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FORMULA 1

Verstappen claims Qatar GP as McLaren strategy misfires

VERSTAPPEN SLASHES NORRIS' LEAD TO 12 POINTS, THREE-WAY TITLE RACE GOES TO ABU DHABI FINALE



Red Bull Racing's driver Max Verstappen celebrates winning the Formula One Qatar Grand Prix at the Lusail International Circuit in Lusail yesterday. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil

By **Sahan Bidappa**
Doha

Red Bull's Max Verstappen kept his championship hopes alive under the Lusail floodlights, winning a chaotic and tactically fraught Qatar Grand Prix after McLaren's bold, and ultimately disastrous, decision not to pit under an early Safety Car left both their drivers exposed.

Pole-sitter Oscar Piastri salvaged second place and 18 points, while championship leader Lando Norris fought back to finish fourth in a damage-limitation drive. The dramatic result ensures the title battle will go down to the wire in Abu Dhabi next weekend. Carlos Sainz delivered a superb performance to take third, earning Williams their second podium of the season.

As things stand, Norris heads into the final round with a 12-point lead over four-time consecutive champion Verstappen, with Piastri 16 points back in third. A third-place finish in Abu Dhabi would secure Norris his maiden title, but with Verstappen having won five of the last eight Grands Prix, and with McLaren under scrutiny for repeated strategic missteps, the season finale is poised for a dramatic twist.

The key moment unfolded at the end of lap 7, when Nico Hulkenberg and Pierre Gasly made light contact, sending the Sauber spinning and triggering a Safety Car. Verstappen immediately dived into the pits, as did nearly the entire field, except for both McLarens and Haas' Esteban Ocon.

The urgency to pit was heightened by an enforced 25-lap maximum stint length on all Pirelli tyre sets on a highly-demanding Lusail track, effectively guaranteeing at least two pit stops in the 57-lap

race. Red Bull, aware of McLaren's strong pace all weekend, gambled early, and it paid off handsomely, with Verstappen securing his seventh win of the season, the same as his McLaren rivals.

"This was an incredible race for us. We made the right call as a team to box under that Safety Car. That was smart," said Verstappen, who claimed his third consecutive victory in Qatar. "I'm super happy to win here. We stay in the fight until the end. Incredible! It was a very strong race on a weekend that was a bit tough but we won the race and that was important."

Saturday's Sprint winner Piastri, who saw a near-certain victory slip away due to McLaren's strategy, was frustrated. "Speechless..." he said over team radio after the chequered flag. "I don't have any words."

Speaking moments later, a forlorn-looking Piastri criticised his team. "Clearly we didn't get it right tonight. I drove the best race that I could and as fast as I could. There was nothing left out there. I tried my best but it wasn't to be tonight unfortunately," the Australian said.

"I think in hindsight it's pretty obvious what we would have done, but I'm sure we'll discuss it as a team. It's not all bad. It's been a really good weekend and the pace has been very strong. Obviously it's a little bit tough to swallow at the moment," the 24-year-old added.

Immediately after the race, McLaren faced accusations that the controversial call was influenced by a desire to avoid favouring either Norris or Piastri in the tight title fight. Norris rejected that claim outright, despite the decision leaving both cars vulnerable.

Had both drivers pitted, Norris would have queued behind Piastri

and risked losing track position, while stopping only one car would inevitably raise questions about favouritism.

"No, nothing to do with that. Everyone keeps thinking that but it's nothing to do with that," Norris insisted. "It's tough. We just had to have faith in the team making the right decision. It's always a gamble. We were the ones who took a gamble in a way. Now it's the wrong decision. We shouldn't have done it. We've won the constructors' six races ago because of that. Not our finest day but that's life," he added.

Meanwhile, Kimi Antonelli helped Mercedes inch closer to securing second place in the Constructors' Championship with a strong run to fifth. Norris was hunting down the Italian on the final lap when Antonelli ran wide, allowing the Briton to pounce and seize fourth, a potentially crucial gain of two extra points heading into Abu Dhabi. Behind Antonelli, Isack Hadjar looked set for sixth before suffering a left-front puncture three laps from the end, promoting George Russell after the Mercedes driver had lost three positions on lap one.

Fernando Alonso, Charles Leclerc, Liam Lawson, and Yuki Tsunoda completed the top ten. Alex Albon (Williams) finished 11th ahead of Lewis Hamilton (Ferrari), Gabriel Bortoleto (Sauber), and Franco Colapinto (Alpine). Ocon was classified 15th after receiving a five-second penalty for a false start, ahead of Gasly, Lance Stroll (Aston Martin), and the unlucky Hadjar.

Ollie Bearman retired after serving a 10-second stop-go penalty for running an unsafe car, while Hulkenberg's race ended in the gravel following his collision with Gasly.



Winner Max Verstappen (centre) celebrates with the trophy next to second-placed McLaren's Australian driver Oscar Piastri (left) and third-placed Williams' Spanish driver Carlos Sainz after the Qatar Grand Prix yesterday.

Qatar GP draws 162,972 fans, al-Mannai meets F1 team principals

Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) and Lusail International Circuit (LIC) president Abdulrahman bin Abdullatif al-Mannai, along with Abdulaziz Ali al-Mohannadi, CEO of Lusail International Circuit, met with team principals of the Formula One teams – Frederic Vasseur of Ferrari, Red Bull's Laurent Mekies and Aston Martin's Sporting Director Andy Stevenson on the sidelines of the Qatar Grand Prix. In a statement, al-Mannai praised the success of the event as he revealed that 162,972 attended the event over three days at the Lusail International Circuit.

Al-Mannai said: "As the Qatar Grand Prix comes to a close, we are proud to reflect on a weekend defined by exceptional competition and an atmosphere of inclusivity. Over the course of three days, the event welcomed 162,972 attendees, whose enthusiasm contributed to its outstanding success. This Grand Prix exemplifies the aspirations of Qatar National Vision 2030 – bringing diverse communities together in celebration of world-class motorsport while demonstrating Qatar's continued capability to host premier international events."

SPOTLIGHT

Kohli shines as India beat South Africa in first ODI

Kohli's 135 came off 120 balls and he shared a second-wicket partnership of 136 with Rohit Sharma

AFP
Ranchi, India

Star batsman Virat Kohli hit a record-extending 52nd one-day century to set up India's 17-run win over a spirited South Africa in the first match yesterday.

Kohli's 135 came off 120 balls and he shared a second-wicket partnership of 136 with fellow stalwart Rohit Sharma to set India on course for 349-8 in the eastern city of Ranchi.

Number eight Corbin Bosch made a valiant 67 off 51 balls as South Africa fought until almost the end. Entering the 50th over, the visitors needed 18 for victory with one wicket left. Bosch fell on the second ball and South Africa were 332 all out.

Matthew Breetzke, who made 72, and Marco Jansen, with 70, put on a fighting stand of 97 for the sixth wicket to revived the chase after South Africa slipped to 11-3 and then 77-4.

Left-arm wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav stood out with figures of 4-68 in the high-scoring contest.

His double strike to remove Jansen and Breetzke in the space of three balls was the turning point for India who took 1-0 lead in the three-match series.

The 37-year-old Kohli remained the hero with his 83rd ton across the three international formats after he raised his hundred with a boundary off Jansen and lifted his bat to a raucous home crowd.

"If you've played 300-odd games and so much cricket, you know when you're hitting balls in practice, you know the reflexes are there and the physical ability



India's Virat Kohli celebrates after scoring a century during the first one-day international against South Africa at the JSCA International Stadium in Ranchi yesterday. (AFP)

is there to bat long," player of the match Kohli said.

"As long as you're hitting the ball well and playing good cricket, it's about physically fit, mentally ready and excited."

An Indian fan breached security and raced to the pitch to touch Kohli's feet before he was dragged away.

Kohli has the most ODI hun-

dreds, with Indian great Sachin Tendulkar second with 49.

The Indian cricket star tops the list of hundreds in a single format with Tendulkar's count in Tests being 51.

Kohli and 38-year-old Rohit, who made 57, only play the 50-over format after they retired from T20 and Test cricket.

Their presence boosted India,

led by KL Rahul in the absence of the injured Shubman Gill, after a 2-0 Test whitewash against South Africa.

Rohit lost fellow opener Yashasvi Jaiswal early for 18 but Kohli walked in to a huge roar from a 38,000-strong capacity crowd.

The pair steadied the innings and then took on the bowlers before Rohit was trapped lbw by

Jansen. Rohit hit three sixes in his 51-ball knock. That took him to 352 sixes in this format, overtaking Pakistan batter Shahid Afridi's record of 351.

Kohli switched gears soon after reaching his first hundred since February. He hit off-spinner Prenelan Subrayen for two fours and two sixes in a 21-run 39th over.

He finally fell to Nandre Burger,



South Africa's Marco Jansen plays a shot during the first one-day international against India at the JSCA International Stadium in Ranchi yesterday. (AFP)

caught by Ryan Rickelton, after hitting 11 fours and seven sixes.

Rahul kept up the attack with 60 off 56 balls, while Ravindra Jadeja made 32 off 20. In the end Bosch's first ODI half-century made it a close contest and much to look forward ahead of the next match is Wednesday in Raipur.

"Great to sit in the change room and watch the guys do their thing," stand-in-skipper Aiden Markram said. "Never losing the belief that we can pull off a rabbit from the hat."

BRIEF SCORES
India 349 for 8 (Kohli 135, Rahul 60, Rohit 57) **beat South Africa 332** (Breetzke 72, Jansen 70, Bosch 67, Kuldeep 4-68) **by 17 runs**

COMMENT

England's Root ready for pink-ball Ashes Test

Reuters
Brisbane

England batter **Joe Root** said he is confident of rediscovering his scoring touch and backed the team to embrace the challenge of their next pink-ball Test against Australia after a drubbing by the hosts in the Ashes series opener.

England take on Australia in Brisbane from Thursday looking to respond strongly to their eight-wicket defeat inside two days in Perth, where Root was dismissed for zero in the first innings before falling for eight in the next.

"It's pretty disappointing in terms of the numbers," Root told reporters yesterday.

"First innings, I thought it was a good ball. It's one of those things you can get early on. You've got to try and find a way to get through that phase when it's tricky at the start.

"And then second innings I thought my tempo was really good, made one mistake. You play a miss at that or it goes between the keeper and it slips for four, you never think of it again.

"I think it's having a bit of re-



alism, understanding, yes there are things that I might have done differently if I get an opportunity again, but also it's not the end of the world."

Former England captain Root has now gone 29 innings without a century against Australia in Test matches Down Under, sparking criticism of his form, but the 34-year-old had no doubt about

his ability to score again. "I'm making sure I'm clear on how I want to construct an innings against the pink ball in these conditions, against this attack," Root added.

"That's what this week's about ... just readying yourself as best as possible, having good conversations around things on how we can work together and build those

big partnerships that are going to set up games for us."

Australia have won 13 of their 14 day-night Tests with their only loss coming at the Gabba last year against West Indies, and Root questioned the need for a pink-ball Ashes test.

"It's very successful and very popular here," Root said.

"Australia has got a good record here. So you can see why we're playing one of those games. Ultimately, two years out it's going to be there. It's part and parcel of making sure you're ready for it.

"A series like this, does it need it? I don't think so. But it doesn't mean that it shouldn't be here either."

Media reports said on Saturday that Mark Wood was likely to miss the game with a sore knee, but Root said the England pacer would do everything to be fit again.

"We'll see how things unfold over the next little while ... every opportunity he gets to play for England, he puts his heart and soul into it to get well as fast as he can," he said.

"He'll be all about readying himself as best as possible," he added.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Russell retires from IPL, joins KKR coaching panel

Reuters
Kolkata

Former West Indies all-rounder Andre Russell yesterday announced his retirement from the Indian Premier League (IPL) saying he will be joining the Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) as 'Power Coach' from next season.

The 37-year-old had been with the IPL franchise as a player since the 2014 season and has lifted the trophy twice. He was also named as the Most Valuable Player in the 2019 season.

In 139 IPL games in his career, Russell has scored 2,651 runs at a strike rate of 174.18 and has picked 123 wickets, being only the second player along with Ravindra Jadeja to have scored over 2,000 runs and taken over 100 wickets in the tournament.

But while he will continue to play across different leagues, Russell, who also announced international retirement in July, said he is excited to start a new IPL chapter in KKR's coaching department.

"I felt like it was the best decision at this point. I don't want to fade out, I want to leave a legacy behind," Russell said in a video shared on the social media.

"To be in a setup that's familiar, matters to me a lot. When I heard that name - 'Power Coach', I felt

that describes Andre Russell the best." Russell was released by KKR this year ahead of the 2026 IPL auctions which will take place on December 16 in Abu Dhabi.

Du Plessis opts out of IPL auctions to play in PSL

Former South Africa captain Faf du Plessis has opted to play in the Pakistan Super League next year, ruling himself out of the 2026 Indian Premier League auctions scheduled to take place next month on December 16 in Abu Dhabi.

The 41-year-old was released by Delhi Capitals in November after scoring 202 runs in nine games at a strike rate of 123.92 in the previous season.

Du Plessis has played for Chennai Super Kings (2011-2015, 2018-2021) and the now-defunct Rising Pune Supergiant (2016-2017), and led Royal Challengers Bangalore (2022-2024) as captain for three seasons, before being bought by Delhi last season at a base price of 20 million rupees (\$220,000).

"This year, I've chosen to take on a new challenge and will be playing in the upcoming PSL season.

"A new country. A new environment. A new challenge. I'm looking forward to the Pakistan hospitality."

Du Plessis has played in the PSL before, for Peshawar Zalmi in the 2019 season and Quetta Gladiators in 2020.

FOCUS

Head prepared to open again for Australia after heroics in first Ashes Test

Reuters
Brisbane

Australia's Travis Head says he is prepared to open the batting once more against England during the ongoing Ashes series after his second innings display in the first Test in Perth last week led the home side to an eight-wicket victory over the tourists.

Head smashed a century in 69 balls, the second fastest in Ashes history, on his way to a match-winning 123 runs after being drafted in as a late replacement for Usman Khawaja, when the regu-

lar top-order batter was unable to take to the field.

"I'm preparing for anything at this stage," said Head upon his arrival in Brisbane yesterday ahead of the second Test, which starts on Thursday.

"There's a fair bit to work through.

"But I've just got here and we haven't had many conversations in the last week. It's about spending some time out of the game, as much as you can.

"I'm just preparing for each test to play the best way I can, and wherever I line up I'm happy.

"If that's what's needed to win a test match and that's what's re-

quired, yeah I'm fine with it," Head told reporters.

The Australians went into the five-Test series with question marks over their opening batters, and debutant Jake Weatherald was the latest to struggle, losing his wicket to Jofra Archer with the second ball of the first innings.

NEED FOR TEST TEAMS TO BE FLEXIBLE

But Head believes his performance in the second innings underlined the need for Test teams to be flexible with their batting line-ups and to adopt the approaches used in the shorter forms of the game.

"I feel I can play in any role, so

I'm open to (opening), and it's just trying to work out in-game and in moments when you may use that," he said.

"But I think all options are on the table and have been for a long period of time, about where the team can potentially get better and where there's opportunities to potentially win games of cricket in moments. I think it's always been on the table.

Head said batting orders are "slightly overrated".

"But the traditionalists will say that's how it's got to be," Head added.

"It's ever evolving and we'll see where we get to."

Abhishek smashes 148 runs in 52 balls

Abhishek Sharma smashed 148 runs in 52 balls in a domestic T20 tournament against an experienced Bengal bowling attack featuring Mohammed Shami and Akash Deep yesterday to guide Punjab to a mammoth total of 310-5, the fourth highest in T20s. Opening the innings after winning the toss in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy match, the Punjab captain struck five sixes and as many fours to reach the 50-mark in 12 balls, the joint-second fastest by an Indian in the format. The left-handed batter completed his century in 32 balls, the third joint-quickest by an Indian in T20s.

With 16 sixes and eight fours in his innings, he reached 148 before being dismissed by Deep. With the innings, the 25-year-old also took his tally of sixes in T20s this year to 91, the highest by an Indian in a calendar year, surpassing his own record of 87 sixes last year. Abhishek's ton comes nearly a year after he scored a 28-ball 100 against Meghalaya, the joint-highest by an Indian. Abhishek also made a case for inclusion in India's squad for next year's T20 World Cup with the innings.

FOCUS

FEI Group VII Finals close with outstanding final day at Al Shaqab

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The FEI Group VII Finals concluded at Al Shaqab's Longines Outdoor Arena on Saturday, marking the end of a historic first edition hosted in Qatar.

The final day showcased exceptional performances across all categories, underscoring the depth of young talent in the region and further establishing Qatar as a leading hub for youth equestrian development. Over three days, the championship brought together the top-ranked Children, Junior, and Young Riders from Group VII nations, representing a major milestone for equestrian sport in the Middle East and North Africa.

Awards were presented by Mohammed Jaber al-Khayarin, Director of Equine Education at Al Shaqab; Dr Ismael Shaker, President of the Egyptian Equestrian Federation; Sultan Mohammed Khalifa al-Yahyai, President of FEI Regional Group VII; and Bader al-Darwish, President of Qatar Equestrian Federation.

Additionally, Bader al-Darwish



presented an honorary award to Sultan Mohammed Khalifa al-Yahyai in recognition of his contributions to Group VII. The day opened with an impressive performance in the 1.25m Youth category, where Abdalla Hamad Ali al-Kirbi of the UAE secured first place following an excellent round. Egypt's Ismail Osama El Borai finished second, while Ali Mufrej Ali Mohamed Alkarbi of the UAE completed the podium in third place, setting a strong tone

for the day. The Children's Final (CSIJ-A 1.15m) followed with another exciting display of young talent. The UAE's Khaled Ahmad Khalifa al-Ayali al-Mheiri claimed first place, Qatar's Abdulaziz bin Jassim al-Thani secured second, and Saudi Arabia's Saud Alhadi took third. Additional strong results came from Abdullah Ghazawi of Saudi Arabia in fourth, Qatar's Mohammed Hamza al-Kuwari in fifth, and Kuwait's Fay Alkaaoud in sixth.



In the Juniors Final (CSIJ-A 1.25m), Qatar's Mohammed bin Jassim al-Thani delivered a standout winning performance, with Egypt's Yassin Ramy Abd al-Ghafour finishing second and Mohammad Saeed al-Ghurair of the UAE taking third. The remaining top positions were claimed by Mabkhout Owaida Alkirbi in fourth, Alya Adnan Awadh Almhairi in fifth, and Egypt's Omar Mohammed Ahmed in sixth. The day concluded with the

Young Riders Final, where Abdalla Hamad Ali al-Kirbi of the UAE secured his second victory of the day with a commanding performance.

Qatar's Saad Ahmed al-Saad finished second, followed by Egypt's Ismail Osama El Borai in third. Completing the top six were Egypt's Seif Yasser Fekry in fourth place, Saudi Arabia's Abdulaziz Fahad Aleid in fifth, and Saif Owaida Mohammed Alkirbi of the UAE in sixth.

Reflecting on the successful

conclusion of Qatar's first hosting of the Finals, Khalid al-Hitmi, Event President at Al Shaqab, stated: "This edition marks a defining chapter for Al Shaqab and for Group VII. Hosting the Finals in Qatar for the first time has allowed us to set a new benchmark for youth equestrian competition in the region. The performances over the past three days reflect a promising future for our young athletes, and we remain committed to supporting their journey toward the 2026 Youth Olympic Games and beyond."

The conclusion of the 2025 Finals represents a significant moment for Al Shaqab, Qatar Foundation, and the wider Group VII community.

Bringing together riders from fourteen nations, the championship showcased a shared commitment to developing youth talent and strengthening equestrian sport across the region.

As the champions of 2025 are celebrated, Al Shaqab extends its appreciation to all riders, federations, teams, and supporters whose dedication contributed to the success of this landmark edition.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Ten-man Chelsea hold off Arsenal 1-1 in London derby

Isak's first league goal helps Liverpool to vital win at West Ham



Arsenal's Mikel Merino (left) celebrates scoring against Chelsea during the Premier League match in London yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
London

Mikel Merino rescued Arsenal as the Premier League leaders battled to a 1-1 draw against 10-man Chelsea in a heavyweight title clash, while Alexander Isak finally scored his first top-flight goal for troubled Liverpool in a 2-0 win at West Ham yesterday.

Chelsea midfielder Moises Caicedo was sent off in the 38th minute at Stamford Bridge for a crude foul on Merino that caught the midfielder on his ankle.

Despite Caicedo's dismissal, Trevoh Chalobah headed Chelsea from Reece James' corner into the lead in the 48th minute. But Merino's close-range header from Bukayo Saka's cross in the 59th minute ensured Arsenal emerged unscathed from a bruising encounter between the title rivals.

Arsenal are five points clear of second-placed Manchester City, who beat Newcastle on Saturday,

and sit six points above third-placed Chelsea. The Gunners remain the favourites to win their first Premier League crown since 2004, but Chelsea's combative display suggested they could emerge as the biggest threat to the Gunners' title aspirations.

Arsenal are unbeaten in 17 games in all competitions, winning 14 of those matches, while Chelsea have gone seven matches without losing in all competitions.

Isak had failed to score in his five top-flight appearances since making a British record £125mn (\$165mn) move from Newcastle in September. The Sweden forward banished that drought with only his second goal in 11 games in all competitions for the Reds, following his maiden strike in a League Cup win against second-tier Southampton. Cody Gakpo bagged Liverpool's second goal in stoppage time to secure their first win in four games in all competitions.

"It's very important for us as a team that we went 1-0 up, but I think it was also important for him

because I think it was his third or fourth chance of this game," said Liverpool manager Arne Slot.

MAN UNITED HIT BACK

Joshua Zirkzee scored his first Premier League goal for nearly a year before Mason Mount grabbed the winner as Manchester United came from behind to beat Crystal Palace 2-1.

Ruben Amorim's side trailed to Jean-Philippe Mateta's first half penalty at Selhurst Park, but Zirkzee and Mount netted after the interval to secure United's first win in four games. United recovered from their lacklustre start thanks to Zirkzee's first goal in the Premier League since he netted against Everton in December 2024.

"I could see that Palace were getting tired at the end of the first half and knew they would suffer if we scored," Amorim said. "The pace and intensity was better in the second half. We controlled the game. We took advantage of a tired opponent"

Unai Emery praised his Aston

Villa players for turning their season around after a 1-0 win against bottom of the table Wolves moved them into the fourth place. Bou-bacar Kamara's stunning strike secured Villa a seventh win from eight league games – a stark contrast to the start of the campaign when they failed to win their first five games and scored just one goal. "Of course I was worried and I was responsible. I tried to share my worries with the players two months ago. The most important thing is how they responded to my message," Emery said.

Fabian Hurlzeler was happy to erase bad memories from the City Ground after Brighton won 2-0 at Nottingham Forest.

The Seagulls avenged the 7-0 defeat they suffered here back in February, with the victory helping them climb to fifth place.

Maxim De Cuyper and Stefanos Tzimas scored for Brighton and Hurlzeler said: "We arrived here with some memories regarding last season but we came to clean the air"

SERIE A

Martinez double at Pisa keeps Inter on heels of leaders AC Milan

AFP
Pisa, Italy

Lautaro Martinez fired Inter Milan to within a point of the Serie A summit with both goals in yesterday's 2-0 win at promoted Pisa, ahead of Napoli's clash at Scudetto rivals Roma.

Argentina striker Martinez smashed home Pio Esposito's low cross in the 69th minute and then ensured Inter would stay on the heels of local rivals AC Milan when he tapped in from close range with seven minutes remaining.

A last-gasp loss to Atletico Madrid midweek and derby defeat last weekend had Inter reeling and although yesterday's three points will be welcome the overall performance was not encouraging.

"I'm happy because we won and that's what we wanted after two defeats... I work for the team, myself and my family, I leave the talk to others," said Martinez to DAZN.

"I hope it continues, I've still

got plenty of time on my contract, I'm happy here and the fans love me... the team comes before everything else."

Martinez's goals took him to 10 in all competitions and saved Inter's blushes, as Cristian Chivu's side were sluggish at the Arena Garibaldi which is a stone's throw from Pisa's world-famous leaning tower.

Pisa, who sit in the bottom three after just one win from their 13 league fixtures, had the better of the chances before Martinez's perfectly hit first-time strike broke the deadlock.

The small gap separating Inter from top spot could be extended as second-placed Roma host the champions in yesterday's head-line fixture.

Level on 27 points with Inter, Gian Piero Gasperini's Roma will reclaim top spot with a win over injury-hit Napoli at the Stadio Olimpico.

Atalanta coach Raffaele Palladino will face his old team Fiorentina in other game, following a thumping victory at Eintracht Frankfurt in the Champions League.



Inter Milan's Lautaro Martinez celebrates after scoring against Pisa during the Italian Serie A match in Pisa yesterday. (AFP)

Villarreal edge Real Sociedad, Betis win fiery derby

Alberto Moleiro helped Villarreal rise to joint second in La Liga yesterday with a stoppage time winner in a 3-2 victory at Real Sociedad.

The playmaker netted twice in the second half of a thrilling game in San Sebastian to take his team back ahead of Atletico Madrid and level on points with Real Madrid, who face Girona later on.

Elsewhere Real Betis claimed a 2-0 derby win at Sevilla in a fiery derby clash which was briefly suspended after angry home fans threw bottles onto the pitch. Villarreal secured their fifth consecutive league win to stay firmly in the Spanish title fight.

Ayoz Perez fired the visitors ahead midway through the first half and teed up Moleiro for Villarreal's second soon after the break. Real Sociedad fought back strongly, with Carlos Soler netting on the hour mark. The Basque side ramped up the pressure and levelled in

the final stages through a spectacular Ander Barrenetxea free-kick.

However, Moleiro had the final say, smashing home in the 95th minute to maintain his team's momentum. "We had that little bit of luck to get three very important points, as important as they were difficult (to get)," said Marcelino.

"To get 32 points out of a possible 42 to me seems a stunning achievement."

Sevilla's derby clash against Real Betis was temporarily suspended in the 87th minute after home fans threw objects onto the pitch at the Ramon Sanchez-Pizjuan stadium. Visitors Betis were two goals ahead with Sevilla reduced to 10 men after Isaac Romero's red card, when plastic bottles were thrown on and the referee ordered the players off the field. The match resumed 15 minutes later, with Pablo Fornals and Sergi Altimira's goals making the difference as Betis shore.

PREVIEW

Confident Qatar to make fresh start, eye win against 'tough' Palestine today

AKRAM AFIF TO LEAD THE CHARGE FOR TWO-TIME ASIAN CHAMPIONS AT AL BAYT STADIUM

By Rizwan Rehmat
Doha

Two-time Asian champions Qatar will rely on the experience of feared forward Akram Afif and a relatively young side today when they tackle Palestine in the opening match of the FIFA Arab Cup.

The two sides will meet in Group A clash at Al Bayt Stadium on what will be the opening day of the 16-team tournament sanctioned by world governing body FIFA.

Coached by Julen Lopetegui, Qatar qualified for the 2026 FIFA World Cup in October. With their match today, Qatar will be officially launching their preparations for next year's FIFA World Cup that starts in seven months' time.

Following a victory at the Asian Cup in February last year and a third-place finish at the last edition of the Arab Cup in 2021, Lopetegui's young team aims to utilise their home advantage to secure a consecutive championship.

The Qatar squad, however, will miss several seasoned players like Almoez Ali, Hasan al-Haydos, Boualem Khoukhi, Karim Boudiaf and Pedro Miguel who have been dropped.

"We have turned the page on the past and are striving to write a new chapter in the history of Al Annabi (the Qatari national team)," Lopetegui said in a press conference yesterday.

"We have many new players in this tournament, and our goal is not limited to participation or trying out some players. Rather, we aim to win, develop, and prepare for the upcoming stages," the coach said. "We are delighted to be participating in the Arab Cup. I watched Palestine's previous matches; they have outstanding players and our match against



Qatar team during a training session in Doha.



them will not be easy," he added. "Our focus is solely on the first match and we aim to progress through the tournament step by step," he said.

Qatar player Hashemi al-Hussein said yesterday: "Preparations for the tournament have gone well despite the limited time available

to us, but playing on our home ground and in front of our fans gives us a huge incentive."

He added: "Representing the national team is a source of pride, an honour, and a dream for every player. This gives us a great incentive, and we strive to capitalise on the coach's confidence in us as young players."

"The fans of Al Annabi are the number one player for us, and they have proven this in all previous tournaments. Our goal is to make them happy, and we hope for their presence and strong support in the stands," al-Hussein said yesterday.

Influential player Afif will lead the home charge when Qatar arrive at the Al Bayt Stadium today. Afif will be paired with the reliable forward Mohammed Muntari, the first goal-scorer at the FIFA World Cup for Qatar in 2022. Afif is a star

in both the Qatar Stars League and the wider Arab world. The versatile forward is a two-time AFC Player of the Year and was named MVP of Qatar's Asian Cup victory in 2024.

Palestine, coached by Ehab Abu Jazar, just last week qualified for the 16-team Arab Cup with a sensational play-off win against Libya.

For Jazar, the key player will be Oday Dabbagh, who is just 26. Dabbagh has already cemented his legacy as Palestine's all-time leading scorer, setting a benchmark that could stand for generations.

A complete forward known for his pace, power, and aerial dominance, the Zamalek striker brings vital European experience – spanning Portugal, Belgium, and Scotland – to the pitch. He will undoubtedly be the focal point of Palestine's attack as they chase



Qatar coach Julen Lopetegui attending a press conference ahead of the team's first FIFA Arab Cup match against Palestine today.

progression in Qatar. Jazar said at a press conference yesterday: "The Palestinian team will enter the first match with high ambitions and a desire to advance deep into the tournament, after qualifying from the preliminary round by defeating Libya on penalties following a goalless draw."

FAN SUPPORT FOR AL ANNABI As the Arab Cup approaches, Khalid Mubarak al-Kuwari, the Director of Marketing and Communications for the Qatar Football Association (QFA), has issued a definitive rallying cry. His message to the nation is clear: when it comes to backing Al Annabi, everyone has a jersey in the game.

Al-Kuwari predicts that the Qatari faithful are poised to be the decisive factor, promising that they will provide the "strongest voice in the stands". He views the upcoming campaign not just as a series of matches, but as a collective mission where every fan is a partner in the team's pursuit of glory.

"Our promotional campaign is diverse, and we strive to involve everyone to be a part of it," al-

Kuwari said. Behind the scenes, the QFA is executing a high-level strategy to unify support. Al-Kuwari revealed that coordination meetings have been held with local clubs to combine forces, utilising their platforms to amplify support for the national team.

With the tournament atmosphere building, al-Kuwari urged fans not to wait until the final whistle to make their move. The directive is to secure tickets now for all national team matches rather than waiting for the last minute, ensuring the stands are packed and the energy is electric from kick-off to the final whistle.

QATAR SQUAD

Mahmoud Abunada, Meshaal Barsham, Shehab al-Laitihi (goalkeepers), Abdulaziz Hatem, Ahmed Alaaeldin, Ahmed Fathy, Akram Afif, Al-Hashemi al-Hussein, Ayoub Mohammed, Assim Madibo, Edmilson Junior, Issa Lay, Homam al-Amin, Jassim Jaber, Khalid Ali, Lucas Mendes, Mohammed Khalid, Mohammed Mannai, Mohammed Muntari, Mohammed Waad, Sultan al-Brake, Tarek Salman, Youssef Ayman

SPOTLIGHT

Palestine coach ready for hard battle against Qatar

QNA
Doha

Palestine coach Ehab Abu Jazar yesterday said his side remained ready to face Qatar in the opening match of the FIFA Arab Cup 2025 today at Al Bayt Stadium, as part of Group A, which also includes Tunisia and Syria.

Speaking at a press conference yesterday, Abu Jazar stressed the importance of the Arab Cup, particularly given Qatar's exceptional organisation and world-class stadiums.

He said the Palestinian team enters today's match with high ambitions and a desire to advance deep into the tournament, after qualifying from the preliminary round by defeating Libya on penalties following a goalless draw.

He expressed confidence in his players' ability to deliver a strong performance in the opening match, noting that the team is in high spirits and aiming for victory despite the challenge of facing the hosts, Qatar.

The coach added that the match holds special significance as the tournament's opener, and because the opponent is the host nation - two-time AFC Asian Cup champions and qualifiers for the FIFA World Cup 2026, which requires exerting maximum effort.

Abu Jazar acknowledged that the team faces some absences due to players' club commitments. Still, he emphasised that the available squad is determined to perform at its best, especially after getting into tournament rhythm through the preliminary-round match against Libya.



Palestine coach Ehab Abu Jazar attends a press conference in Doha yesterday. Palestine face Qatar today.

He noted that the presence of several Palestinian players in the Qatari league will have a positive impact on the team's performance in the Arab Cup.

For his part, Palestine midfielder Ameid Mahajneh stressed the major significance of participating in the Arab Cup, expressing hope that the team will deliver strong performances in all three group-stage matches, with the primary focus now on today's opener

against Qatar. He added that all players are fully prepared for the tournament kick-off, pointing out that achieving a positive result in the first match would provide a crucial morale boost for the rest of their campaign.

Syria, Tunisia eye opening Group A victory

The Syrian and Tunisian national teams will launch Group A action of the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar

2025 today when they meet at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium, ahead of the tournament's official opening clash between hosts Qatar and Palestine at Al Bayt Stadium.

The Tunisian team, led by coach Sami Trabelsi, is enjoying an ideal period after qualifying for the FIFA World Cup for the seventh time, which will take place next year in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

Tunisia will compete in the Arab Cup with a different lineup from the one that played in their recent friendly against Brazil, which ended in a 1-1 draw, due to the overlap between the Arab Cup and the final preparation stage for the Africa Cup of Nations, which will run from Dec 21, 2025-Jan 18, 2026, in Morocco.

Meanwhile, the Syrian team aims to continue its positive results after defeating South Sudan in the qualifiers a few days ago with a 2-0 victory. Syrian's Spanish manager José Lana will work to prepare suitable alternatives, having opted for a squad of young players.

In terms of head-to-head encounters between Tunisia and Syria, the two teams have faced each other 11 times. Tunisia has won five of those matches, Syria has also won five, and they have drawn once.

In the context of the Arab Cup, Tunisia and Syria have met twice. In the first encounter, Tunisia won 1-0 in the inaugural edition of the tournament held in Lebanon in 1963.

Syria avenged that result in the last edition in 2021 at Al Bayt Stadium, winning 2-0. Tunisia's largest victory over Syria came in the 1973 Palestine Cup final in Libya, when they won 4-0.

FORMER PLAYERS SAY FIERCE COMPETITION AWAITS QATAR

Doha: Former Qatari national team players said the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2025, which kicks off today and runs until December 18, is expected to be fiercely competitive, with Qatar emerging as one of the leading contenders for the title.

Six FIFA World Cup stadiums will host the 11th edition of the tournament, which brings together 16 teams. Qatar will launch its campaign against Palestine at Al Bayt Stadium in Group A, alongside Tunisia and Syria.

Former Qatari national team player Hassan Matar said the upcoming edition holds major moral and technical significance, citing the anticipated high level of competition and strong fan turnout. He linked this to the participation of seven teams already qualified for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, in addition to Iraq's presence in the intercontinental play-offs, which could further expand the list of qualified teams.

Matar said the remarkable success of Qatar's previous hosting of the tournament will positively shape the new edition, noting that teams gained valuable competitive experience from earlier editions, boosting their readiness and performance levels. He added that the Arab Cup has evolved beyond its regional framework to become a truly global tournament, thanks to Qatar's outstanding organisational capabilities, which have elevated it into a high-level technical competition.

Regarding the leading title contenders, Matar said the race will be wide open, with the Qatari national team firmly among the favourites, especially as the tournament serves as a vital preparatory stage for the World Cup finals. He noted that the national team's coaching staff, led by Spanish coach Julen Lopetegui, fully appreciates the importance of competing strongly for the championship.

He also named Algeria, Tunisia,

Morocco and Saudi Arabia as major contenders for the title, adding that several other teams possess the quality and potential to progress deep into the competition.

For his part, former Qatari national team player Yousef Adam said the tournament will feature squads packed with leading players, offering coaches an ideal platform to assess player readiness ahead of the World Cup finals. He added that the tournament is expected to attract large crowds, which will have a positive impact on match results and overall performance levels.

Adam stressed that the dream of lifting the title will serve as a powerful motivation for players to deliver their best in every match. He also predicted fierce competition in this edition, particularly in light of the clear technical progress achieved by many Arab teams in recent tournaments.

Meanwhile, former Qatari player Hassan al-Otaibi told QNA that the Arab Cup will serve as a true test for Arab teams that have qualified for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, as they strive to reach peak readiness ahead of the global tournament next summer. He anticipated tough, high-quality matches between teams boasting outstanding players. Al-Otaibi stressed that the Qatari national team will be a strong contender for the title, particularly with the expected massive home support as the host nation. He added that the team enters the tournament with high morale following its improved performances during the Asian World Cup qualifying play-offs.

He further noted that the squad announced by coach Lopetegui includes a distinguished group of experienced players who have previously achieved major successes, including winning the AFC Asian Cup twice in 2019 and 2023, in addition to securing qualification for the upcoming World Cup finals.

- QNA