez said yesterday.

"Still six races to go but I want to keep the full focus."

Marquez has a whopping 512 championship points, already a single-season record for a MotoGP rider, and has 11 grand prix wins so far this year.



Ducati Lenovo Team rider Marc Marquez of Spain shows his helmet during a press conference yesterday, ahead of the Japanese MotoGP Grand Prix at Mobility Resort Motegi in Motegi. *(AFP)*

He has happy memories of the circuit in Japan, clinching the championship there in 2014, 2016 and 2018.

Marquez said he would try to "keep the same mentality" but would not panic if he has to keep the championship champagne on ice for longer.

"It's true that I'm very close to close a cycle where I started five years ago with a very big injury, so let's see if we can finish in the best way possible," he said.

"I repeat, if it's not this weekend, it will not be a disaster. We have another five chances in front."

Marquez suffered a rare slip-up in San Marino two weeks ago 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 before calmly seeing out the win.

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

It also gave him his first opportunity this season to clinch the title and he said it was "impossible not to think about" achieving it.

"When you are in the interviews or when you are in the paddock, everybody is asking you the same question," he said.

"How is your feeling? You feel, but in the end the emotions are quite constant, that is the most important."

SHOWJUMPING

Al-Qadi and al-Marri shine in second round of Hathab

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Hamad Nasser al-Qadi won the Bronze Tour, while Mohammed Abdulla al-Marri topped the Amateur Class in the second round of the Qatar Equestrian Tour – Longines Hathab, which began yesterday at the Qatar Equestrian Federation's (QEF) indoor arena.

Organised by the QEF in partnership with Al Shaqab, a member of Qatar Foundation, the 14-round series will run until May 2026. The opening day featured the Amateur Round at 100cm followed by the Bronze Round at 120cm, which included both individual and team events.

In the Amateur Round, al-Marri clinched first place aboard Dusty in 26.85 seconds. Khalifa bin Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani finished runner-up on Zion II Vdk in 27.75 seconds, while Mohammed Salem al-Nuaimi claimed third with Senna Lafont in 28.47 seconds. Abdullah al-Qashouti, Chairman of the Media and Live Broadcast Committee, presented the prizes to the winners of the junior category.

Al-Qadi dominated the individual Bronze Tour, securing first and third place on Natalie (61.38s) and Deep Water (66.11s), while Abdullah Khalid al-Julandani split the victories with second place on Nuance van het Groeshof (63.71s).

In the team competition, The Dome emerged winners with a total of 113.57 seconds. Al Shaqab followed in second place with 130.93 seconds, while Shahaleel Al Shaqab completed the podium in 131 seconds. The winners were crowned by Mohammed Saleh al-Marri, Chairman of the Facilities Committee, and Hussein al-Nasr, Administrator of the First Dressage Team. The action continues today with the Future Knights category (ages 6–12) at 70cm, the Open Round at 110cm, and the Gold Round at 140cm for both individuals and teams.


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In the Amateur Round, Mohammed Abdulla al-Marri clinched first place aboard Dusty.


Abdullah al-Qashouti, Chairman of the Media and Live Broadcast Committee, presented the prizes to the winners of the junior category.

FOOTBALL

Forest denied winning European return

Antony slots in Roca's ball at the back post as Real Betis take home a point

AFP
Paris

Antony's late goal denied Nottingham Forest a winning return to European football as Real Betis grabbed a 2-2 draw in their Europa League opener on Wednesday, while Roma won at Nice. Forest, managed by Ange Postecoglou who won the tournament with Tottenham last season, are playing in Europe for the first time in 30 years.

They are only in the Europa League rather than the Conference League because English FA Cup winners Crystal Palace fell foul of UEFA's rules governing multi-club ownership. Last season's Conference League runners-up Betis struck first in the 15th minute when Antony's pass picked out Cedric Bakambu inside the area, before the veteran striker turned and fired the ball into the roof of the net. But Forest levelled three minutes later as a sweeping move finished with Morgan Gibbs-White's low ball across the face of goal being tapped in from close range by Igor Jesus.

Brazilian Igor Jesus, who scored his first goals for Forest since his summer move from Botafogo against Swansea last week, completed the turnaround midway through the first half with a clinical header from Douglas Luiz's corner. Postecoglou's men threatened to seize complete control before half-time, as Igor Jesus twice went close to a hat-trick and Callum Hudson-Odoi hit a shot against the post.

Betis managed to stay in the game, though, and a period of late pressure paid dividends when Antony slotted in Marc Roca's ball at the back post with five minutes remaining. "I think first I should be proud of the players' efforts. It's a difficult place to come, difficult conditions," Postecoglou, still waiting for his first win in charge since replacing the sacked Nuno Espirito Santo, said. "The thing I could fault is we didn't put the game to bed."

Roma got their campaign for a first Europa League title under way with an impressive 2-1 victory at Nice. Gian Piero Gasperini's men, who have reached at least the semi-finals in three of the previous five seasons, secured a winning start thanks to two goals in the space of three second-half minutes from Evan Ndicka and Gianluca Mancini.

Terem Moffi pulled one back for Nice from the penalty spot with 13 minutes to play, but Roma held on. Local authorities and prosecutors said 102 people identified as Roma ultras, many of whom caught with potential weapons, were arrested in the build-up to the game for intending to commit violence.

Celtic, playing in the competition for the first time since 2021 after an embarrassing loss to Kairat Almaty in Champions League qualifying, were held to a 1-1 draw by fellow former European champions Red Star Belgrade in Serbia. A long spell of Celtic pressure at the start of the first half culminated in Kelechi Iheanacho's second goal since signing on a free transfer from Sevilla earlier this month.

Red Star hit back, though, in the 65th minute as Marko Arnautovic turned in Franklin Tebo Uchenna's cross.

Elsewhere, Dinamo Zagreb beat Fenerbahce 3-1 in the Croatian capital, while Bundesliga side Freiburg clinched a 2-1 home win over Basel.


Real Betis' goalkeeper Pau Lopez the ball during the UEFA Europa League match against Nottingham Forest in Seville. *(AFP)*

Ronaldo calls on Ancelotti to pick Neymar for World Cup

Sao Paulo: Brazilian great Ronaldo has called on the Selecao's Italian coach Carlo Ancelotti to restore Neymar to the squad for the World Cup in North America next year. Brazil's record goalscorer with 79 goals from 128 matches, Neymar has not pulled on the yellow jersey since October 2023, when he suffered a serious knee injury.

The 33-year-old has played regularly for Sao Paulo side Santos since he returned to his first club in January following a fruitless spell in Saudi Arabia with Al Hilal. Even so, in his four matches in charge, Ancelotti has not called up Neymar.

"He is a decisive player for the Brazilian Selecao. We don't have another player like Neymar," Ronaldo, who twice won the World Cup with Brazil, said during a publicity event in Sao Paulo alongside his compatriot. "The people hope 100 percent that he will go to the World Cup because if he is there, we will definitely have better results than if he's not there," added Ronaldo, 49, who scored 62 goals in 99 Brazil games.

Neymar has been injury-plagued in the last few years and missed Brazil's Copa America triumph on home soil in 2019. He joined Al Hilal from Paris Saint-Germain in August 2023 but after playing just five times and scoring one goal, he ruptured his cruciate knee ligament on international duty against Uruguay.

He was out of action for a year and would play only two more games for the Saudi side before leaving for Santos. After leaving Neymar out of his squad for World Cup qualifiers in September, Ancelotti said that he "needs to get in better shape to help the national team and to give the best of himself at the World Cup."

Alvarez hat-trick helps Atletico edge Rayo thriller

Madrid: Julian Alvarez scored a hat-trick to snatch Atletico Madrid a thrilling 3-2 win over Rayo Vallecano in La Liga on Wednesday. The Rojiblancos fell behind in the 78th minute but Alvarez, who had opened the scoring, struck twice more in the final stages to claim three points for Diego Simeone's side.

The Argentina international helped Atletico secure only their second win from six league matches during a shaky start to the campaign.

Atletico are ninth and trail league leaders Real Madrid by nine points ahead of tomorrow's derby clash against Xabi Alonso's side.

Alvarez, who missed a penalty in Atletico's frustrating draw at Mallorca last weekend, opened the scoring at the Metropolitano stadium. The 25-year-old, who joined from Manchester City in 2024, volleyed home from Marcos Llorente's looping cross after 15 minutes to get the ball rolling.

LEAGUE CUP

Eze nets first goal as Arsenal join Man City in last 16

Reuters
London

Eberechi Eze scored his first goal for Arsenal in their 2-0 League Cup win over Port Vale on Wednesday and manager Mikel Arteta said the attacking midfielder will deliver more "magic moments" when he clicks with his new teammates.

Eze, signed from Crystal Palace for a reported 68mn pounds ($91.52mn) last month, opened the scoring against the third-tier side in the eighth minute with a deft side-footed finish before Leandro Trossard killed the game off late on. Arteta said Eze had been calm and comfortable in possession against a well-organised side.

"He played very centrally against a team that's obviously with a 5-4-1, they are super compact inside, it's not easy to find spaces but he's very capable with the ball," Arteta told reporters. "He still needs a little more time with those guys to understand the timings, especially the things that he needs to do. Then actions like that will be more consistent and better for us. In general, very good – there is still a lot more to give ..., At the end, what we want to do with him is to get him in positions, in spaces, that he can create his magic moments and the difference in the team."


Arsenal's Eberechi Eze celebrates after scoring against Port Vale during the English League Cup third-round match in Stoke-on-Trent, central England. *(AFP)*

Arsenal, who host Brighton in the next round, visit Newcastle United in the Premier League on Sunday.

Manchester City, Tottenham and Newcastle also reached the League Cup fourth round on Wednesday. Phil Foden was City's key man with a goal and assist as they beat Huddersfield 2-0. Foden has shown signs in recent weeks of rediscovering the form that made him the Premier League player of the year two seasons ago.

The England midfielder arrowed in a low drive to give the visitors the lead after 18 minutes. Erling Haaland was among those given the night off as Pep Guardiola made nine changes. The Norwegian's lethal finishing was missed as City had to wait until 15 minutes from time to make the tie safe when Savinho blasted in Foden's pass from a narrow angle. City's reward is a trip to second-tier Swansea in the last 16.

Holders Newcastle will face Tottenham in the next round after both cruised to victory against third-tier opposition. Joelinton and William Osula both struck twice as Newcastle beat League One leaders Bradford 4-1. Tottenham also got the job done inside the opening 20 minutes in a 3-0 victory over Doncaster. Joao Palhinha's overhead kick opened the scoring before Jay McGrath turned into his own goal after just 17 minutes.

Spurs had to wait until stoppage time for their third when Brennan Johnson raced through to net his third goal of the season. Premier League champions Liverpool will take on FA Cup winners Crystal Palace in the other standout fourth-round tie.

Chelsea travel to Wolves, while Fulham visit Wycombe. League Two Grimsby, who shocked Manchester United in round two, will fancy their chances of reaching the quarter-finals after being handed a home tie against Premier League strugglers Brentford. Wrexham's reward for reaching the fourth round for the first time since 1977/78 is an all-Welsh clash against Cardiff.