



CRICKET | Page 2 Markram hits century as South Africa beat India by four wickets



MOTORSPORT | Page 3 Formula One revs up for a three-way title showdown





FOOTBALL

Fired up Qatar seek points against battling Syria today

HOSTS WILL COME OUT AGGRESSIVELY TO PROVE A POINT AND MAKE UP FOR OPENING LOSS



By Rizwan Rehmat

sian champions Qatar will look to recover lost ground at the FIFA Arab Cup today when they face Syria at the iconic Khalifa International Stadium.

On Monday, Qatar - coached by Julen Lopetegui - were stunned by an own goal shocker against Palestine at Al Bayt Stadium.

After the Group A loss, Lopetegui was candid enough to admit that his side did not present their best game in the opener.

Qatar's Akram Afif will be the man tasked with creating magic to break down a Syrian defence that held firm against Tunisia.

For Syria, Omar Khribin, who scored the winner against Tunisia, will be the main threat on the counter-attack. The new

coach of Al Annabi yesterday said the 2026 FIFA World Cup-bound squad will play to collect three points against Syria. "Facing the Syrian team will not be

easy but we are looking to secure our first three full points from this match," Lonetegni said vesterday.

"We know that many teams are strong contenders for the title and we will take one match at a time," he added.

When asked about his team's lacklustre performance on Monday, Lopetegui said it was time to focus on the Syria chal-

"We don't have to talk about what happened two days ago. These kind of tournaments are really fast. Win or lose but you have to be ready for the next challenge. Now our focus is on Syria.



Qatar coach Julen Lopetegui addresses a press conference ahead of his team's FIFA Arab Cup match against Syria today.



Syria head coach Jose Lana attends a press conference in Doha yesterday.

But to beat them, we have to do a lot of work," he said.

Lopetegui said his team remained committed to play for a win today.

"Everyone is eager to make the most of this match and represent Al Annabi in the best possible way. Every member in the squad has an opportunity to play in the last two matches of this phase," he said without elaborating.

"I have watched Syria's last two matches. They have talented players and a very good coach. However, our primary focus remains on ourselves and on delivering the best possible performance on the pitch," the Qatar coach added.

Lopetegui announced key Qatar player Assim Madibo was ruled out of the tournament because of an injury.

"That's very unfortunate not to have him anymore. This is something that is not in our control. He is a very important player for us. Now when he won't be there on the pitch, somebody else will take his place. This will be an opportunity for a replacement player to shine," he said.

"That's the best part about our side that we can play as a team. Some big players now are out (with injury) but we are ready to do well and field a strong team. We have to win and that's what we plan to do," the coach said.

Qatar midfielder Abdulaziz Hatim said yesterday: "We have moved past our opening loss against Palestine. We learned a lot from that match. Our goal is to claim the three points."

He added: "We expect a difficult match. We have no option but to go for the win. We are aiming to go as far as possible in this tournament. We hope to bring joy to our fans. We are counting on their support in the stadium."

Syria's Spanish coach Jose Lana yesterday sounded upbeat about his team's chances against Qatar.

"I am confident that my players have the ability to keep winning and perform at their best," Lana said yesterday. "After

the first match - which we won - we are now facing a difficult match against the strong Qatari team, which has very good players, but in football anything is possible and we will see what happens tomor-

"We know what reality is. Some of our players haven't played with their clubs for four months ... some of them haven't played for five months.

"We will wait for the final training session to determine the team's formation for the next match. That's why we aim t be fully prepared. I am confident in the players' ability to give their best despite the difficulties we face," he said.

"We will do our best to achieve a positive result.

"That's what the players want to do. "Focus will be key," he added. "We will compete. I am proud of how they responded in the first match," he said. "I am sure we will be a difficult team for every

side," he warned. The match kicks off at 8:00pm.

SPOTLIGHT

QATAR CAPTAIN

AKRAM AFIF

Jordan stun UAE as Sudan hold Algeria

By Sports Reporter

ordan vesterday exhibited courage against a superior opponent when they beat regional football powerhouse UAE 2-1 in a thrilling contest on day three of the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar

Ali Olwan (20') converted a penalty kick in the first half while teammate Yazan al-Naimat (65') hoodwinked his marker and the UAE 'keeper in the second to score the decisive goal in the Group C clash at Al Bayt Stadium.

For the UAE, Bruno Oliveira had netted one in the 47th but Jordan remained resolute after al-Naimat's smart finish in the second half to complete a deserving win in the 16team tournament.

Earlier Algeria kicked off their Arab Cup title defence with a scoreless draw against Sudan in Group D

The 2021 champions played the entirety of the second half with ten players following Adam Ounas' sending off, and defended resolutely to bank a point.

The other Group D clash saw Iraq ease past Bahrain 2-1 in Doha.

Ten-man Algeria dug deep to secure a point against Sudan at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium.

The defending champions created the best chances of the first half,



Jordan's Yazan al-Naimat celebrates after beating the UAE in the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2025 Group C match at Al Bayt Stadium, Al Khor, yesterday. (Reuters)

with Sofiane Bendebka heading just wide and Adil Boulbina forcing a

smart save from Mohamed Alnour. The game took on an entirely different complexion, however, when Algeria striker Adam Ounas was sent off for a second bookable of-

fence on the stroke of half-time. With their numerical advantage, Sudan controlled possession after

They came close to opening the scoring when Abdelrazig Yagoub lashed a shot into the side netting, but struggled to carve out regular clear-cut opportunities.

Algeria defended with authority and determination to keep them at

bay as the game finished all square.

Iraq beat Bahrain 2-1

Four years ago Iraq and Bahrain clashed in the same group with both failing to advance; this time the Lions of Mesopotamia took an important initial step to the knockouts with a 2-1 win in Doha.



Action from Bahrain vs Iraq Group D match in the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2025 at Stadium 974 in Doha yesterday. (Reuters)

It took Iraq just ten minutes to strike as an Aymen Hussein effort was bundled into his own goal by Ebrahim Lutfalla.

Having injured himself in that passage of play, the goalkeeper was replaced shortly after by Omar Salem, who then watched on as Mohanad Ali doubled the Iraq advantage from close range midway through the opening stanza. Bahrain substitute Sayed Hashim pulled one back late on as he tucked home a wellweighted Abdulla al-Khalsai cross but in the end Iraq hung on to make a winning start.



UAE **Jordan TODAY'S MATCHES** 5:30pm - Palestine vs Tunisia at Lusail Stadium

8:00pm - Qatar vs Syria at Khalifa International Stadium

SPOTLIGHT

Markram ton helps South Africa level ODI series against India

Raipur

pener Aiden Markram hit a sparkling century to help South Africa chase down 359 for a series-levelling win over India in the second one day international yesterday.

Virat Kohli's second successive century went in vain after South Africa achieved the target with four balls and four wickets to spare in Raipur. Number eight Corbin Bosch hit the winning boundary in his unbeaten 29 and let out a roar with the three-match series level at 1-1 and the decider on Saturday in Visakhapatnam.

Kohli, who made 102 for his 53rd hundred in the ODI format, put on 195 runs for the third wicket with Ruturaj Gaikwad, who hit 105, as India posted 358-5.

In reply, Markram made 110 and put on 101 runs for the second wicket with captain Temba Bavuma (46) to lay the foundations for the joint-highest target chased down against India. Australia chased down 359 in 2019 in Mohali. Markram, who survived a dropped catch on 53 by Yashasvi Jaiswal in the deep, lost partner Bayuma in the 21st over but kept firm to raise his fourth ODI ton in 88 balls.

Pace bowler Harshit Rana dismissed Markram on a slower ball to raise the noise of the 60,000-capacity packed stadium.

Dewald Brevis, who hit 54 off 34 balls, joined Matthew Breetzke, who made 68, and the two kept the chase on track in their fourthwicket partnership of 92.

Brevis reached his maiden ODI fifty with a six off Kuldeep Yadav but the left-arm wrist spinner had his revenge next ball to get the batsman caught out at long-on.

Breetzke was next to go after Krishna trapped him lbw and Arshdeep Singh dismissed Marco Jansen (2) in the next over.

There was more drama when Tony de Zorzi went retired hurt on 17, clutching his hamstring in pain after taking a run with Bosch, who then kept calm to take the team over the line alongside Keshav Maharai (10 not out), Earlier, Kohli

was on fire, taking on the opposition bowlers after India lost Rohit Sharma for 14. The in-form batter began his scoring with a six off pace bowler Lungi Ngidi.

Jaiswal fell for 22 after he handed India a brisk start, but Kohli and Gaikwad steadied the innings and then took the attack to the opposition. Both looked fluent as they struck regular boundaries and Gaikwad reached his maiden ODI ton with a boundary.

Gaikwad departed but Kohli went on to register his 84th century across the three international formats as fans stood up to applaud. Kohli finally fell to Ngidi, and walked back to a standing ovation before skipper K L Rahul hit an unbeaten 66. The 37-yearold Kohli only plays the 50-over over format these days after he and fellow stalwart Rohit, 38, retired from T20 and Test cricket.

BRIEF SCORES: South Africa

362 for 6 (Markram 110, Breetzke 68, Markram 54, Arshdeep 2-54, Prasidh 2-85) beat India 358 for 5 (Gaikwad 105, Kohli 102, Jansen 2-63) by four wickets.



South Africa's Aiden Markram plays a shot during the second ODI against India at the Shaheed Veer Narayan Singh International Cricket Stadium in Raipur vesterday. (AFP)

BRISBANE TEST

Bazball in review as England face pink ball demons

HEAD EXPECTED TO OPEN FOR AUSTRALIA IN KHAWAJA'S PLACE

Reuters Brisbane

ngland's unyielding faith in Bazball will be under scrutiny at a flood-lit Gabba from today as Ben Stokes' side confront their pink ball frailties and the spectre of a 2-0 Ashes deficit to Australia.

After surrendering a dominant position in the eight-wicket defeat in Perth, England need at least a draw in the second test in Bris bane to have genuine hope of contending in the five-match series.

But history and conditions suggest a result is overwhelmingly likely. All day-night Tests, which use a pink ball that shows up better under the lights instead of the typical red, have produced a winner, and England's record under lights offers little comfort.

They have lost five of their seven pink-ball matches, including all three against Australia.

The most recent against the hosts was a 146-run hiding in Hobart in the 2021/22 Ashes, a loss that sealed a 4-0 series drubbing and paved the way for the attacking revolution under England coach Brendon "Baz" McCullum and captain Ben Stokes.

Four years on, Bazball is now in the firing line, with former players and pundits decrying the highrisk game on Australia's spicy pitches. McCullum and Stokes are unmoved, though, believing that changing tack now could only lead to ruin.

"I've got complete trust in the players that we select to go out there with that mentality of being the person who's going to influence the game in the right way for us," Stokes told reporters at the Gabba yesterday.

"Sometimes that doesn't always work out that way... We've taken some lessons from last week."

Bazball or bust, it will take something special for England to win the series from here.

No English side has come back



England's players attend a team training session at The Gabba in Brisbane yesterday, on the eve of the second Ashes Test. (AFP)

from 1-0 down to claim the urn in Australia since the 1950s and none have won a Test at the Gabba since Mike Gatting's team in 1986.

Australia, by contrast, are sitting pretty, effectively owning the day-night format with a record of 13 wins in 14 Tests. If England can take a scrap of

comfort, it is that Australia's sole defeat with the pink ball came at the Gabba, in 2024, against the West Indies.

While the Gabba is renowned for pace and bounce, England shelved their four-seamer setup from Perth, recalling spin-bowling all-rounder Will Jacks for just his third Test in place of Mark

Jacks will be tasked with stiffening England's batting after their collapse led to a defeat inside two days in Perth.

Australia will not confirm their XI until the toss today but Travis Head is expected to continue opening in place of the injured Usman Khawaja following his match-winning 123 in the second innings in Perth.

That would open the door for wicketkeeper-batter Josh Inglis to step into the middle order and play his first Test in Australia should selectors again overlook Beau Webster as a second all-round op-

CUMMINS COMEBACK?

Stand-in skipper Steve Smith said there may even be a place for regular captain Pat Cummins in the XI, despite the fast bowler's omission from the squad named last week.

After missing Perth with a back injury, Cummins's inclusion would likely see one-Test quick Brendan Doggett make way rather than ageless spinner Nathan Lyon. Whatever Australia's XI, leftarm quick Mitchell Starc looms as pivotal again following his

10-wicket clinic in Perth. Already the most prolific bowler in day-night tests with 81 wickets at an average of 17.08, Starc needs only three more dismissals to surpass Wasim Akram's 414 and become the most prolific left-arm fast bowler in all Tests. No England batter may feel Starc's threat more than Joe Root.

The under-pressure former captain was twice removed cheaply by Starc in Perth.

Root spent much of the buildup to Brisbane training against leftarm seam, searching for answers as England brace for another inquiry into their technique and philosophy under the Gabba lights.

Pandya back in India squad for T20s

All-rounder Hardik Pandya was yesterday named in India's T20 squad for the upcoming five matches against South Africa as he returns to international cricket after an injury. Pandya suffered a quadriceps injury during the Asia Cup in September and missed the team's tour of Australia and the ongoing South Africa one-day series. The 32-year-old Pandya made a winning comeback in India's domestic T20 competition for his team Baroda as he scored 77 not out and took one wicket with his pace bowling. Vice-captain Shubman Gill makes the 15-member but his return from a neck injury will depend on clearance from the BCCI. India will begin the T20 series on December 9 in Cuttack. SQUAD: Suryakumar Yadav (capt), Shubman Gill (vice-capt)*, Abhishek Sharma, Tilak Varma, Hardik Pandya, Shivam Dube, Axar Patel, Jitesh Sharma (wk), Sanju Samson (wk), Jasprit Bumrah, Varun Chakaravarthy, Arshdeep Singh, Kuldeep Yadav, Harshit Rana, Washington Sundar. *Subject to fitness clearance from BCCI COE (Centre of Excellence).

FOCUS

Five-wicket Duffy puts New Zealand on top against West Indies

AFP

five-wicket haul by Jacob Duffy gave New Zealand a 64-run first-innings lead over the West Indies after the tourists all out for 167 in the first Tes yesterday.

At stumps on day two in Christchurch, New Zealand were 32-0 in their second innings to be 96 ahead. Devon Conway was 15 not out with Tom Latham on 14.

Once the forgotten man of New Zealand domestic cricket, Duffy found himself the enforcer in only his second Test.

"There was a point in time I didn't think I would be playing any Test cricket," said the 31-year-old. who made his international debut against Zimbabwe four months ago.

"It's my second Test, the first at home, and it feels really cool to get a 'five-for'.

"And to put our team in a good position is pretty huge."

In 16 deliveries following a rain break in the final session, Duffy removed the last four West Indian batsmen while conceding only two runs off his bowling. The fast bowler had earlier dismissed the West Indies top scorer Shai Hope for 56 to finish with career-best figures of 5-34 off 17.4 overs.

Half-centuries from Hope and Tagenarine Chanderpaul provided the backbone of the West Indies innings in a 90-run stand for the third wicket.

But Chanderpaul said it was difficult to bat on a second-day wicket that continued to be bowler-friendly.

"It was seaming around all day and you just had to try and hang in there," he said, "You had to pick up singles here and there and score when you could. It was definitely tough."

Hope, wearing sunglasses under heavily overcast skies because of an eye infection, went to the crease with the West Indies in early trouble at 10-2.

Despite being affected by conjunctivitis and needing breaks to be treated with eye drops, he produced a near-chanceless sixth Test half-century.

But on 56 he allowed a short ball from Duffy to brush his gloves on its way to wicketkeeper Latham and was gone. Matt Henry struck twice with a double-wicket maiden having Roston Chase and Justin Greaves



New Zealand's Jacob Duffy celebrates the wicket of West Indies' Javden Seales during day two of the first Test against West Indies at Hagley Oval in Christchurch vesterday. (AFP)

caught behind by Latham as the West Indies slumped from 100-2 to 106-5.

Chanderpaul battled his way to 52 from 169 deliveries before he was undone by Zak Foulkes as the floodlights came on under

murky skies after the tea break. The West Indies opener had been dropped twice, on five and 24, by Conway at leg slip.

But Conway, leaping to his left, pouched the third chance sent his way at midwicket. After a 30-minute rain interruption Duffy removed Tevin Imlach (14), Johann Layne (0), Jayden Seales (2) and Ojay Shields (0).

The West Indies took just three balls to end the New Zealand first innings at the start of the day, without an addition to the overnight score of 231.

Foulkes, the last man out, was then immediately in the action with the ball, removing John Campbell for one with his first delivery.

Will Young completed the dismissal with a smart onehanded catch to his left at third slip, but then dropped a regulation chance when Alick Athanaze, on four, edged Henry.

However, the scoreboard had not moved before Henry bowled Athanaze in his following over with a ball that nipped back sharply.

BRIEF SCORES: New Zealand 231 (Williamson 52, Bracwell 47,

Shields 2-34. Greaves 2-35) and 32 for O (Conway 15*, Latham 14*) lead West Indies 167 (Hope 56, Chanderpaul 52, Duffy 5-34,

Henry 3-43) by 96 runs.

Stokes backs 'incredibly talented' Jacks on eve of 2nd Ashes clash

England captain Ben Stokes has backed "incredibly talented" Will Jacks to shine following his surprise selection for the day-night second Ashes Test starting at the Gabba in Brisbane. In their only change, England recalled 26-year-old Jacks for his first Test since 2022 following an injury to pace bowler Mark Wood. Stokes said Jacks was preferred over fellow off-spinner Shoaib Bashir because of his ability with the bat, and said Jacks had improved since he played his two Tests in Pakistan in 2022. "Since coming into the squad in Pakistan he's turned himself into the cricketer that I always thought he could be," Stokes said yesterday. "He's incredibly talented and I think he's gone from strength to strength from two-and-a-half,

three ago since the Pakistan tour. "He's been playing so well - it's great for us that we've got someone who's looking in pretty good order coming into a big Test match."

Stokes would not be drawn on the prospect of Australia captain Pat Cummins making an early return from injury, as has been heavily rumoured in Australian media.

The Australians will not name their team until the toss, so England will not know whether Cummins is playing until just before the start

"He's done great things not only as a player, but he's been great since he's been given the responsibility of captain," Stokes said. "If Pat's there, if Pat's not there, we'll still be go-

ing in there to try and get the win." England have not won at the Gabba since 1986 and have only had success there four times in 22 Tests. "You don't try and read too much around what happened or the result the last time the team played there," Stokes said.

"But we've got grounds in England where we know that when we turn up there you sort of have that extra bit of confidence, because of not necessarily your record there, but how the crowds are.

"I feel like the Gabba is sort of like their Edgbaston or Headingley.

"Look, they've got a great record in pink-ball Test cricket and we're just excited to get going and hopefully we can get the win this week."



PREVIEW

Formula One revs up for a three-way title showdown

McLaren's Norris leads Red Bull's Verstappen by 12 points; Piastri a further four behind; Verstappen can match Schumacher's five in a row

Reuters Abu Dhabi

ormula One will crown its champion in Abu Dhabi on Sunday with McLaren's Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri both seeking to dethrone Red Bull's Max Verstappen and deny the Dutchman his fifth title in a row.

Norris is favourite in the threeway showdown, 12 points clear of Verstappen and needing 'only' to finish on the podium at Yas Marina whoever wins on what could be a night of high drama.

The last season before the start of a fresh era for the sport, and the expansion to 11 teams with new rules and engines, has been one of comebacks and shocks for all three contenders and none can be counted out.

All have seven wins each, all capable of adding to that tally and ready to deliver an edge-ofseat sunset finale that might have come straight out of Brad Pitt's recent F1 movie blockbuster.

All have also suffered the agony of race retirements due to collisions or crashes.

Norris, winner of the opener in Melbourne last March, was 34 points behind Piastri at the end of August but turned his fortunes around with a hot streak while the Australian stalled.

He won in Abu Dhabi from pole last year, after losing a title battle with Verstappen.

"It's been an incredible season. We have an incredible car. I'm proud of everyone in the team. Thank you to all of our fans. We've got one more race, and we'll give it everything," he said.

Piastri, leading from Saudi Arabia in April to Mexico in October, had looked set for Australia's first championship since Alan Jones 45 vears ago but is now 16 points behind his teammate.

He needs to win or finish second and hope for a twist in the tale -twice this century the driver who was third overall going into the final round has come out on top.



McLaren's Oscar Piastri celebrates after qualifying in pole position with second-placed McLaren's Lando Norris and third-placed Red Bull's Max Verstappen at the Qatar Grand Prix in Lusail, Qatar, on November 29. (Reuters)

Verstappen, who can join Michael Schumacher as the only drivers to take five titles in a row, could be on for the most astonishing comeback of all after being 104 points behind Piastri in late

"We stay in the fight until the end," grinned the Dutchman after winning in Qatar last weekend, following on from victory in Las Vegas the Saturday before that.

Abu Dhabi has been a happy hunting ground for him in the past, with four wins in a row at the anti-clockwise circuit until last

Another win, with Norris not on

the podium, would suffice. McLaren had both their cars disqualified in Las Vegas and threw away a win for Piastri and podium for Norris in Qatar thanks to bungled strategy. Surely the runaway constructors' champions, with the second highest single-season points tally of all time, can't let slip through their fingers a first title double since

PRIZEMONEY AND PADDOCK **PECKING ORDER**

While the title drama plays out, others will be chasing prizemoney and points to improve their place in the paddock pecking order.

Mercedes and Red Bull are fighting for second place, although the former look likely to prevail with George Russell and Kimi Antonelli given the latter team's reliance on Verstappen.

The race will be a final outing for Japan's Yuki Tsunoda at Red Bull, his seat handed to Frenchman Isack Hadjar for next season, and engine partners Honda before switching to Aston Martin.

Ferrari have one last chance to win a race in 2025 while seventimes world champion Lewis Hamilton is facing a first season without even standing on the po-

Sauber, in their last race before becoming the factory Audi team and with Nico Hulkenberg making his 250th start, are only five points behind eighth-placed Haas who are in turn seven adrift of Aston Martin.

Renault-owned Alpine competing for the last time with Renault engines before a switch to Mercedes power. For Argentine driver Franco Colapinto that means one last attempt to score his first point of the campaign.

FOCUS

Serena denies she plans tennis return despite registering for drug tests

London

erena Williams insisted she had no plans to make a return to tennis after her registration with the sport's drug-testing body sparked reports of a dramatic comeback.

The 23-time Grand Slam singles champion has not competed since a third-round loss at the 2022 US Open left her one short of the all-time record of 24 Grand Slam singles titles, held by Margaret Court in the women's game and Novak Djokovic in men's tennis.

"It is correct that she is back on the Registered Testing Pool list," Adrian Bassett, a spokesman for the the International Tennis Integrity Agency, the sport's drug-testing body told AFP in London on Tuesday in response to media reports the 44-year-old American had registered.

"At this stage we have no other information."

But Williams denied she was planning a return to competitive tennis by posting later Tuesday on X: "Omg (Oh My God) yall (you all) I'm NOT coming back. This wildfire is crazy".

Following her three-set defeat by Australia's Ajla Tomljanovic at Flushing Meadows three years ago, Williams said she did not want to use the word "retiring" but instead explained she was "evolving" away from



Players who decide to return to testing need to provide information about their time and locations when they are available to give samples.

They also need to complete testing for six months before they are allowed to return to competition.

Williams's older sister, Venus, - seven times major singles champion - returned to tennis in July at the age of 45 after almost two years away from the Women's Tennis Association tour.

When Venus, a seven-time major singles champion, came back at the DC Open, she spoke about wishing Serena would join her on tour again. The sisters won 14 Grand Slam doubles titles as a pair and three Olympic gold medals as well.

"I keep saying to my team: The only thing that would make this better is if she was here," said Venus at the time. "Like, we always did everything together, so of course I miss her.

"But if she comes back, I'm sure she'll let y'all know."

New Zealand medley gun **Clareburt makes Melbourne move**

Former 400m individual medley world champion Lewis Clareburt will leave his native New Zealand to train under coach Jolyon Finck at Melbourne's Nunawading Swimming Club as he targets a maiden Olympic medal at Los Angeles 2028.

The 26-year-old Wellington swimmer, who won the 2024 world title in a depleted field at Doha and took world bronze at Gwangju in 2019, will join Finck's programme with other medley specialists. Men's medley swimming has been dominated by French sensation Leon Marchand, who trains in Texas under master coach Bob Bowman and swept the 200 and 400 medley golds at his home Paris Olympics. World record holder Marchand also swept the 200 and 400 world titles for a third time in Singapore this year, following his sweeps in 2022 and 2023.

Bowman, the former coach of Michael Phelps, prepared Carson Foster in his Texas University programme before the American took bronze in the 400m at Paris. Clareburt said Finck, who worked with top British swimmer James Guy, was looking to develop a school of medley swimmers able to rival the best in the United States.

"We're looking to create a really strong medley training group in Melhourne "Clareburt said in a statement vesterday "At the moment there's a really successful medley training group in

the US and they're winning all the medals internationally. "If medley swimmers from Australia and New Zealand want to be on the podium we need to have a similar group in the southern hemisphere and that's what we're looking to set up."

GOLF

McIlroy headlines as Australian Open goes back to basics at Royal Melbourne

Melbourne

ith five-times major champion Rory McIlroy leading the field and a return to Royal Melbourne for the first time since 1991, there is a genuine sense of excitement about the 108th playing of the Australian Open. Golf Australia earlier this year dumped the groundbreaking mixed men's, women's and all-abilities format that was introduced in 2022, leaving Australia's oldest and most prestigious tournament once again the sole centre of attention.

The tournament, which these days is co-sanctioned by the DP World Tour, counts golfing greats Greg Norman, Tom Watson, Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player among its former winners. Masters champion McIlroy al-

ready has his name etched on the Stonehaven Cup after beating Adam Scott in a playoff at Royal Sydney in 2013 and the Northern Irishman said he was excited to be back in Australia.

"It hasn't been a secret that I've wanted to come back... (and) the change in the format, going back to the traditional Australian Open has probably helped," he told reporters on Wednesday, ahead of Thursday's opening round.

"It just feels like this country is starved of top level golf. Obviously, you've had Presidents Cups come down here and you've had a lot of good players still come through, but maybe just not on a consistent basis.

"And I think a market like this,



Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy looks down the fairway during the Pro-Am ahead of the Australian Open at the Royal Melbourne Golf Club in Melbourne. (AFP)

with amazing fans and the history that it does have, probably deserves more of a consistency of

big players and big tournaments." Major winners Cam Smith and Scott are expected to lead the home charge to get the Stonehaven Cup back into Australian hands for the first time since Matt Jones won his second title in 2019.

Min Woo Lee and Karl Vilips, a PGA Tour winner in his rookie season, are other local contenders, while Britain's former Masters champion Danny Willett and 2023 Australian Open winner Joaquin Niemann are among the international challengers.

Former Masters champion Scott won the title in 2009 but said to win it at the world-renowned

sandbelt course would be extra special.

"I think winning the Aussie Open at Royal Melbourne has one of those asterisks next to it, where it's just that little bit more meaningful," the 45-year-old said.

Former British Open champion Smith, who has endured a horror run of form in recent months, was one of the main critics of the mixed tournament, arguing that conditions had been made easier to help the women.

"There was a lot of back-andforth throughout the last couple of years, and I think everyone's pretty happy with the result," he said.

"Everyone's talking about the determination. Aussie Open again, which is what we wanted?

HORSE RACING

Al-Attiyah's Estoori dominates late to retain Bu Samrah Cup

By Sports Reporter

eshaal bin Ali al-Attivah's Estoori retained the Bu Samrah Cup for the second consecutive year with a strong forward-running display at the Al Ravvan Racecourse vesterday. Mohammed Balasim al-Iumaili-trained

six-year-old bay horse raced prominently throughout before launching his move in the home straight, striking the front and drawing clear under Fayos Martin Borja for an impressive two-length victory in the Local Thoroughbred Handicap (45-65) race for the threeyear-old+ over 1,700m. With the win Martin Borja also completed a double on the day.

Estoori raced prominently throughout, adopting a forwardrunning style that kept him in the perfect stalking position. He tracked the early pace set by Nadiraha, with Barkt Al Majd positioned between them as the field made its way through the opening stages. Approaching the home turn, Estoori improved smoothly into second before launching his challenge upon straightening. He swept to the front early in the home straight, but was met with an immediate threat from Suheal Qatar, who produced a strong run from midfield to draw alongside and briefly test the defending champion. Inside the final 100m, Estoori displayed his class and

Responding decisively to Borja's urging, he kicked clear from



Jockey Fayos Martin Borja guided Estoori to the Bu Samrah Cup win. **PICTURE:** Juhaim

his challenger and put the race to bed with authority, securing a comfortable two-length victory. Suheal Qatar, representing Ateeq Hamad Ateeq al-Marri for trainer Abdulaziz Hamad al-Marri under Saleh Salem al-Marri, finished a clear second after his bold effort.

A long way back, Al Gamamah. racing for and trained by Ibrahim Saeed Ibrahim al-Malki with Ivan Rossi aboard, finished best of the rest to take third, though still a huge 12 lengths behind the runner-up.

RESULTS Bu Samrah Cup

WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

1 - BU SAMRAH CUP - LOCAL THOROUGHBRED HANDICAP

45-65 (Class 4) Estoori, Mohammed Balasim al-

Jumaili, Fayos Martin Borja 2 - Purebred Arabian Show **Horses & Mares**

Malhouf Al Mushlah, Abdulla Dhabit Aldosari, Salman Fahad al-Hajri 3 - Local Purebred Arabian **Handicap (65-85)** Za'eer Al Shahania, Eng

Osama Omer al-Dafea, Faleh

Bughenaim

4 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (55-75) Azzam FBR, Fahad Rashid Al

Khayarin al-Hajri, Abdulla Rashid al-Hairi

5 - Thoroughbred Handicap (50-70)

Future Man, Mohd Ahmed Mohd Hasan al-Sulaiti, Fayos Martin 6 - Purebred Arabian Maiden

AJS Al Ruwais, Abdulrahman Mohammed Abdulwahed, Szczepan Mazur

7 - Local Thoroughbred **Maiden Plate** Al Deebil. Mohammed al-

Ghazali, Marco Casamento 8 - Local Purebred Arabian

Maiden Plate Chakib, Mohammed Hassan al-Matwi, Salman Fahad al-Hajri

FIFA ARAB CUP



I love playing in Qatar, says Saudi Arabia's al-Shehri

'THAT WAS BECAUSE MY FATHER IS A MILITARY GUY. HE USED TO TAKE ME SHOOTING WHEN I WAS YOUNG'

aleh al-Shehri has returned to the shooting range and there are plenty of targets left for the veteran forward — and son a of a military man — to hit.

Back in the land where he played a pivotal role in one of the most stunning FIFA World Cup upsets in many years, the Saudi Arabia marksman has already found an early bullseye at Qatar 2025.

Three years ago, it was at Lusail Stadium where he scored a stunning leveller as the Green Falcons got their talons into eventual champions Argentina and didn't let go.

On Tuesday, the Al Ittihad forward rose from the bench at Education City Stadium to grab the winner as Saudi Arabia downed Oman 2-1 to make a positive start at the FIFA Arab Cup.

As al-Shehri told FIFA postmatch, he's more than happy to play in Qatar as often as possible.

"It feels amazing. I love playing here in Qatar," he said. "Even though, in our second World Cup match here at this sta-

World Cup match here at this stadium we had some trouble when we lost against Poland, I guess now I love this stadium again!" Given a string of stunning upsets, with Egypt battling to a first-up draw and both Qatar and Tunisia losing their opening encounters, to kick off the regional showpiece, al-Shehri knows just how important it was that his side got off to a winning start.

"It's a very important win, especially given it's the first game of the groups and three points gives you a good start to the competition," he added.

"Honestly, personally, I know all about these competitions and every team that comes here is a very good team. So, if you don't respect all the teams, you're going to face some trouble. You see Oman qualified from the play-offs but they played a really big game here."

He's also keenly aware that this year more than any other, with a World Cup on the horizon, it's vital that Saudi Arabia perform well.

"Thank God we scored twice and got the three points. That's the most important thing for now but our target here is clear and that is that we have come to compete for the title.

"Firstly we have to get out of the group stage and then we will see but this is an important tournament for our nation."

Having swept home a cross from the outstanding Salem al-Dawsari just five minutes after his second-half introduction, al-Shehri produced, as he always does, his trademark shooting celebration to mark the occasion.

As he explained to FIFA, it's a nod to his childhood and one he plans to keep producing for many more years yet, including ideally at next year's global showpiece where he's hoping that the Green Falcons manage to avoid Argentina at this week's draw.

"It's so hard to choose which teams we would like to play (at the World Cup) because there are so many and so many good nations but it's exciting to see where we'll be based and who we can play.... just honestly not Argentina again please!" he said.

"As for the goal celebration? Oh, that goes right back to my child-hood. That was because my father is a military guy. He used to take me shooting when I was young.

"I guess I was pretty good, luckily I never really made any mistakes there – it was a government place so all secure – and my father has been a really crucial part of my career so I celebrate with him by doing this every time."



Saudi Arabia's Saleh al-Shehri celebrates scoring their second goal against Oman during the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2025 Group B match at the Education City Stadium in Doha on Tuesday. (*Reuters*)

SPOTLIGHT

Man United boss Amorim 'protects' himself from abuse

AFP Manchester

anchester United manager Ruben Amorim has revealed he ignores social media to protect himself from abuse, even if it means losing out on lu-

crative sponsorship contracts.

The Portuguese coach has endured a rollercoaster first year in charge at Old Trafford.

United finished 15th in the Premier League last season – their worst top-flight campaign since being relegated in 1973/74 – and failed to qualify for European competition.

Results have slightly improved recently to lift Amorim's men into seventh place ahead of West Ham's visit today. The 40-year-old said online abuse was now expected for top-level managers and he avoids the platforms to shield himself and his family.

"I don't read it. I protect myself," he told a pre-match press conference yesterday.

"I don't watch TV when they talk about Manchester United. Not because I don't agree, most of the time I do. But it is a way of me being healthy.

"It's enough when we lose, when we draw or when I know we've played bad, my feeling as a coach is enough. I don't need other feelings around the club.

"The only way is to protect myself. Of course I lose money in sponsorships. On Instagram I



could win a lot of money. "But the quality of my life and protection of my family, the way I can live a normal life into the work it. Some more

mal life is not worth it. Some more dollars or pounds is not worth it." United forward Matheus Cunha is set to return from injury today in

a timely boost ahead of the hectic

festive fixture schedule.

The Brazilian missed the last two games just as he was beginning to find his feet at Old Trafford after signing from Wolves in June.

"He has more levels to go," added Amorim. "He is at a different club with different pressure, but I

think he copes with that well.

"He was struggling (at the start)

because he was not scoring and he was thinking too much about the numbers. "The influence he has in the team is so important but I think Cunha has so much to grow defensively and offensively."

United still have Harry Maguire and Benjamin Sesko sidelined by injury.

FIFA gives clubs an extra week before releasing AFCON stars

AFP Paris

tar players such as Mohamed Salah, Bryan Mbeumo and Achraf Hakimi will be able to play for their clubs for an extra week until December 15 before joining their national teams at the Africa Cup of Nations, FIFA said yesterday.

Top European clubs such as Salah's Liverpool, Mbeumo's Manchester United and Hakimi's Paris Saint-Germain face losing key players for up to five weeks for the 24-nation tournament in Morocco from December 21 to January 18.

But they had feared it could be even longer until FIFA amended its rules to soften the blow for clubs by delaying the release date by a week.

The decision came after "fruitful consultations led by FIFA with key stakeholders and thanks to the spirit of solidarity demonstrated by CAF to reduce the impact on various parties," FIFA said in a statement, referring to the tournament organisers, the Confederation of African Football.

"It was also decided to encourage member associations participating in the 2025 AFCON and clubs releasing players... to engage in good faith bilateral discussions in order to find appropriate individual solutions," FIFA added.

Before FIFA's ruling, players

had been required to show up for international duty by December 8, meaning that English Premier League clubs could have been without vital players for up to seven or even eight league matches during a particularly busy part of the season.

The competition falls at an awkward moment for the likes of high-flying Sunderland and rock-bottom Wolverhampton Wanderers who could be without up to seven and five players respectively.

Liverpool will be without Egypt forward Salah, Manchester City will have to do without his international team-mate Omar Marmoush and Algeria's left-back Rayan Ait-Nouri, while United will lose Cameroon's Mbeumo, Ivory Coast winger Amad Diallo and Morocco full-back Noussair Mazraoui.

On the other hand, league leaders Arsenal, Chelsea and Leeds will be unaffected.

French and European champions PSG will lose Hakimi, the reigning African player of the year, but other European giants such as Real Madrid, Barcelona, AC Milan and Juventus will not see any players involved.

Bayern Munich's Senegal forward Nicolas Jackson, on loan from Chelsea, will be at the tournament but will not miss many Bundesliga games as the league will be on its winter break from December 22 to January 8.

Morocco, Egypt, Algeria and Senegal are amongst the tournament favourites.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Germany to host 2029 women's Euros

AFP

AFP Nyon, Switzerland

uropean football's governing body UEFA yesterday announced that Germany will host the women's 2029 European Championship, where England will be the two-time defending champions.

Germany, the record eighttime winners of the Euros, beat off competition from Poland and a joint Sweden-Denmark bid, and will host the tournament for the third time, just five years after doing so for the men's Euros.

It is a measure of compensation for Germany, who missed out on hosting the 2027 women's World Cup when FIFA picked Brazil instead. "Incredible! A dream come true. After 2001, we are once again hosting a Women's EURO in Germany," German football federation (DFB) vice-president for women's and girls' football Heike Ullrich said.

In its bid, Germany had vowed to help women's football realise its "enormous potential".

The eight host stadiums include Munich's 70,000-capacity Allianz Arena, Dortmund's 66,000-capacity Westfalenstadion and five more stadiums with between 45,000 and 54,000 capacities.

Germany believes it will be able to sell more than a million tickets to the 31 matches – compared to 657,291 for this year's tournament in Switzerland. "We are totally convinced that the tournament in Germany will attract more than a million fans," DFB president Bernd Neuendorf said, adding he felt sure the tournament would generate a profit "for the first time".

Germany highlighted its central European position and strong public transport links in its bid.

Sustainability has become a key issue in bidding processes for major events, given the damaging environmental impact of such tournaments. Switzerland boasted that 86 percent of ticket holders for its tournament used either public transport, bicycles or walked to reach their venues.

"Hosting such an important tournament is an honour, but it also comes with a great responsibility," Neuendorf added. "After the wonderful UEFA Women's EURO 2025 in Switzerland, we want to set new standards."



UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin shows the name of Germany, elected to host the UEFA Women's Euro 2029 during an announcement ceremony at the UEFA headquarters, in Nyon yesterday. (AFP)

Bundesliga strugglers Mainz sack coach Henriksen

Bundesliga club Mainz yesterday sacked coach Bo Henriksen, with the side stranded at the bottom of the table after just one win this season. The 50-year-old Dane took over Mainz in February 2024 with the club nine points from safety and beat the odds to keep them in the top flight, losing just two of their final 13 games. Henriksen took Mainz to sixth in the table, the equal best placing in their history, securing them a Conference League spot. In the top flight since 2009-10, Mainz have been a proving ground for top coaches. Former Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp and current England boss Thomas Tuchel started out at Mainz, while Bayer Leverkusen manager Kasper Hjulmand began his Bundesliga career with them.

Olmo out for month after shoulder disclocation

Barcelona midfielder Dani Olmo faces a month on the sidelines after dislocating his shoulder, the club said yesterday. "Olmo suffered a dislocation in his left shoulder during yesterday's match against Atletico Madrid," said Barca in a statement. "Following the tests carried out, a conservative treatment has been chosen. The approximate recovery time is one month."

Spain international Olmo suffered the injury falling as he scored in the 3-1 La Liga win over Atletico on Tuesday which took Barca four points clear at the top of the table. The 27-year-old has suffered various injury problems since joining the Catalan giants in 2024 from RR Leipzig