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CRICKET | Page 2

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CHESS | Page 3

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Page 4

FOOTBALL

Lopetegui hails Qatar's grit after sealing World Cup spot

'It seems like life owed me a World Cup, and fortunately, today I got it It's a reward that I'm grateful for'

By Sports Reporter
Doha



A 2-1 victory over the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday confirmed Qatar's first ever FIFA World Cup appearance through the qualifiers.

Julen Lopetegui paid tribute to his players and the fans after Qatar booked their ticket to the FIFA World Cup 2026 on Tuesday.

A 2-1 win over the United Arab Emirates confirmed the two-time Asian Cup winners' first ever FIFA World Cup appearance through the qualifiers with Lopetegui expressing his pride in his players' never-say-die attitude. "I congratulate everyone on qualifying in a match we managed well with the players and the team. Yes, this is the first time the team has qualified through the qualifiers. This is a great thing for us, and we are happy to qualify and participate in the 2026 World Cup," said the Spanish tactician.

Having drawn with Oman in their opener, Qatar had to defeat UAE to advance, resulting in a tight match at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium. UAE, who beat Oman 2-1, also had the psychological advantage of having defeated Qatar twice in the previous round but fell to strikes from Boualem Khouki and Pedro Miguel, with Sultan Adil netting a consolation after the hosts were reduced to 10 men.

"The match was extremely difficult. We faced a strong and well-prepared team in the UAE. The first half was evenly matched. We wanted to score, and we achieved what we wanted at the beginning of the second half. I thank the players and the fans. Everyone did what was necessary. We overcame a difficult stage and qualified, delighting our fans," said Lopetegui.

As a player, Lopetegui was part of Spain's squad at the 1994 World Cup squad but was third-choice goalkeeper and did not play. He was denied the chance to coach his national team at the 2018 World Cup. After taking Qatar to, the Real Madrid coach said "life owed me a World Cup"

"It seems like life owed me a World Cup, and fortunately, today I got it," the 59-year-old said. "It's a reward that I'm grateful for."

For Lopetegui, the qualification carried personal significance. As a player, he was part of Spain's 1994 World Cup squad but did not feature, and as coach, he was infamously dismissed just days before the 2018 tournament despite leading Spain through an unbeaten qualifying campaign.

"It seems like life owed me a World Cup, and fortunately, today I got it," the 59-year-old said with a smile. "It's a reward I'm very grateful for. I'm excited to be back on the World Cup stage after what happened years ago — now it's time to experience it with Qatar. There was a desire to be able to reach another World Cup, and that was an important factor in my decision to come here."

Qatar's performance in the 2022 World Cup, where they lost all three group games as hosts, is a reminder of the work ahead. Lopetegui acknowledged the task of rejuvenating the squad before 2026.

"We have an older group," he said. "We played with a 41-year-old in Sebastian Soria. We need to refine the team we'll take to the World Cup."

Soria, making a surprise return to the national team after an eight-year absence, was emotional after the final whistle. "I'm happy and proud to have qualified," the veteran striker said. "This generation deserves this achievement. Honestly, I feel lucky to be back with the team at this time. The fans were incredible."

Forward Almoez Ali echoed that sentiment. "Qualifying for the World Cup finals has a special flavour and came after a difficult match," he said. "All the players were heroes today. This is a credit to the Qatari football system, and we want to make our next World Cup participation memorable."

Goalkeeper Abunada, whose early saves kept Qatar in the game, described the win as "a joy for the people." He added: "The match was tough, but everyone fought to achieve this historic victory. The large crowd that came to support us made all the difference."

While Qatar can look forward to rubbing shoulders with the world's best next summer, UAE will now have to navigate a two-leg playoff against Iraq in November, with the winners to advance to the FIFA Playoff Tournament in March, where an additional two spots will be available.

Head coach Cosmin Olariu did not hide his disappointment, with the Romanian feeling that his side did not maximise their chances. "This is a disappointing result. We controlled the match and put pressure on our opponents. In the second half, we conceded an early goal. Football is sometimes unfair, and we must now enter a new phase and strive to return to the top of our game to secure our chances. It's unfortunate that this is where we've come to. We have to fight for our chance, and we have to learn from our mistakes going forward," said Olariu.



Qatar's defender Assim Madibo celebrates with coach Julian Lopetegui after Al Annabi sealed FIFA World Cup 2026 spot at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha. *(AFP)*

FOCUS

Al Sadd sack Sanchez after poor start to QSL title defence



By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Sadd have parted ways with head coach **Felix Sanchez**, with assistant coach Sergio Alegre stepping in as interim coach, the reigning Qatar Stars League (QSL) champions announced yesterday.

"Al Sadd Club's management and head coach Felix Sanchez have mutually agreed to terminate the contract between the two parties. Assistant coach Sergio Alegre will assume responsibility for training the team until a new coaching staff is appointed," the club posted on its official X handle.

Sanchez, 49, took charge of Al Sadd in July 2024, following a celebrated spell with the Qatar national team, where he oversaw their historic AFC Asian Cup title win in 2019 and led the side in their first-ever FIFA World Cup appearance on home soil in 2022. The Spaniard's appointment was seen as a strategic move aimed at restoring Al Sadd's domestic dominance and rekindling their continental competitiveness.

However, the team have struggled for form this season, currently sitting seventh in both the QSL standings and their AFC Champions League Elite group, falling short of the club's high expectations. Alegre, who worked closely with Sanchez during his tenure with both Qatar's youth and senior national teams, will now take charge of preparations for Al Sadd's upcoming AFC Champions League Elite clash against Al Hilal in Riyadh on Tuesday.

AL ARABI APPOINT CONTRA AS NEW HEAD COACH

Al Arabi have announced the appointment of Romanian coach Cosmin Contra as head coach for the remainder of the season. The club confirmed the move on its official X account, stating that Contra will lead a Romanian coaching staff, though details of the contract were not disclosed.

Contra replaces Pablo Amo, who parted ways with the club after a disappointing start to the Qatar Stars League campaign. Al Arabi have collected only four points from their opening six matches and currently sit 11th in the standings.

A former Romanian international, the 50-year-old Contra enjoyed a distinguished playing career with European giants AC Milan and Atletico Madrid before moving into management. His coaching resume includes stints with Al Ittihad (Saudi Arabia) and Dinamo Bucharest (Romania), among others.

Al Arabi will hope the experienced tactician can spark a turnaround as the team seeks to climb out of the relegation zone and rediscover its form in the league.

CRICKET

SPOTLIGHT

Plenty at stake as Ashes opener looms

AFP
Sydney

Major doubts over Pat Cummins' fitness and a void at the top of the Australian order has sparked bravado from England six weeks out from the Ashes but David Warner, at least, is having none of it.

Former fast bowler Stuart Broad lit the fuse this week by claiming England's oldest rivals have their weakest side in 15 years.

"It's probably the worst Australian team since 2010 when England last won (in Australia), and it's the best English team since 2010," Broad, now working as a pundit, told the *BBC*.

"It's actually not an opinion, it's fact."

His provocative comments came on the back of opener Zak Crawley claiming the term Bazball "winds" Australia up and Joe Root suggesting the five-Test series was the best chance to snap his record of never blasting a century Down Under.

England are bringing a powerful squad with a cartel of dangerous quicks spearheaded by Mark Wood and Jofra Archer, while Root, Crawley and Harry Brook lead a batting line-up with plenty of depth.

But the reality for Ben Stokes's men is they have an appalling record in Australia and the taunts will mean little when hostilities begin on November 21 at the first Test in Perth.

England have not won the Ashes in Australia since 2010/11, when Broad was part of a squad that triumphed 3-1. The last three trips have yielded one-sided scorelines of 5-0, 4-0 and 4-0.

Retired Australian opener Warner this week predicted another Australia rout, with only the weather preventing a 5-0 whitewash.

"I think 4-0, there's going to be a washout somewhere, generally Sydney," he told reporters, although Warner tempered his confidence amid worries about skipper Cummins.

"I think it's going to be a great series, depending on the captain, if the captain doesn't play I think they might win one game."

CLOCK IS TICKING

Pace spearhead Cummins has not played since a back injury against the West Indies in July and the clock is ticking.

He admits it is "probably less likely than likely" that he will play in Perth, with concerns that his absence could drag on even longer.

Should he miss the first Test, Scott Boland will almost certainly step in and lead the attack with Mitchell Starc, Josh Hazlewood and Nathan Lyon, while Steve Smith would be skipper.

Who fills the role as back-up pace-man remains to be seen, although coach Andrew McDonald recently nominated Brendan Doggett, Michael Neser and Sean Abbott as candidates.

"I feel like we've got some good options if we do get stretched, which is one of the great things of domestic cricket in Australia," he said of the bowling stocks.

Of more pressing concern is who will open alongside Usman Khawaja, with no-one stepping up to fill Warner's shoes since he retired nearly two years ago.

Marnus Labuschagne, who was dropped ahead of Australia's recent Test campaign in the West Indies, has started his build-up with three hundreds in four matches for Queensland.

But Warner feels he is better suited at three, a position he occupied until being promoted to opener for June's losing World Test Championship final against South Africa at Lord's.

"When someone's averaging 50 in Test cricket you've probably got to go back to that," said Warner.

"I wouldn't like to see him open," he added. "I'd like him to shuffle back down to three."

All-rounder Cameron Green most recently batted at first drop and would have to shift back to six in place of Beau Webster if Labuschagne is picked for the role.

That still leaves a chasm at the top with young gun Sam Konstas and the more experienced Matt Renshaw seen as leading the race.

Former captain Greg Chappell said Renshaw - Khawaja's opening partner at Queensland - was a safer bet.

"The two are domestic opening partners and the established synergy between them is of the sort that has historically been a hallmark of the best Ashes opening pairs," he wrote for the website cricinfo.

"This weighs heavily in Renshaw's favour."

MATCH REPORT

Pakistan bag first Test with 93-run win over Proteas

Spinner Noman Ali takes 10 wickets as hosts draw first blood

Reuters
Lahore

Pakistan secured a 93-run victory over South Africa on the fourth day of the first Test, taking the eight wickets needed yesterday to go 1-0 up in the two-match series.

Left-arm spinner Noman Ali completed a 10-wicket haul and seamer Shaheen Shah Afridi took the last three wickets as South Africa, who were 51-2 overnight, were dismissed for 183 in the middle session.

The slow and deteriorating wicket proved far too testing for the tourists although Dewald Brevis offered them hope as he bludgeoned a quick-fire half century.

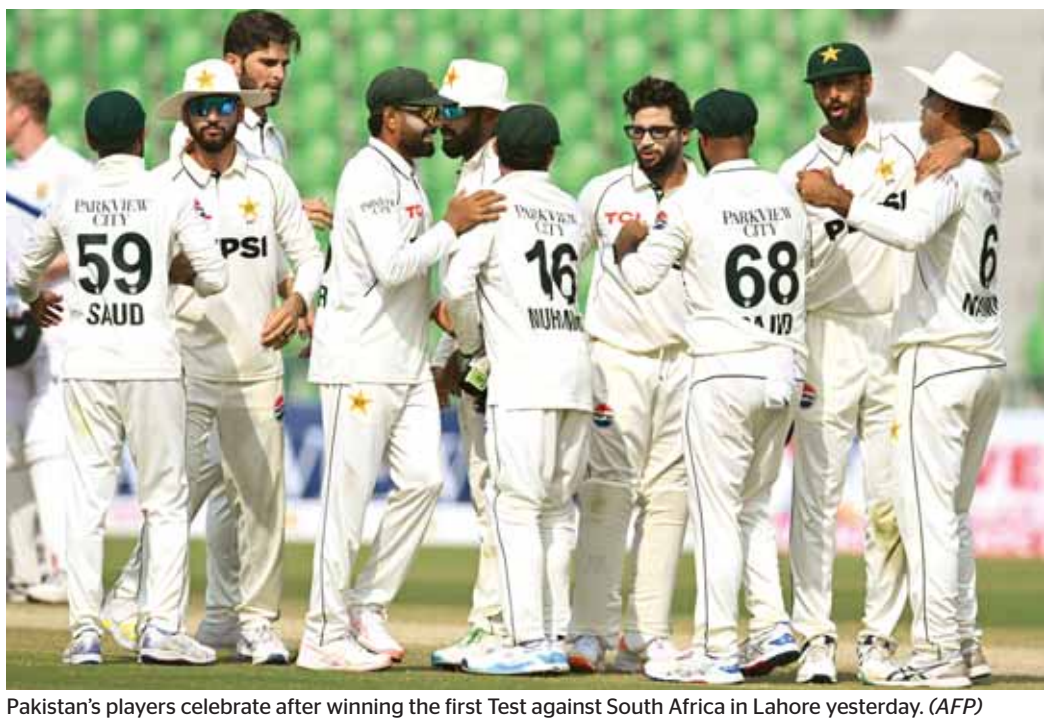
South Africa were always going to be up against it when Tony de Zorzi, who scored a century in the first innings, was trapped leg before wicket by Shaheen Shah Afridi in the first over of the morning, as they chased a target of 277 to extend a 10-test winning streak.

It was a rare wicket for a seamer in a contest where neither side used them much, such was the spin-friendly condition of the turning wicket, although Afridi returned to secure victory for his team.

Tristan Stubbs lasted only eight balls before a viciously turning delivery from Noman deceived him, bringing Brevis to the wicket.

The 22-year-old already has a reputation in limited overs cricket for his expansive hitting and did not temper his approach in his third Test appearance.

He made up for his first ball dismissal in the first innings with 54 runs off as many balls as he put the pressure back onto the Pakistan bowlers and offered South Africa the brief potential of an unlikely win.



Pakistan's players celebrate after winning the first Test against South Africa in Lahore yesterday. *(AFP)*


Pakistan's Noman Ali (right) and teammates walk back to pavilion during lunch break. *(AFP)*

Together with Ryan Rickelton they put on a 73-run partnership, but Noman had the last laugh with a turning delivery that clean bowled Brevis.

Rickelton then got a leading edge to Sajid's turning ball to depart for 45, leaving the tourists 137-6 at lunch.

AFRIDI ROMPS THROUGH TAIL

The last four wickets fell without much resistance with Afridi given another spell to wrap up the tail and return figures of 4-33.

Spinner Noman took 4-79 to add to his six wickets in the first innings.

"We built enough margins where we could have the upper hand and I'm glad we finished it off," said Pakistan captain Shan Masood.

Defeat for South Africa marked a losing start to the defence of their World Test Championship crown at the beginning of a new two-year cycle.

"There was some good stuff over the few days that we played, I thought, really good signs, I suppose, bat and ball.

"So we have a bit to take out, bit to learn as well, and clean up our space for the next game," said South Africa captain Aiden Markram.

Next week's second Test will be played in Rawalpindi.

BRIEF SCORES
Pakistan 378 and 167 (Babar 42, Muthusamy 5-57, Harmer 4-51) **beat South Africa 269 and 183** (Brevis 54, Rickelton 45, Afridi 4-33, Noman 4-79) **by 93 runs**

COMMENT

Pakistan urged to be more consistent

Reuters
Lahore

Pakistan captain Shan Masood wants his team to seize the momentum and show more consistency after they beat South Africa yesterday in the first of their two-Test series.

Pakistan wrapped up a 93-run win over South Africa on the fourth day, making the most of the pitch conditions to ensure victory.

But it follows 12 months of indifferent Test results for Pakistan, who came from behind to beat England 2-1 in a home series this time last year, then lost 2-0 in South Africa before a 1-1 home draw with the West Indies.

"We are playing good cricket against quality opposition but at the same time, the challenge is that we need to consistently perform and win matches against top teams," he told a press conference.

"There were a lot of challenges out in the middle. Credit to South Africa, they kept coming back, but we built enough margins to have the upper hand, and I'm glad we finished it off," he added.

Pakistan will now be looking to complete a 2-0 series win and make a positive start to a new cycle of the World Test Championship, which South Africa won in June.

The second Test starts in Rawalpindi on Monday.

"The spinners came into play, reverse swing helped the bowlers do their job today, and the batters did well enough, but we still have a lot of challenges in the middle order," said Shan.

"We lost 11 wickets for 37 runs over the course of two innings, which is not good. We must overcome that," he said of dramatic collapses in both innings when Pakistan were well set.

In their first innings of 378, they lost their last five wickets for 16 runs, while in the second innings, they lost their last six wickets for a paltry 17 runs and were dismissed for 167.

It drew the ire of coach Azhar Mahmood. "Our shot selection was not good," he told reporters.

"This is something we need to improve.

"If we're going to play on these pitches, we have to have the patience to bat on them."

The pitch took a sharp turn and offered low bounce, especially from day two onward, and conditions in Rawalpindi are expected to be similar.

AFGHANISTAN REST ACE SPINNER RASHID FOR ZIMBABWE TEST

Kabul: Afghanistan selectors yesterday rested Rashid Khan for the one-off Test in Zimbabwe later this month but the ace spinner will lead the side in the three-match Twenty20 international series.

The 27-year-old had back surgery in 2023 and selectors want to keep him fit for next year's T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka.

"Rashid will be rested for the Test as a precaution for the upcoming international events, mainly the World Cup," said the Afghanistan Cricket Board.

The Test match will be played October 20-24 while the three T20Is are on October 29, 31 and November 2, all in Harare.

The squad includes some fresh faces who have done well at domestic level.

Left-arm fast bowler Bashir Ahmad, who recently made appearances in ODIs and T20Is for Afghanistan, is in the Test squad.

Hashmatullah Shahidi will lead the Test team.

Since gaining Test status in 2017 Afghanistan have played just 11 Tests, winning four of them.

Afghanistan Test Squad:
Hashmatullah Shahidi (capt), Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Ibrahim Zadran, Abdul Malik, Afsar Zazai, Ikram Alikhel, Bahir Shah, Shahidullah Kamal, Ismat Alam, Sharafuddin Ashraf, Zia Ur Rahman Akbar, Yamin Ahmadzai, Zia Ur Rahman Sharifi, Khalil Gurbaz, Bashir Ahmad

T20I Squad:
Rashid Khan (capt), Ibrahim Zadran, Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Sediqullah Atal, Darwish Rasooli, Shahidullah Kamal, Ijaz Ahmad Ahmadzai, Azmatullah Omarzai, Mohammad Nabi, Sharafuddin Ashraf, Noor Ahmad, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, Bashir Ahmad, Fareed Ahmad Malik, Abdullah Ahmadzai

FOCUS

India coach Gambhir remains tightlipped about WC hopes of Kohli and Rohit

Reuters
New Delhi

The 2027 World Cup dreams of India's batting stalwarts Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma appear slim, with head coach **Gautam Gambhir** refusing to look that far even if he does not doubt their quality.

Both Kohli and Rohit are active internationally only in the 50-overs format, but India appear keen to control a transition rather than be caught in its throes.

Rohit, who captained India to the Champions Trophy title earlier this year, has been replaced by Shubman Gill as the new captain of the one-day squad ahead of the team's Australia tour.

Rohit and Kohli, with a combined experience of 567 one-day internationals, have managed to retain their places for the three ODIs in Australia but their future beyond the series looks uncertain.

"Look, the 50-over World Cup is still two-and-a-half years away, and I think it is very important to stay in the present," Gambhir told reporters after India swept a Test series against West Indies on Tuesday.

"Obviously, they are quality players, they are coming back, their experience is going to be a handful in Australia as well. Hopefully, those two guys will have a successful tour, and more importantly, as a team, we will have a successful series."

Rohit, who captained India to the final of the 2023 ODI World Cup, will be 40 by the next edition of the showpiece to be co-hosted by South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia.

Kohli, who was part of India's



World Cup-winning 2011 squad, is a year younger. The future is also uncertain for all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja, who turns 37 in December.

Jadeja was part of the recent Champions Trophy-winning squad but has been dropped from the 50-overs squad for Australia.

Jadeja still hopes to play the next World Cup and defused any drama that usually trails big-name omissions, saying his axing has been explained to him.

"It is a good thing that they communicated the reason behind my omission," Jadeja said during the second Test against West Indies.

"But whenever I get a chance next, I will try and do what I have done all these years."

"Winning a World Cup is everyone's dream.

"We had narrowly missed out the last time, the next time we will try and make up for it."

During the press conference, Gambhir also reflected on Shubman Gill's captaincy journey. He said: "It's still very early days — he has captained only a few Test matches so far. The most important quality I see is his ability to handle pressure and tough situations."

He added: "Gill is very much a work in progress; he hasn't yet faced the worst days of captaincy, which will inevitably come. It will test him personally and as a leader and I want to see how he responds when things don't go his way.

"I've told him I'm always here to support, back, and protect him. My role as coach is to take the pressure and criticism off his shoulders, as long as he does the right things for the team and remains transparent and honest with the players inside the dressing room.

"That is the foundation for earning respect," Gambhir told reporters.

"So far, he has been absolutely brilliant — transparent, upfront, hardworking, and focused on doing the right things. What more can a coach ask of a captain who is willing to put everything on the line?"

TENNIS

Pep talks with Djokovic as Sabalenka vows to improve 'everything' in her game

AFP
Hong Kong

World number one Aryna Sabalenka told AFP that she needs to improve her tennis "in literally everything" and how Novak Djokovic is helping her do it on and off the court.

In a wide-ranging interview, the four-time Grand Slam champion talked about ignoring hate on social media, nearly quitting and her hopes and fears for life after tennis.

The 27-year-old from Belarus is now the undoubted women's number one but it was hard work and suffering which got her there, and some of it played out very publicly.

Sabalenka, then two in the world, was reduced to tears as her serve spectacularly deserted her at a tournament in the lead-up to the 2022 Australian Open.

"I couldn't put one serve in. I was double-faulting 40 times. And I was like, maybe that's a sign that I have to quit," she said in Hong Kong.

"Because I was pushing, trying. We've done everything to fix my serve and nothing would work."

She added: "But, you know, I really believe – because I faced in different parts of life similar things – that when you're getting close to that moment where you're about to give up, I really believe that this is the moment when you can turn around things.

"You just have to push. You just have to keep trying. And this is the moment when it's a turning moment."

Back in Australia a year later, Sabalenka won her first major crown and successfully defended her Melbourne title in 2024.

Sabalenka is renowned for her hard hitting, powerful serve, aggressive style of play and mental steel, but warned her rivals that she sees "so many things" that she can do better.

"There's always something, you cannot stop," said Sabalenka, visiting Hong Kong for the Prudential NextGen Aces event with American great Andre Agassi.

"Like Andre said, the moment you stop, you're going down. And I only want to go up."

Talking specifics, she said: "I would love to approach the net much more. And I need to spend time working on that and understanding the game on the net in singles. "So, so many things I can get better at - shots, strokes, like literally everything."

'IT CAN DESTROY YOU'

With success comes scrutiny and commentary, especially on social media, where Sabalenka frequently posts about life inside and outside tennis.

She identified social media as one of the prime challenges to youngsters coming through the sport, warning that even for a seasoned campaigner like herself it is not easy to ignore criticism and hate – "sometimes it can destroy you".

"Sometimes when it really gets to me, I like to go on their profile (the person criticising) and see that. Like guys, I'm trying to do something big here," she said.

"To inspire, to be a good example. I'm working hard. I'm chasing my dreams. I'm dedicating my life to something that I think is big."

CHATS WITH DJOKOVIC

Sabalenka's friendship with 24-time Grand Slam champion Djokovic recently came to the fore after she practised with him and they spent time together socially along with their partners.



Belarus' player Aryna Sabalenka speaks as she attends a media event in Hong Kong yesterday. *(AFP)*

"He's a great guy and he's very open. You can ask anything and he can give you advice," she said of the 38-year-old Serb.

"And he's such an open guy and I love practising with him because for me it's such high-intensity training. It just helps me physically and even mentally to get better. And then when I play against girls, I'm not getting tired physically because I practise with Novak."

She revealed that after losing two finals this year she sought his counsel. "At Wimbledon I spoke to Novak. I just wanted to know how he was preparing himself for those big matches – what was the focus and what was his mindset going into the match.

"So we talked for an hour probably, but with Novak you always can spend more than that talking and asking for advice.

"And then later on, going to the US Open final, I remembered what he said, what he told me, and I think it helped me to get the title."

'LOTS TO LEARN'

Sabalenka still has years left at the top, but already has ideas of what comes after tennis.

She is thinking about something related to fashion or health, but admits it is a touch daunting.

"For now I'm too busy on getting better as a player, but we're definitely going to try to come up with something cool," she said.

"But that scares me as well because I feel like as an athlete, we're so focused on our sport and we're just living in a bubble.

"And then when we finish our career and we go outside of the bubble, it feels like for me I know nothing and I have a lot of things to learn."

SPOTLIGHT

Norway tour gets nod for combined world chess title

Fresh attempt to make sport appealing to broadcasters, online fans

Reuters
Paris

The International Chess Federation (FIDE) has approved a new global competition set up by Norway Chess that will crown a "World Combined Champion" across three time formats – Fast Classic, Rapid and Blitz, organisers said yesterday.

The tournament series, called the Total Chess World Championship Tour, will feature four events a year in cities around the world, with the overall winner taking the FIDE title.

A one-off pilot event is scheduled for late 2026 before the full championship season begins in 2027.

"We are looking for the total chess player – a versatile, tactically intelligent and technically skilled athlete who adapts to multiple time controls," Norway Chess CEO Kjell Madland said. "It will be a game-changer, both for the players and the fans."

"We expect this (Total Chess World Championship Tour), to become one of the most prestigious events in the entire chess calendar," said Madland.

He said that the World Championships, which is held in the Classical format, and the newly-conceptualised Total Chess World Championship Tour will complement each other as it had been officially approved by FIDE.

"The new championship will not replace or affect any existing FIDE World Championship titles," he said.



GAMES SHORTENED TO 45 MINUTES

The Fast Classic format shortens traditional games to 45 minutes plus a 30-second increment per move – part of an effort to make chess more appealing for broadcasters and online audiences.

The launch comes months after former world champion **Magnus Carlsen**, also Norwegian, unveiled a separate "Freestyle Chess" tour, which uses a randomised starting position inspired by Fischer Random chess.

That tour has not been sanctioned by FIDE, highlighting tensions between the world governing body and independent organisers seeking to modernise the sport. World number one Carlsen, the undisputed world champion from 2013-23, opted out of defending his title citing a lack of motivation and focused more on Freestyle chess and faster time controls, winning the Esports World Cup title this year.

FIDE President Arkady Dvorkovich welcomed the initiative.

"We are always looking for ways to innovate and push the boundaries of what chess can be," he said yesterday.

"This new tour complements the traditional World Chess Championship and will attract both existing fans and new audiences."

Carlsen also reacted positively to the move.

"This seems like a well-thought-out step to further develop chess. Bringing multiple formats together under a single title will provide a more complete view of the players' strengths, while the time controls suit today's players and audience," he said.

Norway Chess said it was inviting potential host cities, investors and partners to join what it called a long-term collaboration with FIDE.

The Total Chess World Championship Tour will offer a prize pool of a minimum of $750,000 for each of the first three locations while the fourth event will award at least $450,000 to a four-player field.

FOCUS

Qatar Rapid Team Chess Championship starts



QNA
Doha

The inaugural edition of the Qatar Rapid Team Chess Championship 2025 will kick off today at the Qatar Chess Training Centre, with 24 teams in action over two days.

Organised by the Qatar Chess Association (QCA), the tournament is open to all FIDE-rated players and will follow the Swiss system format over seven rounds, with each game timed at 10 minutes plus a 5-second increment per move. The first three rounds are scheduled for Thursday, while the final rounds will take place tomorrow.

A total prize pool of QR21,000 will be awarded to top-performing teams.

The championship features a mixed-gender team format, requiring each team to field four players – three men on the open boards and one woman on a designated board. Notably, only titled players (FM, IM, GM) are allowed to play on Board 1, although female players holding these titles may also compete on either Board 1 or the women's board.

Ahead of the launch, the organising committee concluded preparations. A technical meeting with team representatives and the referee panel was held to review tournament regulations. The referees' briefing was led by Dr Yousef al-Muhasna, Head of the Referees Committee, along with International Arbiters Sara al-Mohannadi and Hussein al-Haddad.

INDIA'S AHMEDABAD RECOMMENDED TO HOST 2030 COMMONWEALTH GAMES


The world's biggest cricket venue Narendra Modi Stadium is in Ahmedabad.

Bengaluru: The Indian city of Ahmedabad in the state of Gujarat has been recommended as the host city for the 2030 Centenary Commonwealth Games, the Commonwealth Sport Executive Board said yesterday.

The board said it will propose Ahmedabad, also known as Amdavad, in the western Indian state of Gujarat, to the full Commonwealth Sport membership for approval at the General Assembly in Glasgow on November 26.

The recommendation follows an evaluation process of candidate cities.

Both Ahmedabad and Abuja, Nigeria, had submitted bids.

The 2030 Games are set to commemorate 100 years since the inaugural event in Hamilton, Canada. The north American country was expected to be in the running but did not bid.

The board also said it would continue working with Nigeria to help realise its ambition of hosting future Games, including potential consideration for 2034.

The recommendation for India to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games has given fresh impetus to its bid to stage the 2036 Olympics in Ahmedabad.

The Indian Olympic Association (IOA) pledged in July to tackle doping and governance issues to strengthen its candidacy.

"India being recommended to host the Centenary Commonwealth Games in 2030 is a proud milestone in India's journey as a global sporting powerhouse," India's IOC member Nita Ambani said in a statement.

"This moment marks another step forward towards our shared dream of bringing the Olympic Games to India."

Ambani is the founder of Reliance Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Reliance Industries, India's most valuable company, which also sponsors the IOA.

India, having first hosted the Commonwealth Games in Delhi in 2010, pledged an event reflecting the Commonwealth's diversity and scale. The 2022 Games were shifted to Birmingham after the South African city of Durban withdrew due to financial issues.

The bid is a boost for the multi-sport event after fears Glasgow 2026 might be the last edition.

The Scottish city will host a pared-down version of the Games next year after the Australian state of Victoria, the original host, pulled out citing escalating costs.

"Today's recommendation is strategically important for the future of the Commonwealth Sport Movement. It builds on the platform that Glasgow 2026 will provide and sets a clear direction for the years ahead," Katie Sadleir, Chief Executive Officer of Commonwealth Sport said in a statement.

MCILROY ARRIVES IN NEW DELHI


Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy gestures during a media briefing for the India Championship 2025 golf tournament in New Delhi yesterday. The five-time major winner will compete for the first time at the DP World India Championship starting today at Delhi Golf Club. The field includes Ryder Cup teammates Luke Donald, Tommy Fleetwood and Shane Lowry. *(Reuters)*

HORSE RACING

Nano Toro claims season-opener Al Ghariyah Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Nano Toro delivered a thrilling performance to land the Al Ghariyah Cup over 1,200m, surging powerfully in the final strides to snatch victory and kick off the 2025-26 racing season in style at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.

The five-year-old chestnut mare showed tremendous determination and late speed, showcasing both her class and grit under pressure. Trained by Debbie Mountain and ridden confidently by jockey Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik, Nano Toro's win marked the first feature success of the new season and completed a swift double on the card for the team.

The back-to-back victories were a rewarding start for owner Engineer Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik, underlining his strong presence in the early stages of the campaign.

The winning connections were presented with the Al Ghariyah Cup trophies by Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC) Racing Manager Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi alongside Head of QREC Racing Operations Section Rashid Saed Adiba.


Jockey Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik guided Nano Toro to the Al Ghariyah Cup at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday. **PICTURES:** *Juhaim*


Connections of Nano Toro celebrate after the five-year-old chestnut mare won the Al Ghariyah Cup.

Mountain and Alabdulmalik enjoyed their first victory when Cei Connah edged out opponents in the Thoroughbred Handicap (75-95) – the penultimate event on the opening day of the hectic 70-meeting season.

There was also double delight for trainer Maayouf bin Hashim al-Shamari and jockey Salman Fahad al-Hajri, with Khaled Al Shahania (Purebred Arabian Handicap) and Nemr (Purebred Arabian Novice Plate) both landing victories.

Prominent jockey Soufiane Saadi also walked away with a brace of titles, guiding Jassim Hamad al-Atteya-trained Al Theeba and Mohammed al-Ghazali-trained Aeon's Aegis to perfection in Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate and Thoroughbred Maiden Plate respectively.

Jockey Jefferson Smith opened the action guiding Damaah, trained by Hadi al-Ramzani, to land the Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate (Fillies & Mares).

He also completed a pair of wins when he rode Ahmed Kobeissi-trained Roman Number to a massive six-length win in the 1,700m Thoroughbred Handicap (50-70). Today's second meeting at Al Rayyan also features eight races culminating with the Al Hamla Cup.

RESULTS
WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1 - Al Ghariyah Cup - Thoroughbred (Fillies & Mares) (Class 2)
Nano Toro, Debbie Mountain, Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik
2 - Thoroughbred Handicap (75-95)
Cei Connah, Debbie Mountain, Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik
3 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (70-90)
Khaled Al Shahania, Maayouf bin Hashim al-Shamari, Salman Fahad al-Hajri
4 - Purebred Arabian Novice Plate
Nemr, Maayouf bin Hashim al-Shamari, Salman Fahad al-Hajri
5 - Thoroughbred Handicap (50-70)
Roman Number, Ahmed Kobeissi, Jefferson Smith
6 - Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate
Al Theeba, Jassim Hamad al-Atteya, Soufiane Saadi
7 - Thoroughbred Maiden Plate
Aeon's Aegis, Mohammed al-Ghazali, Soufiane Saadi
8 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate (Fillies & Mares)
Damaah, Hadi al-Ramzani, Jefferson Smith

FOOTBALL

Tuchel laughs off good-humoured 'stick' from fans

'IT'S BRITISH HUMOUR AND I SURELY CAN TAKE IT. NO HARM DONE'

AFP
Riga

Manager Thomas Tuchel laughed off taunts from England fans as "British humour" after his team smashed Latvia 5-0 to become the first European side to book a place at next year's World Cup.

Harry Kane's first-half double in Riga on Tuesday, along with goals from Anthony Gordon, Eberechi Eze and a Maksims Tonisevs own goal, guaranteed England a place at the tournament in Canada, Mexico and the United States.

Tuchel was on the receiving end of light-hearted chants from the travelling fans who were responding to the German's criticism of the atmosphere during Thursday's 3-0 friendly win over Wales at Wembley.

He was subjected to taunts of "We sing when we want" and "Are we loud enough for you?".

"I got a bit of stick today, in the first half, pretty much in every song," said Tuchel.

"So fair enough. Well done. I take it and good humour, good sense of humour.

"They had a reason today from my last comments and I guess that's fair enough. I got a bit of stick and I found it quite creative.

"It made me smile and this is how it has to be. It's British humour and I surely can take it. No harm done."


England manager Thomas Tuchel reacts after FIFA World Cup qualifiers against Latvia in Riga, Latvia. *(Reuters)*

Tuchel, whose contract runs until the end of the World Cup, said vocal support from fans was vital as the team chases a first major trophy since 1966.

"It's so important. They are here and I said the support in Serbia was brilliant, and we are very sure the support in America (at the World Cup) will be absolutely brilliant," he said. "We need it. It makes such a difference if you go out as a player or as a coach and you see the fans behind the team and singing.

"We want to make them proud, we want to make them happy. They should be happy to watch us and they should be able to identify with how we play.

"We are on our way to build something and top performance from them."

England's victory in Riga made it six wins from six in Group K and they now have an unassailable seven-point lead over second-placed Albania, with two games remaining.

The draw for the group stage of the World Cup will be held in Washington on December 5.

BASKETBALL

Al Rayyan emerge Super Cup champs

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Rayyan emerged as champions of the inaugural basketball Qatar Super Cup as they beat Al Sadd 97-72 in the final held at the Lusail Multi-Purpose Sports Arena yesterday.

Mohammed bin Saad al-Mughaiseeb, President of the Qatar Basketball Federation, crowned the champions.

Al Rayyan dominated from the tip-off, imposing their style with organised offence built on quick transitions and stout defence to claim the first quarter 36-23.

Al Rayyan extended their lead in the second quarter, outscoring Al Sadd 27-18 thanks to standout performances from their imports.

They maintained control in the third, winning 20-12 with near-total command of the game. Al Sadd mounted a late rally in the fourth, taking it 19-14, but it wasn't enough to close the gap, sealing Al Rayyan's 97-72 win and inaugural Super Cup title.

Rolands Freimanis shone for Al Rayyan with 27 points, while Ding Ding Adel led Al Sadd with 20 points. Al Rayyan advanced to the final with a commanding 101-74 semi-final win over Al Ahli, while Al Sadd progressed after edging Al Arabi 87-82.



De Jong pens new Barcelona deal to 2029

Barcelona midfielder Frenkie de Jong signed a new deal until 2029, the Spanish champions announced yesterday. The 28-year-old Dutch international joined Barcelona from Ajax in 2019 and is in his seventh season with the Catalan giants, winning two La Liga titles and the Copa del Rey twice.

"Barca are confident that the midfielder can be a pivotal part of the current sporting project due to his quality and experience," said the club in a statement.

De Jong has struggled for form at times but became a key part of the midfield under Hansi Flick last season alongside Pedri Gonzalez.

"I always dreamed of playing for Barca, and now that I am living the dream I have always had since I was a child, I want to continue pursuing this dream for many more years, and I am eager to win titles," De Jong told a news conference. Arriving under previous Barca president Josep Maria Bartomeu, De Jong is one of the club's highest earners, with Spanish media reporting he has accepted a pay cut in his new deal starting from the 2026/27 season.

MOTORSPORT

LIC to host 2026 FIA World Endurance Championship opening round

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) season will kick off next spring at Lusail International Circuit (LIC) with the "Qatar 1812 KM" season-opener, named in honour of Qatar's National Day.

Taking place from March 26-28, tickets for the motorsport spectacle are now on sale. Fans will witness multiple cars racing simultaneously across two categories: Hypercar and LMGT3, in an intense battle that will last up to ten hours.

A QR50 ticket valid for all three days of the event provides access to two prime viewing areas: the Main Grandstand (free seating) and Lusail Hill as well as the entertainment filled Fan Zone.



While the Main Grandstand offers an excellent view of the start/finish line and pit lane action, the Lusail Hill is a dedicated elevated viewing area located at Turn 1, providing spectators with an unparalleled vantage point of one of the most exciting parts of the track. Children under 12 can attend free of charge, with a maximum of six child tickets per order, and children aged two years and below are granted entry without a ticket. In line with Lusail International Circuit's commitment to inclusivity, wheelchair users and a companion can request entry with one full-price ticket and one complimentary ticket, by contacting tickets@lcsc.qa

There is a special bonus for motorsport fans, holders of a ticket for the Qatar 1812 KM will also receive a 25% discount on tickets for the 2026 MotoGP Qatar Airways Grand Prix of Qatar, offering an opportunity to experience both of Qatar's premier racing events. All tickets will be delivered as mobile tickets through the Lusail Tickets app and are valid as single-day tickets.

As it speeds towards its 14th season, WEC continues to be the world's premier international endurance championship. In 2026, the series will span eight rounds, with Qatar hosting the Prologue group test, followed by races in Italy, Belgium, France, Brazil, the USA, Japan, and Bahrain, reinforcing its status as one of the most prestigious championships in global motorsport.

In evidence of its success, more major automotive manufacturers compete in WEC than in any other motorsport series – from Ferrari and Ford to McLaren and Mercedes – with Genesis additionally set to join the headlining Hypercar grid in 2026 with its new GMR-001.

Event Schedule: March 26, 2026: Free practice sessions; March 27, 2026: Free practice and Qualifying sessions; March 28, 2026: Qatar 1812 KM - 2026 FIA World Endurance Championship. For more details and updates, follow LIC on social media or visit the official website: tickets.lcsc.qa

