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FIFA U17 WORLD CUP QATAR 2025

U-17 WORLD CUP

Cabral looks to write his own chapter for Portugal

By Sports Reporter
Doha



With six goals in five games, Anisio Cabral leads the race for the Golden Boot at the FIFA U-17 World Cup in Qatar.

Anisio Cabral wants to be remembered for more than a single trademark celebration. After finding the net against Belgium in the Round of 32 at the FIFA U-17 World Cup in Qatar, the young Portuguese striker sprinted toward the corner and hit Cristiano Ronaldo's iconic 'Siuuu' celebration, a gesture honouring a player he has admired since childhood.

Cabral, however, insists his inspirations extend beyond one global superstar. Portugal's leading scorer at the tournament says he draws from multiple greats. He speaks highly of Cristiano Ronaldo's drive and winning mindset, while also praising the flair and finishing of Brazil legend Ronaldo 'Fenómeno,' two figures who have shaped the way he sees the game.

With six goals in five games, Cabral leads the race for the Golden Boot in the tournament, just as his idols did so often in international competitions. But among so many legends to look up to, one carries a special meaning for him. And it's not either of the Ronaldos.

Like Cabral, this former striker also has roots in Guinea-Bissau – Eder. In 2016, Eder became a national hero by scoring the only goal in the UEFA European Championship final against France that gave Portugal its first title.

Years later, he ended up working alongside Cabral when he took on a management role within the national youth set-up. "Eder is a special person; I'm lucky to have met him," gushed the young striker. "He's been part of our coaching staff. He's an inspiration, of course, and someone who has helped us on our journey. He's a really good person."

That's the path Cabral is trying to forge for the Portuguese national team. He already had a taste of it when he scored in the victory over France in the UEFA European U-17 final. Now he's carving out his story on the global stage.

"It's very important to play for Portugal," he said. "We're a small nation, but we have a very big heart. It's about continuing to make the Portuguese people proud and honouring our nation. The message is just to 'keep going'."

Cabral has not only scored plenty of goals for Portugal, but he has also shown up during the most crucial moments of the tournament. In the opener against New Caledonia, he scored Portugal's first two goals that turned the match around. Against Morocco and Mexico, he stepped up to extend a one-goal lead on each occasion and to settle the team's nerves.

Then in the first knockout game, against Belgium, he bagged a brace to secure Portugal's 2–1 victory. In a side that likes to keep possession with lots of movement in midfield, the striker provides the perfect blend of explosiveness and presence in the box that Portugal will need as the challenges ahead of them grow tougher. "I've been playing with Anisio for a few years and I always thought he had potential," remarked captain Rafael Quintas, his Benfica teammate. "He's very physical, and he knows how to use his body well. He's lethal up front and scores for fun. That's exactly the type of player the team needs to complement the others."

"I've known Anisio for a long time," added fellow striker, Stevan Manuel. "He's a very strong centre-forward. Playing alongside him makes everything easier."

The match against Mexico also marked a special anniversary for Cabral. On November 19, 2024, he scored his first goals for Portugal's U-17s, ending his four-match goalless run in a 4–2 victory over Bosnia and Herzegovina. One year to the day, he has amassed 15 goals in 19 matches under coach Bino Macaes, including the six scored in the first five matches of the U-17 World Cup.

"Anisio has always had great potential. He's having a great World Cup," said the Portuguese coach.

"He's matured a lot since we started together in the Under-16s. He is very hungry to improve and to learn, which is crucial for a young footballer. "He's evolving. He's a boy who loves to listen and to learn, and that's what is helping him to keep progressing and get stronger and stronger."

Driven by Cristiano's mentality, Fenomeno's playing style and the inspiration of Eder, Cabral still has a long way to go in football.

However, the U-17 World Cup offers him the chance to achieve something that has never been done before: to take the title for Portugal. And just like his idols, he has the chance to write his name into the history books.

"It's an amazing feeling to be part of this World Cup," he concluded. "We have to keep representing Portugal in the right way, respecting every opponent, but also have the confidence that we can win it. Why not?"

Semi-final spots up for grabs in thrilling showdowns

Doha: Four high-stakes quarter-finals are lined up today at the FIFA U-17 World Cup at Aspire Zone.

AUSTRIA V JAPAN
Austria arrive buoyed by one of the results of the tournament, a commanding 4-0 dismantling of England that underlined their attacking fluency and tactical organisation under Hermann Stadler. Japan's route was far more fraught: a gritty 1-1 draw with Korea DPR followed by a nerve-jangling penalty shootout.

ITALY V BURKINA FASO
Italy have emerged as one of the tournament's most compelling sides, sweeping through their five matches with an aggregate score of 13-3 and showcasing a fluid, high-tempo style. Burkina Faso, however, have shown both resilience and edge, rallying past Uganda via penalties after a 1-1 draw.

PORTUGAL V SWITZERLAND
Portugal's free-scoring attack has lit up the tournament, highlighted by a five-goal burst against Mexico — their third such haul at these finals. Switzerland, unbeaten in 12 U-17 World Cup matches, have combined organisation with sharp attacking play and were in full control against the Republic of Ireland in the last round.

MOROCCO V BRAZIL
Morocco continue to marry defensive resilience with star moments in attack, having edged past Mali through an inspired display led by Ismail El Aoud. They now chase a historic first victory over South American opposition at this tournament. Brazil, meanwhile, are surviving on grit, late goals and the heroics of their goalkeeper after consecutive shootout triumphs over Paraguay and France.

FIDE WORLD RAPID & BLITZ CHESS CHAMPIONSHIPS

Carlsen and Gukesh to lead star-studded field in Doha

Women's field, which will be headlined by World Champion Ju Wenjun, features 130 participants

By Sports Reporter
Doha



World No. 1 Magnus Carlsen returns to the World Rapid & Blitz championships looking to reclaim both titles.



Gukesh's participation is expected to generate significant public interest among large Indian expatriates in Qatar.

World Champion Gukesh D and World No. 1 Magnus Carlsen are among more than 360 players who have confirmed their participation in the FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Chess Championships in Doha. The event, scheduled from December 25 to 30, brings together a field featuring multiple world champions, many of the sport's top-rated competitors, and a strong group of rising stars.

A total of 233 players have registered for the Blitz Open and 230 for the Rapid. After missing out on the Rapid crown and sharing gold in the Blitz at last year's edition in New York, Carlsen – who also became a father this year – returns to the World Rapid & Blitz looking to reclaim both titles. He will attempt to dethrone the reigning World Rapid champion, Volodar Murzin, who has enjoyed consistently strong results throughout 2024.

Gukesh has likewise confirmed his attendance, and his participation is expected to generate significant public interest among large Indian expatriates in Qatar. His outstanding performance in Zagreb earlier in the year has positioned him as one of the leading contenders in the Rapid discipline.

Many seasoned elite players – including 2024 World Blitz co-champion Ian Nepomniachtchi, Fabiano Caruana, Anish Giri, Wesley So and Levon Aronian – have also confirmed their entry. They will be challenged by a new wave of ambitious talents aiming to shake up the established order, such as Vincent Keymer, Arjun Erigaisi, Nodirbek Abdusattorov, Praggnanandhaa R, Yagiz Kaan Erdogmus, and Ediz Gurel, among others.

Qatar's chess enthusiasts will also be pleased to see legendary figures like Alexander Grischuk and Vasyl Ivanchuk – who won the World Rapid in Doha in 2016 – returning to compete.

The Women's Rapid and Blitz tournaments will likewise feature the world's best. Headlined by Women's World Champion Ju Wenjun, the competition includes 130 participants, with top names such as Zhu Jiner, Lei Tingjie, Aleksandra Goryachkina and Humpy Koneru. Anna Muzychuk, who won both the Women's Rapid and Blitz titles in Doha in 2016, will also compete alongside her sister, Mariya.

"The lineup shows the immense strength and magnetism of the World Rapid & Blitz," FIDE President Arkady Dvorkovich said. "We are pleased to see so many strong players in both the Open and the Women's competition confirming their participation. The FIDE World Rapid & Blitz is traditionally one of the most exciting and most watched chess events of the year, and we expect that tradition to continue. I'd like to thank the local organising committee for sparing no effort in making it a great event," he added.

"Doha is now the only city to host the World Rapid & Blitz Championship twice, a milestone for chess and for sports in Qatar. It reflects our deep passion for the game and our commitment to delivering excellence. We are proud to welcome the world's greatest players back to Doha, where ambition, tradition and the future of our sport meet," said Mohammed al-Mudahka, President of the Qatar Chess Federation.

The championship will take place at the Sports and Events Complex at Qatar University and offers a prize fund of more than €1mn across both the Open and Women's competitions.

CRICKET

PREVIEW

Ashes battle lines drawn for Perth pace paradise

'WE'VE GOT AN OPPORTUNITY OVER THE NEXT TWO AND A HALF MONTHS TO WRITE OUR OWN HISTORY'

Reuters
Perth

Australia and England wrapped up their Ashes preparations today with the home side showing their hand with a pair of debutants while the visitors kept their final XI under wraps for the series-opening test.

Injuries have torn up Australia's best-laid plans twice in recent weeks but stand-in skipper Steve Smith was all calm as he confirmed that opener Jake Weatherald would face the new ball at Perth Stadium and paceman Brendan Doggett will slot into a depleted attack.

The 31-year-old debutants may do little to reduce the ageing profile of the Australian squad but each offers something different on the menu for England.

Initially sixth cab off the rank in Australia's pace setup, Doggett will be thrown into the Ashes cauldron from today because of injuries to Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and Sean Abbott.

Aggressive left-hander Weatherald joins the more patient Usman Khawaja at the top of the order, having turfed Sam Konstas out of the position with his weight of domestic runs.

Both the new boys face a baptism of fire against a team convinced by captain Ben Stokes that the urn England relinquished eight years ago is there for the taking.

"Coming to Australia, playing against Australia, they're a seriously good team," Stokes told reporters yesterday.

"Everyone, including myself, knows the record of England over the history of Ashes in Australia isn't the best.

"We've got an opportunity over the next two and a half months to write our own history," he said.

"We've obviously come with the goal and that goal is to get on that plane mid-January and return to England being Ashes winners."

The Perth Stadium curator has promised the wicket will be green, fast and bouncy but Stokes offered no thoughts on whether England would attack with four quicks or pick the specialist spinner, Shoaib Bashir, in their 11.

"He was always going to be in the 12," Stokes said.

"We thought it was just about getting as many opportunities to bowl as possible. And we got to face him."

The decision may come later after a chat with coach Brendon McCullum, the skipper said.

Pacer Mark Wood only sent down eight overs in the game last week before heading for scans on a hamstring niggle. He was cleared, but has barely played since knee surgery earlier this year. Stokes said he had no concerns about the 35-year-old, who was "flying".

"I know you guys say he only bowled eight overs in the game, but he's been bowling for a long, long time," he said.

"He has always been someone who can just hit the ground running in the game, and he's bowling rapid, which is good."

Australia had no hesitation picking spinner Nathan Lyon, who turned 38 on Thursday and embarks upon his eighth Ashes campaign. The man nicknamed "Goat" (Greatest Of All-Time) for claiming an Australian record 562 test wickets as an off-spinner would be hard to overlook at Perth Stadium where he has 29 wickets at an average of 20.86.

"He's done really well out here. He bowls nicely when the wicket's bouncing," said Smith.

"So we'll see how it pans out."

Smith will have Cummins keeping a close eye on proceedings and offering another calm voice in the dressing room.

England will have travelling fans back in the terraces four years after they were barred from the deflating 2021/22 tour due to Australia's stiff border controls during Covid.

Touring in a Covid-restricted bubble, Joe Root's England lost 4-0 for a second successive series.

Only a few of the squad remain from that tour, leaving most in the current England setup free of the scarring. A tighter series is tipped even if the host nation would delight in another thrashing.

"When battle lines are drawn on Friday, then I will certainly be hoping that it's a 5-0 result in Australia's (favour)," Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said on the eve of the opener.

England have a mountain to climb to win back the urn for the first time in Australia since 2010/11, and they will be dodging flak from home fans and media all the way. Perth newspaper the *Western Australian* roasted England's players as "arrogant Bazballing Poms" on its front page yesterday. Stokes said England would take things in their stride.

"We know we're going to be outnumbered ... and that's going to be good fun."



Australian captain Steve Smith (left) and England captain Ben Stokes hold the Waterford Crystal Ashes trophy at Perth Stadium in Perth yesterday, on the eve of the first Ashes Test. *(AFP)*

Stokes calls Smith and Root 'greatest of their generation'

England captain Ben Stokes called Steve Smith and Joe Root the greatest batsmen of their generation yesterday and said keeping the Australian skipper quiet was crucial to winning the Ashes.
Ahead of today's first Test in Perth, Australia's Smith and England's Root share 24,020 Test runs between them and 75 centuries.
But while Root is yet to score a ton on Australian soil and averages just 35.68, Smith has been potent at home. He averages an ominous 59.70 against England, including 18 hundreds.
"Not too much has changed because he (Smith) just gets runs against us, doesn't he?" Stoke said when asked if he had noticed any weakness to exploit.
"That seems to be a constant – a serious player, has been for a very long time.
"Him and Joe Root, neck-and-neck in my opinion in terms of the greatest batters of this generation.
"You always want to come up with ways to try and keep the best players quiet. And that's something that obviously we're going to have to do. It'll be a hard thing to be able to do," he added.
"But if we can keep Steve Smith, minus all the other guys in the batting order, quiet, then we've given ourselves a good chance to achieve in the goal that we want."
Smith will lead Australia for the third time this year in Pat Cummins' absence when the Ashes get under way.
The 36-year-old's full-time reign as skipper came to an end over the South Africa ball-tampering controversy in 2018, but he has consistently filled in since.
Sure to send a scare through the England camp, his average is an incredible 68.98 in his 40 Tests as Australia captain.
Smith scored a century for New South Wales last month after not picking up a bat for six weeks, and said he was in a good place.
"I'm pretty chilled," he said. "I think I've learned a lot over my journey.
"The last couple of times that I've stood in for Patty (Cummins) I've tried to be pretty relaxed and let the game play.
"Obviously I've got to do it my own way out there and have my own style. But I'm a lot more relaxed these days, chilled, and you know, let the guys go about their work."



England's Joe Root takes part in a training session in Perth yesterday. *(AFP)*

Smith takes pre-Ashes swipe at 'Mastermind' Panesar

Steve Smith took a swipe yesterday at "comical" Monty Panesar after the former England spinner urged fans and players to target the stand-in Australia captain during the Ashes over his part in the 2018 "Sandpapergate" affair.
Smith was banned for a year and sacked as skipper after conspiring to alter the ball during the third Test against South Africa in Cape Town.
The retired Panesar, who played 50 Tests, said last week that Smith should be made to feel "guilty" about his part in the scandal.
On the eve of the first Test in Perth, Smith pointed to Panesar's gaffe-ridden 2019 appearance on a celebrity edition of the British quiz show *Mastermind*.
"I'm going to go off topic for a second here," an apparently pre-prepared Smith told a press conference when asked about the criticism.
"Who of you in the room have seen *Mastermind* and Monty Panesar on that?
"Any of you? Well, those of you that have, you'll understand where I'm coming from, and those of you haven't, do yourself a favour because it's pretty comical.
"Anyone that believes that Athens is in Germany, that's a start, Oliver Twist is a season of the year and America is a city.
"Doesn't really bother me, those comments," he added. "That's as far as I'll go with that one."
During his *Mastermind* appearance, Panesar did well on his specialist subject but failed miserably when it came to general knowledge.
Panesar responded to star batsman Smith's jibes by telling the BBC later on yesterday: "I've had some great moments for England and I've had shockers, and he's had some great moments for Australia and he's obviously had a very big shocker in South Africa.
"We've both made mistakes. I made mine on a quiz show, he made his on a cricket field."
The 36-year-old Smith is standing in as skipper in the absence of regular captain Pat Cummins, who is on his way back from injury.

SPOTLIGHT

India won't risk another Gill injury in 2nd Test

AFP
Guwahati

India will not play skipper Shubman Gill in the second Test against South Africa tomorrow if it risks aggravating his neck injury, a team coach said.

Gill has travelled with the squad to Guwahati but faces a race against time, with a decision set to be made late on the eve of the match.

The top-order batsman suffered neck spasms in the first innings of the opening Test and pulled out of the remainder of the match, spending a night in hospital.

"He is definitely recovering really well," batting coach Sitanshu Kotak said yesterday, amid reports in Indian media that Gill is set to miss the Test.

"The decision will be taken tomorrow evening because the physios, doctors will have to take a call that even if he is fully recovered he should not get the spasm again during the game."

"If he is fully recovered and it is a guarantee that he won't have this issue again then he will play," said Kotak.

"If there is doubt, then I am sure he will take rest (for) one more game because it won't be helpful to the team."

India lost a low-scoring first Test in Kolkata inside three days after they failed to chase down 124 on a turning pitch with inconsistent bounce.

A batter short with Gill out, India were bundled out for 93 to trail the two-match series 1-0.

Kotak said the hosts have a strong bench to fill Gill's spot if the captain does not play.

"A player like Shubman and a captain any team would miss, but if he is missing out due to injury we have batters and plenty of good players," he said.

South Africa, led by Temba Bavuma, are chasing a first series win on Indian soil since Hansie Cronje's team triumphed there in 2000.

"We won a World Test Championship final earlier in the year against Australia at Lord's, but this was right up there for us," coach Shukri Conrad said of the Kolkata win.

"Coming to India, playing at Eden Gardens, doing something we haven't done for 15 years, this is right up there.

"What we lack in (ability) we certainly make up in the ability to play as a unit and the resilience that we show. We never give up."

South Africa have added Lungi Ngidi to their squad after fellow quick Kagiso Rabada missed the opener with a rib injury and is doubtful for the final match.

Rabada watched his fellow bowlers rattle the Indian batting with spinner Simon Harmer taking a match haul of eight wickets.

India's ploy to have a turning pitch at Eden Gardens has met with severe criticism from pundits after the hosts faltered badly in their chase.

The defeat was India's fourth at home in six Tests having been whitewashed by New Zealand 3-0 last year.

"I completely believe that (coach) Gautam Gambhir and his team in India must play on much better wickets than what they played at Eden Gardens," former captain Sourav Ganguly told TV channel India Today.

Gambhir is under pressure after replacing Rahul Dravid following the T20 World Cup triumph last year.

The going has been tough for the former opener, losing nine out of 18 Tests since being appointed coach of a team in transition.

Stalwarts Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma quit T20 cricket after the World Cup win in Barbados and earlier this year called time on their Test careers.

Play in Guwahati at India's newest Test venue will start at 9:00am (0330 GMT) because of early sunsets, with the order of the session breaks reversed – meaning tea will be before lunch.

FOCUS

Asia Cup Rising Stars semis today

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Sri Lanka A will hope for another sterling show from their captain Dunith Wellalage in the semi-final against Pakistan Shaheens in the Asia Cup Rising Stars T20 Tournament at the West End Park International Stadium today.

The Emerald Isles' A team rode on all-round brilliance of Wellalage against Bangladesh A in their six-run win on Wednesday.

The result not only saw Sri Lanka A grab the valuable 2 points but they also pushed out defending champions on a better net run-rate while making the grade.

Wellalage said that his team will again need to stick to the task if they are to get the better of Pakistan Shaheens.

"We will need to make sure that we make less mistakes and apply ourselves through the match," he said.

Pakistan Shaheens are the only team to be unbeaten so far in the tournament having won all their three group stage games including one over India A. India A will take on Bangladesh A in the first semi-final today.

Bangladesh A captain Akbar Ali said his team has prepared well by watching videos and previous games of the India A side. "We know we have a challenging task but we aim to do our best," he said.

Meanwhile, the Qatar Cricket Association (QCA) extended a warm welcome to Mohsin Naqvi, President of the Asian Cricket Council (ACC), who will be attending the final of the Asia Cup Rising Stars Tournament on Sunday.

In a statement QCA said: "Mohsin Naqvi's presence reaffirms his support for young talent and his commitment to fostering a spirit of sporting competition throughout this distinguished event."

SCHEDULE
Semis: Today: 12.30pm: India A vs Bangladesh A; 5.30pm: Pakistan Shaheens vs Sri Lanka A.
Sunday: Final at 5.30pm.

SPOTLIGHT

World Military Parachuting Championship enters final stage

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The CISM Qatar 2025 World Military Parachuting Championship enters its final stage today at the Umm Shakhout Airport, featuring 320 male and female parachutists from 30 countries.

Competitors have battled fiercely across three events – the four-way formation, the style competition and the target landing – showcasing skill, precision and sportsmanship.

Today, weather permitting, the much-anticipated target landing competition will feature Qatar's champions in action.

For the third consecutive day, strong winds and a storm forced the organisers in co-ordination with the International Military Sports Council (CISM), to postpone the yesterday's events to ensure the safety of all participants. Wind speeds exceeded 25 knots, grounding jumpers and halting flights. Organisers remain hopeful that conditions will improve, allowing the remaining competitions to proceed as planned before the championship concludes tomorrow.

Meanwhile, the Qatar Air Show team continues to draw international acclaim for its record-breaking performances, having secured five Guinness World Records. Highlights include the largest aerial canopy formation in Florida, USA (2018), the largest multi-point canopy formation in Portugal (2021), and spectacular pyrotechnic displays in Zephyr Hills, USA, in 2022 and 2025. These achievements underscore Qatar's global standing in military and aerobatic parachuting.



Qatar school students visited Umm Shakhout Airport to witness the CISM Qatar World Military Parachuting Championship, touring the Air Sports Museum, fan zone and parachute landing areas.

The Qatari school students visited Umm Shakhout Airport to witness the championship firsthand, touring the Air Sports Museum, Fan Zone, and parachute landing areas.

Students also experienced paragliding and entered aircraft cockpits, creating unforgettable memories.







Participating schools included Ahmed School, Mansour Primary School for Boys, Khalid Bin al-Waleed Preparatory School, and Doha Secondary School for Boys.

The Qatar Anti-Doping Committee ensured fair play by collecting samples from all parachutists in line with WADA protocols. First Lieutenant Hamad Rashid al-Marri emphasised that competitors are accustomed to weather-related delays, maintaining focus and composure, while First Lieutenant Abdullah al-Kuwari praised the Qatari aerobatic champions for consistently elevating the country's profile.

First Lieutenant Abdullah al-Khawar highlighted the championship's organisational successes, particularly in supporting young national parachutists and ensuring smooth operations.

FORMULA 1

Piastri ready to forget struggles and enjoy Vegas GP

'I don't think I should have done anything differently recently'

AFP
Las Vegas

Oscar Piastri said there had been some "tough moments" as his commanding Formula One lead evaporated, but he was "looking forward to getting back in the car in Vegas" this weekend.

The Australian started the season in style with four wins in the first nine races. After his fifth victory in round 15 in the Netherlands, Piastri led McLaren teammate Lando Norris by 34 points.

Yet, going into round 22 in Nevada this weekend, Piastri trails Norris by 24 points.

"I was particularly strong in the first half of the season. Even though things aren't going as well now, I don't think I should have done anything differently recently," he said.

"There's going to be bumps along the road."

There are a maximum of 83 points available in the last three races and the sprint on the final weekend in Qatar. Asked if he needed to win them all, Piastri replied: "That would help!"

"It's going to be difficult now to try and win but the mentality of trying to go out each week and get the most out of it is still there," he added.

His problems have started in qualifying, leaving him pressing to catch up when the flag drops.

In the first 15 races of the season, Piastri secured five pole positions and was second on the grid five times. In the last six, he has not started from the front row.

In round 16 in Monza, Piastri was edged on to the second row by reigning champion Max Verstappen and by Norris.


McLaren's Oscar Piastri arrives in the paddock yesterday ahead of the F1 Grand Prix of Las Vegas. *(AFP)*

In the race, Piastri climbed to second because the McLaren pit crew botched a Norris tyre change. The team asked Piastri to give the place back, which he did. The difference between second and third meant a six-point swing to Norris.

The following race in Baku was a disaster as Piastri made, what he called, "silly mistakes". He crashed in qualifying, started ninth on the grid, virtually stalled at the start, dropped to last and then crashed into a wall.

That ended a run of 34 consecutive races in the points.

As Piastri has struggled, teammate Norris has blossomed. In the last three races, the Englishman has finished second in the United States and then won in Brazil and Mexico.

In Austin and Mexico, Piastri said, "something fundamental wasn't working."

"The other races have been a combination of different things going wrong," he said. "What some might say is 'the difficult world of motor sport'."

"There have been some tough lessons to learn, some tough moments to have to accept, and nothing more than that."

The dip in form coincided with the team order for Piastri to cede second to Norris in Monza.

Frenchman Pierre Gasly, who drives for Alipne wondered if there was a link.

"It's inexplicable. You can be unhappy with your team, but you can't forget how to drive from one weekend to the next," Gasly told AFP. Pisatri said no driver on the grid was entirely happy with their team and that McLaren had addressed issues.

"There have been some tough conversations through the year," he said.

"Some things to sort out and realign on but I'm very comfortable we've done a good job on it."

He's eager to be back on the bumpy road.

"I'm looking forward to getting back in the car in Vegas. I'm concentrating on performance, building a strong weekend and maximising every opportunity," he said.

MASSA'S LAWSUIT OVER 2008 F1 TITLE TO GO TO TRIAL

Former driver Felipe Massa's £64mn ($84mn) claim against Formula One, its governing body the FIA and the sport's former supremo Bernie Ecclestone can go to trial, a judge ruled yesterday.
At the centre of the trial will be Lewis Hamilton's first Formula One world title in 2008, with Brazilian driver Massa claiming he was the rightful winner of the championship.
Massa lost the title by a point after Nelson Piquet Jr deliberately crashed at the Singapore race.
Massa claims that the crash, which gifted victory to teammate Fernando Alonso by causing an early safety car, changed the course of the title race because Ferrari's title contender dropped down the order in a pitstop and eventually lost the championship to Hamilton by one point. Ecclestone, who headed F1 for four decades until 2017, suggested in 2023 that the sport's executives were aware of the cover-up before the 2008 season finished. Justice Robert Jay said that while the court has the power to award damages to Massa, it cannot overturn the results of the 2008 season, so the case will not have an impact on Hamilton's title.
Ecclestone, the FIA and Formula One Management are defending the claims. Last month, they asked the High Court in London to dismiss the case, arguing that Massa's poor drive in the 2008 Singapore Grand Prix ultimately led to him losing the championship. They also argued that the claim had been brought too late.
In a written judgement handed down yesterday, Justice Jay said the case could go ahead.
He said Massa had "no real prospect of establishing that the FIA's duties were owed to him", but that "he does have a real prospect of proving at trial all the components of his unlawful means conspiracy".
At a hearing in October, Massa's barrister Nick De Marco said in written submissions that the defendants could not "establish that Mr Massa's claims have no real prospect of success".
He argued that Massa had "a real prospect of succeeding on all of the grounds" and the case should therefore go to a full trial.
In a statement, the FIA said that although the trial was going ahead, it would be based on "significantly narrowed grounds".
David Quest, a barrister representing Ecclestone, said Massa's claims were "a misguided attempt to reopen the results of the 2008 F1 drivers' championship".

FOCUS

Players' group nears deal with Tennis Australia in lawsuit over pay, schedule

Reuters
Bengluru

A global players' advocacy group co-founded by Novak Djokovic said on Wednesday it was close to settling with Tennis Australia in its case accusing some governing bodies of being a "cartel" that underpays and imposes an unsustainable schedule.

The Professional Tennis Players' Association (PTPA) filed a class-action lawsuit in March saying the ATP, WTA, International Tennis Federation and International Tennis Integrity Agency had indulged in anti-competitive practices and showed disregard for player welfare.

Organisers of the four Grand Slam events, including the Australian Open, were added to the case in September.

The men's ATP Tour has previously said it believed the case was without merit while the women's WTA Tour defended its record of growing women's tennis and said the lawsuit was "baseless".

On Wednesday, lawyers for the PTPA, co-founded in 2020 by Djokovic and Vasek Pospisil, filed a letter to the US Southern District Court in New York saying there had been fruitful talks with the organisers of the Australian Open.

"Plaintiffs and Tennis Australia are engaged in substantive and productive bilateral settlement discussions and believe that a settlement as to plaintiffs' claims against Tennis Australia is likely in the near future," the PTPA's lawyers wrote, saying both parties wanted to halt proceedings while they reach a deal.

The letter added the stay request would apply only to Tennis Australia, not the other defendants. Tennis Australia confirmed the development.

"If the New York court approves a settlement between the parties, Tennis Australia will exit the litigation," it said. Neither party gave any details of what a potential deal may entail.

In its lawsuit, the PTPA accuses the various governing bodies of paying "artificially low compensation to professional tennis players" and imposing a "draconian" ranking system that forces them to compete in certain tournaments.

It also calls the gruelling 11-month schedule unsustainable, says players are made to compete in extreme heat and during the early hours of the morning and that different tennis balls used in different events are causing chronic injuries. Djokovic, a 24-times Grand Slam champion, has been a passionate advocate for player welfare but is not among the 12 current and former players listed as plaintiffs alongside the PTPA in the lawsuit.

While the world's elite tennis players can earn fortunes, with Jannik Sinner for example taking $5mn for Sunday's ATP Finals win, those further down the rankings often struggle to balance meagre income with the costs of coaching, travel and accommodation.

Players are expected to compete in a set number of mandatory tournaments every year or risk penalties that include the loss of ranking points. Tennis Australia is currently preparing for the Australian Open, which begins in Melbourne on January 18 and kicks off the new Grand Slam season.

Spain fight back against Czech Republic to reach Davis Cup semis

Spain reached the semi-finals of the Davis Cup yesterday after coming back from one match down to beat the Czech Republic 2-1 in Bologna.
Marcel Granollers and Pedro Martinez beat Tomas Machac and Jakub Mensik 7-6 (10-8), 7-6 (10-8) to seal Spain's passage to the last four, where David Ferrer's team will face either Argentina or Germany in the last four on Saturday.
Jaume Munar set Spain up to win the tie by beating Jiri Lehecka 6-3, 6-4 and levelling up the match after Pablo Carreno Busta was beaten by world number 19 Mensik 7-5, 6-4.
Spain's biggest star Carlos Alcaraz pulled out of the tournament on Tuesday with a hamstring injury suffered during his defeat to Jannik Sinner in the title-match of the ATP Finals on Sunday.
The six-time Grand Slam champion said in the aftermath of that defeat that his hamstring hadn't affected him, even though it was strapped up during a medical time out.
World number one Alcaraz is one of three top-10 players to have dropped out of the Davis Cup finals in northern Italy, where fans have also been denied the chance to see Sinner and Lorenzo Musetti play for the Azzurri.
The highest ranked player at the Davis Cup finals is former Olympic champion and world number three Alexander Zverev, who will play for Germany against Argentina later.

HORSE RACING

Aafoor claims Late Sheikh Ali Bin Faleh Al Thani Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Jeryan Stud's Aafoor delivered a commanding performance to capture The Late Sheikh Ali Bin Faleh Al Thani Cup at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

The feature race of the day, a Class 2 Thoroughbred Conditions contest for three-year-olds and older over 2,100 metres, featured eight runners. The four-year-old chestnut gelding, guided by jockey Szczepan Mazur, produced a perfectly timed surge to win by 2½ lengths. QREC Chairman Hamad bin Abdulrahman al-Attiyah was in attendance.

Following a strategy seen in many races on the day, Aafoor settled in fourth behind early leader Toromona, with Kadovar and Captain Winters close behind. As the field entered the home straight, Captain Winters momentarily took the lead, but Mazur timed his move perfectly. Aafoor responded instantly, sweeping past his rivals to claim a comfortable victory.

Captain Winters, trained by Khalifa Hamed Nasser al-Sawai for Al Emadi Racing and ridden by Damien Morin, finished second, while Tiding, representing Sheikh Abdul Rahman Rashid al-Thani with trainer Jassim al-Ghazali and jockey Marco Casamento, edged into third by a neck. Aafoor guided by jockey Szczepan Mazur, produced a perfectly timed surge.

With their top-two finishes, Aafoor and Captain Winters secured priority entry for the HH The Amir Shalfa Race in February.





QREC Chairman Hamad bin Abdulrahman al-Attiyah with the connections of Aafoor, which won The Late Sheikh Ali Bin Faleh Al Thani Cup. **PICTURES:** *Juhaim*

RESULTS 13TH AL RAYYAN RACE MEETING - THE LATE SHEIKH ALI BIN FALEH AL THANI CUP

1 - The Late Sheikh Ali Bin Faleh Al Thani Cup, Thoroughbred Conditions
Aafoor, MHK al-Attiyah, Szczepan Mazur
2 - Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate
Zah'ran Al Shahania, Ahmed al-Jehani, Arnaud De Lepine
3 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate, 3YOs, 1400m
Lubara, Jean de Mieulle, Faleh Bughenaim
4 - Thoroughbred Handicap (75-95)
Rothstein, Alban de Mieulle, Soufiane Saadi
5 - Thoroughbred Open Race, 2YOs
Silca Blue, Jassim al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento
6 - Local Thoroughbred Conditions
Equinoxe, Alban de Mieulle, Soufiane Saadi
7 - Thoroughbred Handicap (85-105)
Loose Cannon, Jassim al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento
8 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (80-110)
Arman, Alban de Mieulle, Soufiane Saadi
9 - Purebred Arabian Conditions
Aneed Al Shahania, Rudy Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier

FOOTBALL

Italy to take on Northern Ireland in World Cup playoffs

Ukraine will play Sweden that could feature Isak and Gyokeres

AFP
Zurich

Four-time World Cup winners Italy will face Northern Ireland in the semi-finals of the European playoffs for the 2026 tournament while Ukraine face star-studded Sweden.

Italy will take on Northern Ireland on March 26 next year at an Italian venue that is yet to be confirmed, after the draw made in Zurich yesterday. Five days later the winner will travel to face the winner of Wales's semi-final against Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Despite another error-strewn qualification campaign, Italy still have a chance of reaching the World Cup finals for the first time since the 2014 tournament in Brazil, having failed to qualify in 2018 and 2022.

Facing the Azzurri will be a daunting challenge for Northern Ireland, who have only beaten the Italians once in 11 meetings, and that was in 1958. Italy coach Gennaro Gattuso said: "Let's concentrate on the first match. Northern Ireland are a team that we can beat. They're a team that have their own style, they're very physical... they'll give us a good game but we can do it. We know about Wales and Bosnia, and playing in Cardiff is difficult for anybody, but for now let's concentrate on the semi-final."

War-torn Ukraine will play a Sweden team that could feature Liverpool's £125mn ($164mn) forward Alexander Isak and Arsenal striker Viktor Gyokeres. The Swedes, though, were woeful in qualifying, finishing bottom of their group, and only got into the playoffs thanks to their performance in the Nations League. Newly appointed English coach Graham Potter, formerly in charge of Brighton and Chelsea, faces a tough task to steer the Swedes to the finals in the United States, Mexico and Canada. Potter said Sweden had a "fantastic opportunity".

"We need to make sure we're in a good place in March. We need to use our time until then wisely," he said.

Whoever triumphs in the Ukraine v Sweden match will face the winner of Poland's meeting with Albania – the Albanians are bidding to reach football's showpiece for the first time.

Meanwhile, the Republic of Ireland, who reached the playoffs after a dramatic late goal from Troy Parrott earned a 3-2 win in Hungary on Sunday, face a tough trip to the Czech Republic. The winner of that match will host the winner of the semi-final between Denmark and North Macedonia.

Turkiye will play Romania, who were surprise quarter-finalists the last time the tournament was played in the United States in 1994. The winner will face either Slovakia or Kosovo, who are also trying to reach a World Cup for the first time in their history. All the European semi-finals will take place on March 26, with the finals on March 31.

In the inter-continental playoffs, New Caledonia – another nation bidding to make a first appearance at a World Cup finals – will play against Jamaica for the right to face the seeded Democratic Republic of Congo.

Bolivia will play Suriname – yet another country seeking a first ever appearance – with the victor going on to a winner-takes-all game against Iraq.

Those games will be played in March next year. The expansion of the 2026 World Cup to 48 teams from 32 teams in 2022 has led to a clutch of first-time qualifiers, including Curacao and Uzbekistan.



Former Italian defender Marco Materazzi shows the paper slip of Italy during the 2026 FIFA World Cup European play-off draw in Zurich. *(AFP)*

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar ends Islamic Solidarity Games with three medals

By Sports Reporter
Riyadh

Qatar wrapped up its campaign at the 6th Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh with three medals – a silver in fencing and bronze medals in handball and athletics – bringing its overall tally to 11 (3 gold, 3 silver, 5 bronze).

The men's foil team of Khalid al-Yafei, Adham al-Deeb and Abdullah Khalifa won silver after a tight 43-45 loss to Uzbekistan in the final, having beaten the UAE in the semi-finals. The men's and women's epee teams were eliminated in the Round of 16.

Qatar's handball team claimed bronze after a 36-28 win over the UAE, overcoming the disappointment of a narrow semi-final defeat to Bahrain. They topped their group with three victories before finishing the tournament with a 4-1 record.

In athletics, Abubaker Haydar secured bronze in the men's 800m with a time of 1:46.26, while Moaz Ibrahim was placed fourth in the discus throw. In camel racing, Hazam Abdullah al-Nadeela finished fourth in the 2km event at Al-Janadriyah.



Qatar's foil team won silver after a 43-45 loss to Uzbekistan.

Qatar's handball team claimed bronze after a 36-28 win over the UAE.

Cherif and Tijan out of World Championship



French duo Teo Rotar and Arnaud-Gauthier Rat eliminated Qatar's Tokyo Olympic medallists Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan 2-1 (15-21, 21-16, 23-21) in the round of 16 clash at the FIVB Beach Volleyball World Championship in Adelaide yesterday.

Turkish crackdown on insider gambling to widen

Ankara: A huge investigation into insider betting in Turkiye's football leagues is likely to widen and include coaches, commentators and club chairmen, a prosecutor was cited as saying. Earlier this month, Turkiye's football federation suspended 149 referees and assistants after an investigation found that officials in the professional leagues were betting on games. The net widened last week with the arrest of eight people, including the chairman of a top-tier club, and the suspension of 1,024 players from all leagues, on whom the football federation (TFF) imposed bans. Matches in the second and third-tier leagues were suspended for two weeks.

"We may carry out another operation in the coming days. We want to clean our football, absolutely," Istanbul Chief Prosecutor Akin Gurlek said.

"Whoever was involved in cheating, we are chasing them. There will be club chairmen and club executives in the probes ... There may be ties between chairmen and referees, coaches and commentators. We are investigating everything."

Turkiye was working with European football governing body UEFA and global police body Interpol, Gurlek said. Authorities were also monitoring Turks suspected of illegal gambling in Montenegro, Cyprus, and Georgia.

Gurlek also said that his office was waiting for responses from some foreign betting companies abroad whose platforms were used by Turkish suspects for illegal bets.

There was no immediate comment from the TFF, but its president, Ibrahim Haciosmanoglu, has acknowledged a "moral crisis in Turkish football".

The federation's own investigation showed that 371 of 571 referees in Turkiye's professional leagues had betting accounts.

Under Turkiye's sports disciplinary regulations, if someone is found to have impacted the outcome and progression of a match or received forms of payment for this, they are banned from the sport indefinitely.

If these violations are carried out by club executives, the club is relegated and those involved face fines.