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Pakistan win ODI against South Africa as Salman shows the way



CHAMPIONS LEAGUE | Page 4

Merino sends Arsenal past Slavia as Dowman creates history

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**GULF TIMES**

**SPORT**

SPOTLIGHT

Inacio on Italy belief and vibrant Qatar atmosphere at Aspire

From the first minute to the last of Qatar's FIFA U-17 World Cup showdown with Italy on Monday, the home fans backed their team with incessant noise and passion, creating an intoxicating buzz at the Aspire Zone complex.

The match concluded a thrilling opening day at the newly-expanded tournament, which featured eight matches and 27 goals. The hosts ultimately went down 1-0 to their illustrious opponents, who mixed class, steel and poise to bank a hard-fought win. Samuele Inacio netted the game's only goal and, speaking to FIFA, explained why the carnival atmosphere ensured it was an occasion to savour.

"It was amazing," said the Borussia Dortmund striker, fresh from being presented with his Player of the Match prize. "We were playing against the home team, so it was crazy. To play in this fantastic atmosphere and win makes us very proud. The key was the focus. We stayed together. We have a lot of confidence for this tournament. We did a great EURO (reaching the semi-finals), and we are ready to have a great World Cup."

Italy captain Benit Borasio wore a beam-

ing smile as he reflected on his U-17 World Cup debut. "The atmosphere was incredible," he said. "Even if the fans are against you, it gives you energy. That emotion transmits to you. The pitch was also perfect. It was great."

Qatar coach Alvaro Mejia witnessed his team go toe to toe against a top-quality outfit. The host nation steadfastly hunted an equaliser following Inacio's strike, but could not find a way through Italy's well-drilled backline. Mejia declared the squad's collective hunger to reward their vibrant support when they return to action against South Africa tomorrow

"Here in Qatar, everyone loves football," he said. "They love to be part of it. The atmosphere was beautiful. It was colourful all around. For the people to watch players at this age – who very soon are going to be on TV and will be stars – it's something amazing."

"I am happy with how we performed against one of the strongest teams. The idea was to go out and compete. We competed. I am proud of the players and now we are going to come back against another strong team in South Africa. Let's try to give the best of ourselves for all the people

who are coming here to support. We have to push ourselves to the limits."

The game's winning goal was fitting for the stage. Centre-back Borasio arrowed a sensational defence-splitting pass into the path of Inacio, who finished clinically into the bottom corner. "It was a good assist from Benit," said Inacio of his skipper's contribution. "I didn't expect it, to be honest! It was a great pass. To have a captain like him is fantastic. He has a lot of responsibility, and he takes us with him."

Borasio, who plays his club football for Juventus, was a towering presence in the Italy backline throughout the contest. His comfort in possession was also eye-catching, and it came as little surprise to learn he formerly played higher up the pitch. "In the past, I played in the middle, like a CDM (defensive midfielder). Now I play centre-back. I like to play there, because I can drive with the ball and pass through the lines to my mates."

On the honour of leading his nation out at Qatar 2025, Borasio added: "It's amazing to be captain for Italy, especially in the World Cup. You feel the responsibility for your team and for your country. It is a great feeling."

(fifa.com)



Samuele Inacio netted the game's only goal as Italy beat Qatar.

FOOTBALL

Venezuela stun England as Brazil and Egypt cruise

North Korea, South Korea, Switzerland and Zambia win, while Colombia draw with holders Germany

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The FIFA U-17 World Cup Qatar 2025 continued yesterday with some impressive team performances, including Brazil finding the net seven times against Honduras, while Venezuela beating fancied England in style.

Egypt, North Korea, South Korea, Switzerland and Zambia also enjoyed winning debuts, while Colombia and Germany served up the most exciting encounter on the day in a share of the spoils.

In Group E, Venezuela produced an exceptional all-round display to earn a famous 3-0 win over England. The South Americans hit the front when captain Roman Davis rifled home from a tight angle. If that goal was good, their second was even better, with Dione Fuentes curling a wonderful strike into the top corner. Substitute Eider Barrios made it three late on with a close-range finish.

England coach Neil Ryan was naturally frustrated with the result. Ryan said: "We're very disappointed with the scoreline. We created five or six clear chances to score and of course that comes back to haunt you. But it's only the first game of the group stage. We're going to keep really positive and work hard to go into the next game and make things right."

Egypt sailed past Haiti 4-1. The Young Pharaohs made a triumphant return to the competition for the first time since a 2-1 quarter-final loss to Xavi and Spain in 1997. Belal Attia, Abdelaziz Elzoghby and Hamza Abdelkarim all sparkled and scored for Ahmed Elkass's side, while Nikolai Pierre's sumptuous curler gave Haiti hope before the break. Egypt's victory was sealed when Omar Kamal headed home a devilish Attia delivery. Egypt coach Ahmed El Kass said: "I am very happy with the result today for two reasons: first we have always had slow starts in past tournaments, and also because we feel that we have made the Egyptian people happy – both here and at home."

In Group H Brazil thrashed Honduras 7-0. Dell struck a predatory double, while wonder goals from Ruan Pablo and Felipe Morais had Brazil cruising at the break. Thereafter, a Vitor Hugo header, a glorious strike from Angelo and an admirable Gabriel Mec effort ensured the four-time champions made an emphatic statement of intent.

Felipe Morais, Brazil midfielder, said: "Our goal was to start well in the tournament and that's what we did. We executed everything we trained since our preparation until here. I'm very happy for the goal.



Venezuela players celebrate after their upset win over England at the FIFA U-17 World Cup at Aspire Zone.

This gives me even more confidence for the next matches."

Zambia capped their inaugural match in the global finals with a thrilling comeback 1-3 victory over Indonesia, highlighted by a quickfire brace from Abel Nyirongo. Indonesia, the 2023 hosts, took an early lead through an opportunistic strike from Zahaby Gholy. But Zambia quickly fought back thanks to two goals in as many minutes from Nyirongo, with Lukonde Mwale ensuring the triumph just before the break.

Defending champions Germany were held to a 1-1 draw by Colombia in a Group G tie. Marc-Patrick Meister's Mannschaft and Predy Hurtado's Tricolor played out an exciting, evenly-matched stalemate. Just 16 seconds were on the clock when Toni Langsteiner scored the third-fastest goal in the tournament's 40-year history. Criss Macias almost equalised following a swashbuckling surge through the German defence, before Juan Catano did grab Colombia a point by fizzing home a loose ball from the edge of the box.

Colombia coach Freddy Hurtado was pleased with a draw against the holders. He said: "We began the match and got behind early. The opener is the hardest match, and more so against Germany. The guys competed well and we are happy with this point. Obviously we wanted more, but



Egypt sailed past Haiti 4-1 in their opening match.

now our focus is on the next game."

North Korea routed El Salvador 2-0 as Ri Kang-rim and Kim Yu-jin each bagged braces. Korea started on the front foot and broke the deadlock on a slashing run from Ri, whose shot deflected in off the fingertips of El Salvador goalkeeper Oliver Alegria. El Salvador tried to respond, but

a late first half penalty following a video review saw Kim double the lead for the Asian side. They added some insurance in the second stanza when El Salvador failed to clear a free-kick and Ri easily tapped home, followed by late goals from Kim and Han Il-bok.

In Group F, Switzerland recorded an 4-1

RESULTS			
GROUP F			
COTE D'IVOIRE	1 - 4	SWITZERLAND	
GROUP H			
BRAZIL	7 - 0	HONDURAS	
MEXICO	1 - 2	KOREA REPUBLIC	
GROUP E			
HAITI	1 - 4	EGYPT	
GERMANY	1 - 1	COLOMBIA	
GROUP I			
ENGLAND	0 - 3	VENEZUELA	
GROUP G			
KOREA DPR	5 - 0	EL SALVADOR	
GROUP H			
INDONESIA	1 - 3	ZAMBIA	



Dell struck a double as Brazil thrashed Honduras 7-0.

impressive victory in their opening fixture, with two goals in each half against Cote d'Ivoire. Captain Gil Zufferey opened the scoring when he tried his luck from long range with a dipping strike that evaded opposing skipper Christ Kouassi.

Adrien Lluques doubled the advantage before the interval, following up to convert after his own penalty had been saved by the unfortunate Kouassi. Giacomo Koloto was released to calmly convert the third, with Jill Stiel smashing home a spectacular fourth before Hubert Yao's consolation for the African side.

South Korea edged out Mexico 2-1 in a compelling Group F clash. Koo Hyeonbin put his team in front with an instinctive finish, before Aldo De Nigris headed Mexico level. The Koreans went back ahead early in the second half when Nam Ian netted after a fast counter-attack, and then defended resolutely to secure maximum points.



CRICKET

# Rizwan, Salman guide Pakistan to hard-fought win

Pakistan chase 263 for the loss of eight wickets in the first ODI

Reuters  
Faisalabad

Salman Ali Agha top scored for Pakistan as they snatched a last-over victory over South Africa yesterday in an exciting finish to the first of three One Day Internationals at Faisalabad.

Salman scored 62 as Pakistan won by two wickets with two balls remaining as they successfully chased down a 264-run target.

Pakistan put South Africa in to bat and the tourists' opening pair put on a 98-run partnership before teenager Lhuan-dre Pretorius, who scored 57 off 60 balls on his ODI debut, was expertly caught at point.

Quinton de Kock, back in the ODI ranks after a two-year absence, was South Africa's top scorer with 63 and Corbin Bosch made a quick-fire 41 in the last overs before South Africa were bowled out for 263 with five balls to spare.

Fakhar Zaman (45) and Saim Ayub (39) got Pakistan off to a solid 87-run first-wicket start and they kept on course as Mohammad Rizwan hit 55 and featured in a key 91-run fourth-wicket partnership with Salman. Rizwan had been replaced as captain last month.

Agha, the player of the match, said: "I would have finished the game. It was on me and I would have finished the game. But yeah I think it's a great win. I was ex-



Pakistan's Mohammad Rizwan (right) and Pakistan's Salman Agha run between the wickets during the first ODI against South Africa at the Iqbal Stadium in Faisalabad yesterday. (AFP)

pecting dew here but there was no dew, and without dew it was tough in the second innings, it was turning and staying low and reversing. But me and Rizwan spoke that if we bat through, we'll win, and that partnership was important. We knew that if we have a partnership, we have enough time. We just want to respect bowlers where needed and

when we need to score runs, we need to just communicate who will take charge and that's what we do when we are batting together."

There was a wobble for Pakistan, who were seemingly coasting to victory when they lost three wickets in successive overs, but new captain Shaheen Shah Afridi was there at the end to help see

them over the line. The two teams meet again at Iqbal Stadium, hosting international cricket after a 17-year absence, tomorrow.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**Pakistan 264 for 8** (Agha 62, Rizwan 55, Bosch 2-32, Ngidi 2-46) **beat South Africa 263** (de Kock 63, Pretorius 57, Naseem 3-40, Abrar 3-53) **by 2 wickets**

ANNOUNCEMENT

# Pakistan's Rauf, Indian skipper Yadav punished

AFP  
Dubai

Pakistan paceman Haris Rauf and Indian captain Suryakumar Yadav were punished by the International Cricket Council (ICC) yesterday for their inflammatory behaviour in September's Asia Cup.

India and Pakistan met three times during the tournament – India beating their bitter rivals in all three matches, including the September 28 final in Dubai – and on each occasion the sides refused to shake hands.

There was added tension between them at the Asia Cup because of the four-day conflict in May that resulted in more than 70 deaths in missile, drone and military fire on each side.

It had been sparked by a terror attack in Pahalgalam on the Indian side of Kashmir, which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan, a charge denied by Islamabad.

In one of the matches, Rauf mimicked a fighter jet crashing before showing a "6-0" hand signal, referring to the number of planes the Pakistanis claim they shot down during the conflict.

## SURYAKUMAR REFUSED TO ACCEPT TROPHY

Suryakumar dedicated the win over Pakistan in the first match which was played on September 14 to the victims of the Pahalgalam attack and the Indian armed forces, and after the final refused to accept the trophy from Mohsin Naqvi, the president of the Asian Cricket Council (ACC).

The Indian players instead celebrated retaining their regional crown by mimicking holding a trophy.

Naqvi, who is also chairman of the Pakistan Cricket Board and Pakistan interior minister, said afterwards they were "welcome to come to the ACC office and collect it from me".

The ICC ruled both Rauf and Suryakumar

– the ICC said the latter's behaviour "brings the game into disrepute" – would forfeit 30 percent of their match fee and receive two demerit points.

The latter punishment raised Rauf's total to four demerit points in the past two years "resulting in two suspension points".

As a result he will miss the first two one-day Internationals this week, against South Africa in Faisalabad.

Pakistan opener Sahibzada Farhan and Indian pace bowler Jasprit Bumrah got off more lightly with a warning and one demerit point each.

Farhan had mimicked a gun celebration after hitting a half-century.

Bumrah celebrated by mimicking a crashing-plane after he dismissed Rauf for six in the final.

The ICC said the punishments were the outcome of several code of conduct proceedings held by match referees Richie Richardson and Andy Pycroft.

SPOTLIGHT

# Ashwin out of Big Bash League after knee surgery

Reuters  
Sydney

Indian spinner Ravichandran Ashwin will miss what would have been his maiden Big Bash League (BBL) season following a knee surgery.

The 39-year-old shattered a long-standing barrier when he signed with Sydney Thunder in September, becoming the first male Indian player to join the league.

He quit international cricket last year and ended his Indian Premier League (IPL) career in August, thus freeing himself from the Indian board's restrictions that bar male players from participating in franchise cricket elsewhere.

"I'm gutted to miss BBL," Ashwin said in a statement issued by his BBL franchise on Tuesday.

"My focus now is recovery and coming back stronger. I'm grateful to the Thunder family and the



Ravichandran Ashwin

fans for the warmth they've already shown me." "If rehab and travel plans allow, I'd love to be around the group later in the season and meet the fans. Wishing both Thunder teams a big year."

Ashwin said he hurt his knee while preparing for the season that necessitated the surgery.

"Everyone at Sydney Thunder was devastated to learn of Ash's knee injury that has ruled him out of BBL, and we wish him well

in his recovery," Thunder general manager Trent Copeland said.

Ashwin has committed the entire season to his BBL side after going unsold at the players' auction in the International League T20 in the United Arab Emirates.

## Zimbabwe stalwart Williams loses contract after entering drug rehab

Zimbabwe all-rounder Sean Williams, one of the country's finest ever cricketers, will no longer be

considered for selection after he entered into a drug rehabilitation programme, Zimbabwe Cricket (ZC) said in a statement on Tuesday.

Williams, 39, who made his international debut in 2005 and is one of Zimbabwe's most experienced players, will not have his ZC contract extended beyond its expiry in December this year.

Williams withdrew from the Zimbabwe side that took part in the recent T20 World Cup Africa Qualifier 2025 in Harare, one of several tours and tournaments he has skipped over the years.

"During an internal investigation to understand the reasons for his unavailability, Williams disclosed that he has been struggling with drug addiction and has voluntarily entered rehabilitation," ZC said in a statement.

Williams averaged a healthy 45.25 with the bat from his 24 tests, and also played 164 one day internationals and 85 Twenty20 Internationals.

FIFA U-17 WORLD CUP QATAR 2025

# Disabled fans enjoy barrier-free experience

The FIFA U-17 World Cup Qatar 2025 is underway, with 48 teams battling it out in the exciting group stage. With fans making their way to Aspire Zone to cheer on their teams, the tournament is offering a barrier-free experience for disabled fans to be part of the football celebrations.

## Here are three key accessibility features allowing disabled fans to be part of the tournament experience:

### Wheelchair-accessible seating across all pitches

All eight pitches of the Competition Complex in Aspire Zone include wheelchair-accessible seating options.

The Final will take place at Khalifa International Stadium, also located in Aspire Zone, featuring accessible seating options for fans with disabilities and/or limited mobility.

### Audio descriptive commentary available through smartphone app

Audio descriptive commentary in Arabic and English is available for select matches, including all Qatar national team matches, for blind and partially sighted football fans.

Fans can download the 3annak app, enter the code U17, and select the audio channel of their choice.

Using personal headphones, fans can listen to a detailed com-

mentary of match details, including important information about the ambience in the stands and even the players' facial reactions. The service enables blind and partially sighted fans to experience the football action in a barrier-free manner.

### Sensory room at the fan zone

A dedicated sensory room is available in the fan zone for fans with neurodivergent needs. Operating in partnership with Qatar Foundation Pre-University Education, the sensory room allows fans with sensory needs to watch matches in a quieter space, equipped with assistive technology and managed by expert staff.

### How to apply for accessibility tickets?

Fans can apply for an accessibility ticket by sending an e-mail to: accessibility.u17fw@sc.qa Tickets are priced at QR10. A dedicated team is set up to manage all accessibility ticket requests. Accessibility tickets will allow disabled fans to attend multiple matches a day as well as cultural and entertainment activities taking place at the fan zone. The fan zone will operate from 1:30pm until the final whistle, on match days only.

Ticket holders must carry their Proof of Eligibility when entering the Aspire Zone and Khalifa International Stadium. Companion tickets are available for people assisting an accessibility ticketholder.



# ENGLAND TEST CAPTAIN STOKES SIGNS DEAL UNTIL 2027 ASHES

**London:** Ben Stokes has been awarded a fresh two-year contract that will take him through to the end of the next home Ashes series in 2027, England cricket chiefs announced yesterday.

The Test captain, whose previous deal had been due to expire next year, is one of 14 players handed two-year deals by the England and Wales Cricket Board, including pace bowler Jofra Archer and highly rated young batsman Jacob Bethell.

Twelve others have signed one-year contracts. Stokes, 34, has a chequered injury history and has not played any cricket since July following a shoulder injury. But he is expected to be available for the first Test of a five-match Ashes series against Australia, which starts in Perth on November 21.

Jonny Bairstow's central contract has finally come to an end, while spinner Jack Leach also misses out after falling out of favour.

Rob Key, managing director of England men's cricket, said the contracts reflect the depth and strength of talent available. "We have awarded two-year deals to our multi-format players, so we can manage their workloads responsibly and give them the stability they need to perform across formats," he said.

## England 'quietly confident' heading into Ashes series: Wood

England are banking on their rapid bowling attack as they look to end their Ashes drought in Australia, with fast bowler Mark Wood saying the squad has a "different feel" to previous unsuccessful trips Down Under. England last won the Ashes in 2015 and have not won a series in Australia since 2011, losing their last three tours by margins of 5-0, 4-0 and 4-0.

Their last series defeat in Australia in 2022 led to an extensive review and shake-up of team leadership, resulting in the appointments of coach Brendon McCullum and red-ball captain Ben Stokes as well as a marked shift in playing style.

"I can truly say there's a quiet confidence within the group," Wood told the *Guardian* in an interview published on Monday. "It's a different feel this time. Last



time we had Covid-19 and problems behind the scenes.

"Under this coach (Brendon McCullum) and this captain (Ben Stokes) there's a specific way of playing and we're going with more confidence and belief."

England head into the series with arguably their quickest fast-bowling lineup in years, featuring Wood, Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Josh Tongue and Brydon Carse. Their last series victory in Australia was also built on a strong bowling attack, which boasted James Anderson, Stuart Broad, Graeme Swann, Steve Finn and Chris Tremlett.

Wood said England had taken a page out of Australia's playbook with their approach.

"It's about having a collection of bowlers who can come in if anyone needs resting or there are injuries," he added.

"We want a battery of fast bowlers and we've tried to change from the norm of England, where there are lots of seamers, to Australia's vision of fast bowling. Look at Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood. "They can all bowl at 90 (mph) or in the high 80s and they've been especially consistent and relentless."

"So we're going there with a bit of an Australia blueprint to see if we can replicate that and put their batters under pressure like they've done with ours."

Wood, who was one of England's standout bowlers in the 2021-22 series when he claimed 17 wickets, has been sidelined since February due to a knee injury.

"I've obviously had a poor and strange summer. I could have played at the back end of the season, for Durham, but England took a more cautious approach," the 35-year-old said.



FOCUS

# Final preparations underway at Lusail for Qatar Baja

QATAR'S AL-ATTIYAH TARGETS VICTORY IN A CHALLENGER CAR FOR THE SECOND TIME



Home hero Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah is aiming to win the Qatar International Baja outright in a Challenger car.

By Sports Reporter  
Lusail

The Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) has put the finishing touches to this weekend's Qatar International Baja and competitors have now set up their equipment in the expansive Baja service park, adjacent to the Lusail International Circuit, north of Doha.

Forty-three cars, 54 motorcycles and four quads are expected to tackle the penultimate rounds of the FIA World and Middle East Baja Cups and the FIM Bajas World Cup.

Rally officials have also made minor tweaks to the route in the days building up to the event. The Prologue to determine the starting order for the first stage will now run for 10.59km tomorrow afternoon. This precedes a slightly revised opening stage of 220.31km on Friday and the final run through the dunes of southern Qatar on Saturday that has been

slightly lengthened to 234.19km.

Five-time Dakar Rally winner Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah proved last December that it is possible to beat the Ultimate category cars and take an outright victory in a round of the FIA World Baja Cup (he and Pablo Moreno won the Dubai round in a Taurus T3 Max) in a Challenger class machine.

The Qatari has a busy weekend ahead offering support vehicles to the QMMF Team. As he explained in the service park yesterday: "We tried hard in Dubai last year and we won. It was really nice. Now, we have made a lot of development with the car (Taurus) in South Africa also. We have worked on the cooling and the power of the engine."

He added: "It is very nice to have the Nasser Racing and QMMF teams for our region and to help the people. It is amazing. We try to improve every time. It's also a good chance for me to keep focused before the Dakar with Dacia. That's another reason we are here. I am also with Fabian (Lurquin), my co-driver for Dakar, and

we are here to learn more together. I didn't want to miss this race."

One of the entrants in the SSV category at the wheel of an RX-Sport-supplied Can-Am Maverick XRS Turbo RR is Nora al-Jassasi. The first Emirati female to be licenced by the FIA as a driver is teaming up with navigator Egor Okhotnikov. After starting out in equestrian endurance racing, Nora switched to motorcycling and has also taken part in the Jameel Rally in Saudi Arabia on a couple of occasions.

"I'm excited to be a part of the Qatar Baja," said Nora. "I know Qatar's terrain will be challenging but that's what pushes you to improve. I will also compete in Dubai as preparation for the 2026 FIA Middle East Baja Cup. I took part in the Abu Dhabi Baja Challenge at the end of October and was third in T4 and second in the Ladies Cup."

Rashid al-Ketbi is a former rally driver himself and would often give Mohammed Ben Sulayem and Abdullah Bakhshab a run for their money on rounds of the FIA Mid-



QMMF Team cars undergo final rebuilds before the Qatar International Baja.

dle East Rally Championship. He is now running Dubai-based RX-Sport and overseeing the exploits of Oman's Hamed al-Wahaibi in this year's FIA World Baja Cup.

Al-Wahaibi is currently tied third in the SSV standings with Briton Paul Severn and behind runaway series leader Mitchel van den Brink and Italy's Amerigo Ventura.

Al-Ketbi said: "I am very excited to be here and to see so many old friends again. We have been managing Hamed all season in the World Championship and we are aiming for the podium. We reach a certain time in our motorsport careers as we get older and we decide to support each other as best we can. It is becoming a motorsport family more than just a motorsport challenge."

Al-Attiyah's brother Khalifa Saleh is in pole position to win the FIA Middle East Baja Cup outright. The QMMF Team Taurus driver takes an 11-point lead over Saudi Arabia's Dania Akeel into the weekend in the overall Drivers' Championship. He leads team-

mate Abdulaziz al-Kuwari by 32 points in the SSV standings. "I need to be cautious, not take risks, find a fast pace and make sure that I score points," said Khalifa Saleh.

Rival Akeel kept in match practice last weekend by finishing second overall at the Qassim Rally in Saudi Arabia. She will run an Overdrive Racing Toyota Hilux this weekend.

Last year, Akeel was on the verge of history by becoming the first woman ever to win a Baja-type event in the Middle East. She led at the start of the final stage in Qatar and then stopped shortly before the finish with a broken steering arm. Desperate emergency repairs enabled her to reach the finish in fifth place.

Juan Cruz Yacopini arrives in Doha trying to defend a 22-point lead in the Drivers' Championship in the FIA World Bajas Cup. The Argentine's closest rival is Czech veteran Miroslav Zapletal. Yacopini has only scored points on four rounds so far this year. He finished second to Yazeed al-Rajhi at the Saudi Baja and scored maximum

points in Jordan, Italy and Spain.

Mohammed al-Balooshi starts as the favourite in the FIM Bajas World Cup category and is also the leader of the local Qatar Baja series.

Michael Anderson has a growing reputation in the area for his speed, while this year's Saudi Baja winner Alex McInnes has changed the engine on his bike in the bivouac after last weekend's Qassim Rally.

Both Barry Howe and Hamdan al-Ali will be absent from the start list because of injury but Qatari riders Mohammed al-Kubaisi and Abdulrahman al-Sheeb will be raring to go. Meanwhile, Briton Ben Harvey-Grounds will line-up full of confidence after his win on a Kove in the prestigious 24-hour Dawn to Dusk Enduro in Wales.

On Wednesday, competitors go through their administration and scrutineering checks at the Lusail International Circuit before a dozen of the leading drivers and riders attend the pre-event press conference in the circuit's media centre 6pm.

TENNIS

## Gauff sweeps Paolini aside, Sabalenka wins

AFP  
Riyadh

Coco Gauff claimed a much-needed 6-3, 6-2 victory over Jasmine Paolini to keep her WTA Finals title defence alive in Riyadh yesterday, while top-seeded Aryna Sabalenka battled past Jessica Pegula 6-4, 2-6, 6-3.

Gauff, the American third seed had lost her opener two days prior to Pegula but was far more clinical against Paolini, whose second singles defeat of the week means she has no chance of advancing to the semi-finals.

The Italian is still in contention in doubles though alongside her partner Sara Errani.

"I'm really happy with how I played today, definitely a turnaround from my first match," said Gauff, who posted her 10th top-10 win of the season.

Sabalenka recovered from an early break in the deciding set to avenge her recent loss to Pegula in the Wuhan semi-finals and strengthen her chances of qualifying for the final four in Riyadh.

The Belarusian world number one could only convert four of the 16 break points she created, as Pegula fought until the bitter end.

A total of 10 of Pegula's last 11 matches have gone to three sets. This was just her second three-set loss within that stretch.

"She's an incredible player, she always pushes me to that limit," said Sabalenka of her fifth-seeded opponent.

"In the third set, I just told myself to go for it. She pushed me and I love it. I love playing against her because it's always great matches, great level, great points. I was really enjoying that she was pushing me to the next level."



Coco Gauff hits a return against Jasmine Paolini during their WTA Finals match in Riyadh yesterday. (AFP)

It will be all to play for in the Stefanie Graf Group on Thursday with Sabalenka, Gauff and Pegula all still in contention for semi-final tickets.

Against Pegula in her opener on Sunday, Gauff struggled with her serve, committing 17 double faults and winning just 28 percent of the points behind her second delivery.

Her performance in the first set of her second match was already a significant improvement, as she won nine of 11 points on her second serve, misfiring just twice for two double faults.

The 21-year-old leapt to a 3-0

lead and despite Paolini's attempted comeback, was able to reclaim her advantage to take the opening set in 40 minutes.

The second set was a straightforward affair as Gauff notched two breaks of serve en route to her second win in five meetings with the Italian this season.

"I think only three doubles today compared to 17 - that's a big difference," said the two-time grand slam champion.

"I think it just shows that I have the ability to serve like this and it definitely gives me confidence."

Gauff hired biomechanics coach

Gavin MacMillan in late August, right before the US Open, to help fix technical issues with her serve.

She said her approach after her opening defeat was to go "back to the basics and try not to overcomplicate things".

"I think I was on the trajectory in China serving great and I think maybe trying to serve a little bit too hard in that match against Jess," Gauff said.

"So today I just tried to slow it down and let's start with that approach first and obviously if I have to go bigger, I have the ability to do that."

### Sabalenka to face Kyrgios in 'Battle of Sexes' on December 28

Aryna Sabalenka will play Nick Kyrgios on December 28 in Dubai in a "Battle of the Sexes" tennis showdown, organisers confirmed yesterday. The rare man-versus-woman match between world number 1 Sabalenka and 30-year-old semi-retired Australian Kyrgios echoes the legendary 1973 encounter when Billie Jean King defeated Bobby Riggs in a key moment as the push for women's rights gained ground. Sabalenka, who is competing at the WTA Finals this week in Riyadh, commented: "I have so much respect for Billie Jean King and what she has done for the women's game. I'm proud to represent women's tennis and to be part of this modern take of the iconic Battle of the Sexes match."

The Belarusian said she had a lot of respect for Kyrgios.

"But make no mistake, I'm ready to bring my A-game," the four-time Grand Slam winner warned the volatile Australian showman who is currently 652nd in the ATP rankings having not played since March. "When the World No 1 challenges you, you answer the call," Kyrgios, 30, said. "I've got massive respect for Aryna; she's a powerhouse and a true champion."

"But I've never backed down from a challenge, and I'm not just here to play, I'm here to entertain. This is what I live for. Dubai, get ready for a show," added the 2022 Wimbledon finalist.

Kyrgios threw down the gauntlet to Sabalenka during the US Open in September, saying in an interview he would easily dispatch the 27-year-old. Sabalenka responded by saying she was ready to "kick ass" - setting up an intriguing end to the 2025 tennis season.

### LPGA's International Crown returning to San Francisco in '27

The LPGA Tour announced that the International Crown will be played at the Lake Merced Golf Club in San Francisco for the sixth edition of the team event in 2027. The only team event in women's golf that is contested by global teams, the 2025 International Crown included seven national teams and one World Team. It was won by Australia at the New Korea Country Club outside of Seoul. The International Crown was first contested in 2014 at Caves Valley Golf Club in Maryland. It was played at the Merit Club in Illinois in 2016 and at the Jack Nicklaus Golf Club Korea in South Korea in 2018. After being canceled in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the International Crown was held at TPC Harding Park in San Francisco in 2023. The event is sponsored by Hanwha, a global business conglomerate based in the Republic of Korea whose AI hub is located in San Francisco. "After such a successful Hanwha Lifeplus International Crown in Korea, we are thrilled to bring the next playing of this exciting team event back to San Francisco and the spectacular Lake Merced Golf Club," said Chris Madsen, managing director of LPGA APAC Region. "The International Crown is a brilliant demonstration of the global power of women's golf, with athletes playing for both country and personal pride. We look forward to working with our partners at Hanwha in the continued growth of this special event."



AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

# Sadd fight back in vain as Goncalves strike seals it for Ahli

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Saudi’s Al Ahli staved off a second half fightback to defeat Qatar’s Al Sadd 2-1 in the AFC Champions League Elite tie at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.

Riyad Mahrez’s first half strike was cancelled out by Claudinho in the 63rd minute, only for Mathheus Goncalves to respond with the winner five minutes later to seal a third victory for the defending champions. Al Sadd, who suffered a 3-1 defeat against Al Hilal SFC in their previous, dominated the opening exchanges with Rafa Mujica seeing his close range effort blocked in the seventh minute with Roger Ibanez and Matteo Dams marshalling Al Ahli’s back-line.

Al Ahli stayed calm under pressure and were bailed out of trouble in the 25th minute when Edouard

Mendy produced a stunning sequence of saves, first denying Akram Afif from distance, then Roberto Firmino on the rebound before Mujica’s close range finish was ruled out for offside.

Al Ahli began to find their rhythm with Enzo Millot and Franck Kessie pulling the strings in midfield, while Al Sadd’s early momentum was beginning to fade with Paulo Otavio seeing his shot go wide just after the half-hour mark. Al Ahli made their next attack count in the 34th minute with Millot setting up Mahrez after a clever buildup, with the Algerian finishing brilliantly with a low shot past Al Sadd keeper Meshaal Barsham.

The Qatari side came close to finding the equaliser in first half stoppage time with Mujica rattling the woodwork from inside the box before Mohamed Camara’s long-range drive was comfortably collected by Mendy.

Al Sadd started the second half

with renewed confidence with Tarek Salman shooting high from distance, while Mujica missed the target by a whisker when he angled his headed attempt just wide of the left post.

Their patience was rewarded in the 63rd minute after Afif pushed through the centre to set up Claudinho, who struck a powerful drive from just inside the box into the top right corner.

The Saudi Pro League side regained the lead five minutes later when Galeno played the ball wide to Goncalves, who scored from the tightest of angles past the flailing hands of Barsham.

Kessie thought he had furthered Al Ahli’s advantage in the 77th minute after a well-worked build-up involving Galeno and Feras Al Brikan supplying the nodded assist was ruled out for offside.

A deflated Al Sadd were left frustrated in the closing stages with Al Ahli keeping the door shut to secure the victory.



Al Ahli’s Matheus Goncalves (left) celebrates with Riyad Mahrez and Galeno after scoring against Al Sadd at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.

FOCUS

## Ronaldo reveals emotional retirement will come ‘soon’

AFP  
London

Cristiano Ronaldo has revealed he plans to retire “soon” as the Portugal and Al Nassr star prepares for a tearful end to his glittering career.

Ronaldo discussed his thoughts on retirement and his life after football in an interview with Piers Morgan Uncensored.

The 40-year-old, who has scored a remarkable 952 goals, is one of the most decorated players in the history of the game, but the end is in sight for his astonishing career. Asked when he would consider hanging up his boots, Ronaldo, who is under contract with Al Nassr until 2027, replied: “Soon. But I think I will be prepared.

“It will be tough, of course. It will be difficult? Yes. Probably will cry, yes. I’m an open person. It will be very, very difficult, yes.

“But Piers, I prepare my future since 25, 26, 27 years old, I prepare my future. So I think I will be capable to support that pressure.”

Ronaldo is confident he will be able to cope without football because he wants to focus on his family and his off the pitch interests. “Nothing will be able to compare that the adrenaline that we have for football to score a goal,” he said.

“But everything has a beginning, and everything has an end. I have other passions. I’m going to have more time for me, I’m going to have more time for my family to raise my kids.

“I want to follow Cristiano Junior because he’s at an age when kids do stupid things. I was the same. Mateo loves football as well. I want to do more fun things. I love playing Padel with my closest friends. We are getting quite good.”

After starting his career with Sporting Lisbon, Ronaldo enjoyed successful spells at Manchester United and Real Madrid, Juventus. He won three Premier League titles and the Champions League among other trophies in his first stint in Manchester. Ronaldo joined Saudi Pro League side Al Nassr after leaving United for a second time in 2022.

### Qatar to host Rising Stars Asia Cup

The Qatar Cricket Association (QCA) will be playing hosts to the upcoming Asian Cricket Council (ACC) Rising Stars Asia Cup, earlier the Emerging Teams tournament, to be played in Doha from November 14-23 at the West-End International Cricket Stadium.

The T20 event will feature eight teams – India A, Pakistan A, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Oman, UAE, Hong Kong, and Sri Lanka. In this new format, full member nations will field their A teams, while associate nations will field their main teams. QCA said the tournament will be open to the public with ticketed entry. Meanwhile, Jitesh Sharma has been named captain of the India A squad and Naman Dhir has been appointed his deputy. The selectors have also included 14-year-old IPL sensation Vaibhav Suryavanshi in the squad. Pakistan A and Oman will kick off the tournament, with the showpiece India A vs Pakistan A match slotted for November 16. The teams are divided into two groups: Group A has Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong and Sri Lanka, while Group B has India, Oman, Pakistan and UAE. This will be the first cricketing exchange between the men’s teams of India and Pakistan since the senior Asia Cup in September, though the senior women’s teams faced off at the ODI World Cup earlier this month.

#### Schedule

Nov 14 - Oman vs Pakistan; India A vs UAE  
Nov 15 - Bangladesh vs Hong Kong; Afghanistan vs Sri Lanka  
Nov 16 - Oman vs UAE; India A vs Pakistan A  
Nov 17 - Hong Kong vs Sri Lanka; Afghanistan vs Bangladesh  
Nov 18 - Pakistan A vs UAE; India A vs Oman  
Nov 19 - Afghanistan vs Hong Kong; Bangladesh vs Sri Lanka  
Nov 21 - Semi-finals: A1 vs B2; B1 vs A2  
Nov 23 - Final

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# Merino brace sends Arsenal past Slavia

Arsenal’s Dowman becomes youngest-ever Champions League player

AFP  
Prague

Mikel Merino’s two second-half goals helped Arsenal to a 3-0 win at Slavia Prague in the Champions League yesterday, the Gunners’ fourth in as many games in the competition. For the Premier League leaders, the result also constituted a 10th straight win in all competitions and an eighth consecutive clean sheet.

They have now scored 11 goals and conceded none in the Champions League so far as they moved clear at the top of the standings. The match also saw a moment of history as Arsenal’s Max Dowman became the youngest-ever player in a Champions League game aged just 15 years and 309 days when he came onto the pitch in the 73rd minute. The previous record was held by German striker Youssoufa Moukoko, who played for Borussia Dortmund at Zenit St Petersburg at 16 years and 18 days in 2020. Dowman made his Premier League debut aged 15 years and 234 days during the Gunners’ 5-0 win over Leeds on August 23.

He is the second-youngest Premier League player ever after Arsenal teammate Ethan Nwaneri, who was 53 days younger on his 2022 debut. But Dowman became the youngest-ever player to start a match for Arsenal in the Gunners’ 2-0 win over Brighton in the League Cup fourth round last week.

Yesterday, stand-in captain Bukayo Saka opened the scoring from the penalty spot on 32 minutes after Slavia captain Lukas Provod had handled the ball in the box clearing a corner. Merino made it 2-0 from a quick breakaway 30 seconds into the second half as he volleyed home at the near post after Leandro Trossard’s superb pass found him unmarked in the Slavia box.

He then beat Slavia goalkeeper Jakub Markovic with a header from Declan Rice’s cross on 68 minutes. Merino was one of four



Arsenal’s Mikel Merino scores their third goal against Slavia during their Champions League match in Prague yesterday. (Reuters)



Arsenal’s Max Dowman celebrates after their win over Slavia. (AFP)

changes made by Gunners coach Mikel Arteta against Arsenal’s 2-0 league win at Burnley on Saturday. The game got off to an eventful start as Gabriel Magalhaes blasted wide from outside the box and Provod followed suit at the other end inside the opening two minutes.

Any effort by Slavia to get close to the Arsenal goal stumbled on the Gunners’ rock-solid defence, and the reigning Czech champi-

ons failed to produce a single shot on target during the match. Arsenal were soon on the front foot, dominating possession and creating chances despite missing injured strikers Viktor Gyokeres, Kai Havertz and Gabriel Martinelli.

Saka alone had three shots on goal within eight minutes midway through the first half but was denied by Slavia’s Markovic each time. The goalkeeper also then stopped the Arsenal captain’s low

shot from inside the box on 60 minutes. The loss leaves Slavia, the Czech top-flight leaders, with two points from four games in the Champions League.

#### Napoli and Eintracht Frankfurt in stalemate

Napoli and Eintracht Frankfurt played out an uneventful goalless draw which did little for their stuttering Champions League campaigns. There was little goalmouth action in Naples where both teams ended their evenings on a paltry four points from four matches in this season’s competition. Napoli and Eintracht – sat 19th and 18th respectively – are likely to be in the elimination places at the half-way point of the league phase.

Scott McTominay missed the best chance of a frustrating night for the Serie A champions when he blasted over from close range following a powerful burst down the right flank from his midfield partner Andre-Frank Anguissa.

COMMENT

## Which record? Haaland warns he can get even better

AFP  
Manchester

Erling Haaland has warned opponents he is still not the finished article despite his phenomenal goalscoring record for Manchester City.

The Norwegian forward, who faces former club Borussia Dortmund in the Champions League today, has netted a staggering 26 goals in 16 games for club and country this season.

Former England striker Alan Shearer said last month that if Haaland stays long enough, he will “no doubt” shatter his own all-time Premier League record of 260 goals. Haaland, 25, was asked at

City’s pre-match press conference on Tuesday whether he could beat his record for goals in a season.

“Not to sound arrogant, but which one?” he asked. The reporter clarified that he was asking about Haaland’s tally of 52 goals for City in 2022/23, when the club won the Treble of Champions League, Premier League and FA Cup.

During that season, Haaland’s first in England, he scored 36 Premier League goals – setting a new record for a single campaign.

The marauding 1.95-metre (six feet, five inches) striker admitted he was “in a good way” this season but said he was more focused on the team than individual records.

“I can’t think about records I

can break,” he said. “That’s the last thing I think of. I try to help the team win football games. That’s my job and that’s my main focus.

“I know it’s boring. I know you want me to say the complete opposite, but that’s not how it is.”

In a scary message for his opponents, Haaland said he was improving as a player, adding that he had been working on his headers.

“I think you can always get better and better,” he said. “So there’s something I try to practise still and you can see I’m getting better and better and there’s still a long way to go.”

City boss Pep Guardiola made Haaland part of his leadership team this season and described him at his own press conference

on Tuesday as a “real world-class player who is incredibly humble”.

“I know he wants to score goals, but I have the feeling he always wants what is best for the team,” he said. “And that is difficult to find. He has this ability, talent, kindness, whatever you want to say. Of course he has to score goals, that’s the best way to help us, that is perfectly clear, but he signed a contract for 10 years and he is involved in many things.”

Haaland himself, who became a father last year, said he was “still the same kid”, just with more experience. “I’m still the same kid in some situations, and I’m still that kid from Bryne (in Norway), but with much more experience in life,” he said.



Manchester City’s Erling Haaland speaks during a press conference in Manchester yesterday. (AFP)