

To subscribe  
**GULF TIMES**  
Newspaper  
Please call  
**444 666 35**



**CRICKET | Page 2**

Suryakumar says  
Gill and Pandya  
fit for T20 series  
against S Africa



**MOTORSPORT | Page 3**

Piastri looking  
forward to sun  
and cricket after  
tough F1 season

To advertise here,  
PLEASE CALL  
**444 666 21**

Tuesday, December 9, 2025  
Jumada II 18, 1447 AH

**GULF TIMES**

**SPORT**

**FIFA ARAB CUP  
QATAR 2025**

REVIEW

# Qatar’s early Arab Cup exit sparks World Cup concerns

By **Sahan Bidappa**  
Doha

With just over six months before their 2026 FIFA World Cup opener, Qatar find themselves back at the drawing board. Julen Lopetegui’s side crashed out of the Arab Cup group stage on Sunday after a 0-3 drubbing by ten-man Tunisia at Al Bayt Stadium, completing a winless campaign that also included a shock loss to Palestine and a draw against Syria.

The early exit – Qatar finished bottom of Group A with just one point, scoring only once and conceding five – has stalled momentum at a critical stage of the Asian champions’ preparation cycle for next year’s global showpiece, which will be co-hosted by US, Canada and Mexico.



Qatar coach Julen Lopetegui cut an increasingly frustrated figure on the touchline during the Arab Cup. (Reuters)



Qatar made an early exit from the Arab Cup, finishing bottom of Group A with just one point, scoring only once and conceding five.

attack often fades, a problem repeatedly highlighted throughout the tournament.

If Lopetegui intended to experiment, he might have been better served resting Afif entirely and using the opportunity to blood emerging options such as 24-year-old Al Saliya winger Khaled Ali.

Lopetegui made five further changes for the Tunisia match in another major reshuffle, but the adjustments brought little improvement. Even after Tunisia were reduced to ten men, Qatar conceded a late third, which left the home fans in frustration.

**LOPETEGUI UNDER PRESSURE**

The Spanish coach cut an increasingly agitated figure on the touchline and in press conferences, particularly after the draw against Syria left Qatar on the brink of elimination. His irritation contrasted sharply with Saudi Arabia’s Herve Renard, who briefly left Qatar to attend the World Cup draw in Washington before returning to guide his side to the quarter-finals.

“We did not perform at the required level,” Lopetegui admitted after the Tunisia defeat. “We made many mistakes, both individually and collectively. We were

hoping to qualify, especially with the great fan support, but the performance was not enough.”

Still, the coach pointed to Qatar’s historic qualification for the 2026 World Cup as evidence of progress. “From the moment I arrived, we achieved something incredible – something that had never happened in the country’s history. We were very proud and very happy,” he said.

Lopetegui also defended his decision to introduce several new players due to injuries and long-term planning. “We added many new players to the squad for different reasons – injuries, choices, and to open opportunities for young players. This is important for the future of the national team. But at the same time, we must continue competing well,” he said.

But the Arab Cup exposed the risks of those choices. Key veterans – including Boualem Khoukhi, Karim Boudiaf and Pedro Miguel – were left out, while midfield anchor Assim Madibo was ruled out through injury. Without their

experience, Qatar looked disjointed.

**WORLD CUP OPPONENTS ALREADY TARGETING QATAR**

The World Cup draw adds further urgency to Qatar’s situation. Al Annabi will face co-hosts Canada, Switzerland and potentially Italy – the four-time world champions – who must navigate a playoff path involving Northern Ireland, Wales and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

With a squad comprised entirely of players from Qatari clubs, Qatar remain something of an unknown quantity for many. Following the draw, Canada’s coach Jesse Marsch described Qatar as “a challenging but winnable opponent,” emphasising the need for detailed analysis. “We’ll spend a heavy amount of preparation on Switzerland and Qatar,” he said.

Marsch even took advantage of a rare chance to scout a World Cup opponent live, attending Qatar’s defeat to Tunisia at Al Bayt Stadium on Sunday. “You don’t get too many chances to watch your op-

ponents live before a World Cup,” he said before travelling. “I am flying to Qatar to watch them against Tunisia... so I’ll be sitting in coach on the flight, and if anyone wants to join me, I’ll be there to watch Qatar.”

Switzerland coach Murat Yakin called the group “attractive and manageable” but admitted Qatar are difficult to assess due to their fluctuating performances and Lopetegui’s evolving squad.

For Qatar, the Arab Cup was meant to be a timely gauge of readiness before facing higher-ranked opposition on the global stage. Instead, it revealed deep concerns: a lack of identity, cohesion and leadership, all that requires rapid correction.

Lopetegui has stressed the need for a thorough internal review. “This Arab Cup revealed aspects that must be corrected,” he said. In 2022, Qatar lost all three matches at their home World Cup, exiting in ignominy. Lopetegui and his squad must ensure they do not repeat the same fate six months from now in North America.

FOOTBALL

# Berkaoui’s first-half strike sends Morocco to quarters

Saudi Arabia also qualify for last eight despite defeat, Oman beat Comoros but still suffer elimination

By **Sports Reporter**  
Doha

On another thrilling day of action in the FIFA Arab Cup, Morocco defeated Saudi Arabia 1-0 at the Lusail Stadium yesterday to top Group B and reach the quarter-finals. The Saudis, who missed a penalty, had already secured their progress to the knockout stages. Elsewhere, Oman needed victory over Comoros and for Morocco to lose to the Saudis to seal an unlikely qualification. They fulfilled their end of the bargain with a 2-1 victory but the result elsewhere ensured their elimination.

Requiring a draw to progress, Morocco secured their passage to the quarter-finals with victory over Saudi Arabia, who missed a penalty in the second half.

The Green Falcons held their own after making multiple changes following their prior progress to the knockouts following back-to-back victories. Herve Renard’s men came close to breaking the deadlock in the sixth minute when a looping header from Saleh Abu al-Shamat flew over Morocco goalkeeper El Mehdi Benabid and clipped the crossbar.

With a place in the quarter-finals at stake, Morocco immediately fought back and took the lead after Tarik Tissoudali laid the ball off to Karim El Berkaoui, who finished under intense pressure from the Saudi defence.

Saudi Arabia refused to give up and were awarded a penalty midway through the second half following a foul by Amin Zahzouh on substitute Abdullah al-Hamdan, who attempted a Panenka but chipped the resulting spot kick over the bar.



Morocco’s Karim El Berkaoui celebrates after scoring against Saudi Arabia during the group stage match at the Lusail Stadium. (Reuters)

**OMAN EXIT DESPITE VICTORY OVER COMOROS**

At the Stadium 974, Oman needing to not just win but also chase goals wasted little time in setting about that task.

Within the first half hour alone, Issam al-Sabhi twice failed to hit the target from close range, Zahir al-Aghbari

forced a pair of saves from Comoros keeper Ali Ahamada and Jameel al-Yahmadi also blazed wide.

When the goal did eventually come, it was not a moment that Ahamada will remember fondly as he attempted to dribble past Al Sabhi inside the six-yard box, was duly dispossessed and watched on as



Oman’s Issam al-Sabhi scores against Comoros at the Stadium 974. (Reuters)

the Omani forward tucked home into an empty goal.

A swooping header just shy of the break doubled al-Sabhi and Oman’s advantage before things swung unexpectedly in Comoros’ favour after the resumption.

Firstly a delightful solo effort from Nas-suir Hamidou saw them peg one back be-

fore several late chances were squandered in an entertaining finale to a campaign that saw the debutants ultimately end with three straight defeats.

Oman depart with four points and at something of a crossroads ahead of the start of qualification for the next FIFA World Cup.



TWENTY20

# Suryakumar says Gill and Pandya fit for series opener

‘HIS PRESENCE WILL DEFINITELY GIVE A GOOD BALANCE TO THE SIDE’



India captain Suryakumar Yadav addressed the media yesterday, on the eve of the T20I against South Africa in Cuttack.

Reuters  
Cuttack

Top-order batter Shubman Gill and all-rounder Hardik Pandya are fit and available for today's T20 series opener against South Africa, India captain Suryakumar Yadav said on the eve of the match. Gill, who had been thrown out of action with a neck injury sustained during the opening test against the Proteas, was included in the T20 squad for the five-match series subject to his fitness. Pandya, who has been active in domestic cricket, is set to return to action after suffering a quadriceps injury in September.

"Both are looking healthy and fit," Suryakumar told reporters in Cuttack yesterday. Pandya's availability gave the team flexibility in terms of team combination, he said. "What you saw in the Asia Cup also, when he was bowling with the new ball, he opened up a lot of options, combinations for us with respect to the playing eleven," Suryakumar said. "That's what he brings to the table. His experience, the way he has done well in all big games... I think that experience will count a lot and his presence will definitely give a good balance to the side." With Gill back in the top order, wicketkeeper-batter Sanju Sam-

son looks locked in a battle with Jitesh Sharma for a middle-order slot. "Sanju, when he came into the circuit, he batted higher up the order," Suryakumar said. While Samson seemed the first-choice wicketkeeper for the T20 World Cup, the inclusion of Shubman Gill from the Asia Cup onwards has changed the dynamics. Having started the Suryakumar-Gautam Gambhir tenure as an opener, he had made way for Samson, as India's priority lay on Tests. After a season-best IPL, Gill duly took the spot at the top with his childhood friend Abhishek, with Samson moved to the middle-order in the UAE and Australia

before losing the spot to Jitesh by the end of the tour. For a team that has gone about handing role clarity in the most commendable ways in T20s, the message to Samson seems clear too. That he would have to bat in the middle-order. "Now the thing is, other than the openers, everyone has to be flexible. He did really well when he opened the innings but Shubman had played before him in the Sri Lanka series, so he deserves to take that spot. "But we gave Sanju opportunities. He was ready to bat at any number... Both (Samson and Jitesh) are in the scheme of things... both can do all the roles. It's an asset to the team and a good headache to have."

SPOTLIGHT

## Shakib wants home farewell series before ending career

Reuters  
Dhaka

Former Bangladesh captain Shakib Al Hasan wants to return home to play a match in all three formats before ending his international career, the 38-year-old said. Considered the greatest cricketer ever produced by Bangladesh, Shakib left the country after the toppling of the Sheikh Hasina-led government last year. The all-rounder had been a member of parliament for the Awami League led by Hasina, whose 15-year rule as prime minister ended with her fleeing to India following deadly protests. "I am officially not retired from all formats," Shakib said on the Beard Before Wicket podcast on Sunday. "This is the first time I'll be revealing that. My plan is to go back to Bangladesh, play one full series of ODI, test, and T20, and retire. "I mean, (I can) retire from all formats in a series ... I want to play a whole series and retire. That's what I want." Shakib has not played international cricket since his 71st Test in India last year, after



which he announced his retirement from T20 Internationals. He then requested to play a farewell test at home in the series against South Africa but the interim government was unable to guarantee his safety due to his political past. The all-rounder said been playing franchise cricket around the world in the hopes he will be able to play for Bangladesh again. "I am hopeful. That's why I'm playing (T20 leagues). I think it will happen," he added.

## England woes deepen as Australia A hammer Lions by an innings

England's cricketing woes deepened yesterday when their second-tier team crashed to Australia A by an innings and 127 runs, emphasising the tourists' alarming lack of depth. With England losing the first two Tests in Perth and Brisbane, it was a chance for a host of players to shine and make their case to selectors. Young middle-order batsman Asa Tribe, 21, was the pick of the bunch with an unbeaten 129 in the second innings total of 295. Test aspirant Jacob Bethell made 71 and could be an option to replace the under-performing Ollie Pope in the third Test at Adelaide next week. Billed as the only "unofficial

Test" of England's Ashes tour, the Lions won the toss and chose to bat at Allan Border Field in Brisbane. But they were skittled for 166 with Australian Test bowler Jhye Richardson taking 4-35 as he battles back from injuries. In reply, Australia A racked up 588-8 declared with Nathan McSweeney pushing his claims for a Test recall with a superb unbeaten 226. England spinner Shoaib Bashir, overlooked for the Ashes losses in Perth and Brisbane, conceded 115 in a wicketless 25 overs. England's back-up fast bowlers Josh Tongue and Matthew Potts did not play.

(AFP)

FOCUS

## Golf, beaches and nap-time: beaten England focus on R+R

Reuters  
Melbourne

Though 2-0 down in the Ashes after less than six days' cricket, England will put away their playing kit to take a mini-break in the south Queensland resort town of Noosa before turning their focus to the do-or-die Test in Adelaide next week. England's laid-back buildup to the tour and shunning of practice matches has been viewed dimly by old-school players who queried whether the team was ready for a pink ball match before their eight-wicket thrashing by Australia at the Gabba. Head coach Brendon McCullum conceded team management may indeed have got things wrong, but more for training too hard than too little. That will be remedied over the next two days in a long-planned break on the idyllic Sunshine Coast north of Brisbane. Having hit Western Australia's golf links before being beaten by eight wickets in Perth, England's

enthusiasts will have access to a selection of championship courses to play a round before a refreshing dip in the Pacific Ocean. "We've got a couple days in Noosa so we can spend some time together more casually and let the dust settle on what has been a pretty intense couple of weeks and start to plot and plan our way back into the series," McCullum told host broadcaster Seven Network. While the cricket has been tough, England players have enjoyed their down-time, with some taking e-scooters for a helmetless ride through Brisbane streets. England pace bowler Jofra Archer knows the value of good rest, having brought a pillow to the Gabba before day three. Archer's nap-time may have been pushed back a bit when Mitchell Starc scored 77 and the Australian tail hung on for most of the day's play to rack up 511. "There's a great saying that I know - are you going to 'train to train' or are you going to train to dominate?" said England captain Ben Stokes. For the moment, all of

the worries about England's batting, bowling and fielding can be put aside. Questions such as: Whether Ollie Pope should, or even can, be a number three test batter, why Harry Brook continues to throw away his wicket and whether spinner Shoaib Bashir can even be considered for Adelaide after going wicketless for 115 runs in the England Lions match against Australia A in Brisbane. England put down five catches in Australia's first innings at the Gabba. Post-match, Stokes wondered why England kept losing in the pressure moments to Australia. The stakes will be high in Adelaide where England must win to keep the series alive. England fans will wait and see whether the solution to managing pressure is all about decompressing after all. "It's also very important that when you do get the opportunity you are able to go away and refresh your mind, because obviously in Adelaide we need to be physically and mentally very good," said Stokes.

BOTTOMLINE

## Resilient Australia 'adapt on the go' to close in on Ashes glory



Australia's captain Steve Smith (centre) celebrates with teammate Jake Weatherald after hitting the winning runs on day four of the second Ashes Test at The Gabba in Brisbane on Sunday. (AFP)

AFP  
Brisbane

Australia's ability to adapt and rise in key moments has thrust them to the cusp of retaining the Ashes, with Steve Smith saying it is a process they have fine-tuned. The hosts are firmly in the box seat against a ragged England after winning the first two Tests at Perth and Brisbane, both by eight wickets. They head to Adelaide for the third encounter beginning on December 17 planning more of the same to secure the five-Test series for the fourth consecutive time on home soil. The wily Smith, who captained the side in both Tests while Pat Cummins recovered from a back injury, said Australia's experience had come to the fore during crunch periods so far. "We've identified (those) moments in the game and made the most of them," he told reporters. "I think that's one thing this team's done for the last four years. We play 'live'. We adapt on the go, instead of getting back in the sheds and going: 'We should have done this.' "Sometimes it's just playing the long game. I think we've just adapted so well the last couple of years, and played in real time, I suppose." In contrast, England stumbled when it mattered most, leading skipper Ben Stokes to question their mentality under pressure. England are now faced with having to win a near-impossible three Tests in a row. And they have not won a Test on Australian

soil since the 2010-11 series, losing 15 and drawing two. "When we are on top, we are great, and when behind the game we are also very good, but when the moment is neck-and-neck, we are not coming out on top on enough occasions," he said. Marnus Labuschagne pointed to the patient 75-run stand between man-of-the-match Mitchell Starc (77) and Scott Boland (21 not out) for the ninth wicket at the Gabba that helped propel Australia to 511. It ensured a 177-run first innings lead and while England clawed past the deficit, they could only set Australia 65 to win. "I look back on this game and I look at the partnership between Starc and Scott. I look at those moments to get us in the situation where we had the night session (to bowl) on our terms," he said. "We're in a really nice spot where we're just really process-driven, focused on what we need to do to be ready and once again being ready for those big moments in the game." Australia face some selection dilemmas for Adelaide, notably whether to recall veteran opener Usman Khawaja who missed the first two Tests with back issues. In his absence, Travis Head - whose home ground is Adelaide - and Jake Weatherald looked good at the top. Cummins seems certain to return with Brendan Doggett likely to make way, while chief selector George Bailey has said veteran off-spinner Nathan Lyon will play. Lyon was dropped for the day-night Brisbane Test with Australia opting for an all-pace attack. His replacement Michael Neser took 5-42 in England's second innings, but faces missing out.



England's captain Ben Stokes (centre) laughs as he talks with Joe Root (left) and Jofra Archer before the start of day three of the second Ashes Test at The Gabba in Brisbane on Saturday. (AFP)



MOTORSPORT

# Piastri wants sun and cricket after a demanding F1 season

Piastri expects equal terms to continue at McLaren as new engine era and rule set to change next season

Reuters  
Abu Dhabi

Oscar Piastri looked forward to watching Australia beat England at cricket and enjoying some home summer sun after a Formula One season of highs and lows ended in disappointment on Sunday.

The Australian's bid to become his country's first Formula One champion in 45 years fizzled out with third place overall as teammate Lando Norris took the crown in Abu Dhabi on Sunday.

"I'm going back to Australia for a little bit, see my family and friends, give my annual hellos and goodbyes," he told reporters.

"I'm looking forward to some time away from racing, to be honest.

"It's been a long, demanding season. As enjoyable as driving the fastest cars in the world is, a break now and again is always a nice thing. So, I'm just looking forward to not thinking about race cars and spending time with people around me."

Like most of his compatriots, he has been following Australia's Ashes hammering of England - they lead the series 2-0 - and hoped to catch some of the action at the fourth test in his home town Melbourne after Christmas.

"There's part of me that kind of wants the series to still be alive by that point, and part of me that really doesn't," said Piastri.

"So I'll take whatever we can get," he said.

"It's been enjoyable to watch for the last couple of weeks."

Piastri won seven races this season, the same number as Norris and one fewer than Red Bull's Max Verstappen - whose four-year



Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen, McLaren's British driver Lando Norris and McLaren's Australian driver Oscar Piastri stand on the grid ahead of the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix at the Yas Marina Circuit in Abu Dhabi on Sunday. (AFP)

reign as champion ended. Next year sees the start of a new engine era and a major change in the rules, which could rearrange the paddock pecking order and has also brought forward pre-season testing and launches to January.

The season starts in Australia on March 8.

McLaren will begin as double champions, having clinched a second successive constructors' title back in October, and Piastri will have his sights on his teammate's crown.

"Obviously, the new season is not far away so it's going to be im-

portant to enjoy that time off and then come back refreshed with the new challenges for next year," he said.

"He (Norris) has obviously had a great season this year and is a deserving champion, but he's still Lando Norris. It's not like he's become Superman.

"So, I don't think things will change with that. I'm expecting full fairness from the team and equality going forward. I don't have any concerns that that will change at all."

Piastri said he also felt he had become a better driver thanks to

the competition within the team, each driver pushing the other to the limit.

"Sometimes that's been uncomfortable for everyone, but ultimately, yeah, it's been a good thing," he said.

"We've had a lot of discussions through the year and I'm sure we'll have discussions in the off-season about anything we want to do slightly differently for next year.

"But I think at the end of the day, they gave us both as good a chance as the team could have to fairly fight for a world championship, and that's all you can ask for."

## Hamilton plans to bin his phone following nightmare season

**Abu Dhabi:** Seven-times world champion **Lewis Hamilton** plans to throw his phone in the bin as he does not want to speak to anyone when he heads into Formula One's winter break after a nightmare debut season with Ferrari.

The Briton joined the Italian team this season from Mercedes in a highly-anticipated move that paired the sport's most successful driver with its most successful team.

Expectations from the partnership were high, especially after Ferrari finished second in the constructors' standings last year, fuelling hopes that Hamilton could challenge for an unprecedented eighth title.

But the optimism soured and Hamilton has endured one of his worst seasons ever, with the Briton failing to stand on the podium all year for the first time in his career.

He ended the year with three consecutive first phase qualifying exits and has cut an increasingly frustrated figure.

On Saturday, he said he felt an "unbearable amount of anger and rage" after qualifying 16th for the Abu Dhabi finale.

"At the moment I'm only looking forward to the break, just to disconnecting, not speaking to anyone," said the 40-year-old despite recovering to an eighth-place finish in Sunday's season-ending race.

"No one will be able to get in touch with me this winter. I won't have my phone with me and I'm looking forward to that. Com-



pletely unplug from the matrix. "I've generally always had it around. But this time, it's going in the freaking bin."

Hamilton's teammate Charles Leclerc, who finished fifth overall but raced to seven podiums, has struck an equally frustrated tone at Ferrari's winless season.

The Monegasque said next season, with radical rule changes offering the chance of a reset, was Ferrari's "now or never" moment.

The team, who enjoyed years of dominance with German great Michael Schumacher in the early 2000s, last won a drivers' championship with Kimi Raikkonen in 2007.

They ended the season fourth in the overall standings. Ferrari team boss Fred Vasseur played down his drivers' comments.

"It doesn't matter if you are first or 10th, I think the debrief today at Alpine, at Williams, at Red Bull, or with us, it's the same," said the Frenchman. "We are just trying to do a better job."

GOLF

# Matsuyama edges past Noren in playoff to win Hero World Challenge

Reuters  
Bahamas

Japan's Hideki Matsuyama outlasted Alex Noren of Sweden in a one-hole playoff to win the Hero World Challenge on Sunday at Albany Golf Course in The Bahamas.

Both players closed with sparkling 8-under-par 64s to finish regulation tied at 22-under 266 before Matsuyama ended it with a laser-tight birdie on the extra hole.

In the playoff, Matsuyama hit a 9-iron that landed a couple of feet from the flag on the 18th hole. Noren had a 20-foot putt that slid left, and Matsuyama tapped in for the title.

When asked what his best shot of the tournament was, Matsuyama had a straightforward answer: the second shot in the playoff.

"Couldn't make (a) birdie putt on 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18," Matsuyama said through an interpreter. "So we decided (to) go right at it."

Austria's Sepp Straka, who entered Sunday with a one-stroke lead, posted 68 and birdied the last hole to finish solo third at 21 under. World No 1 Scottie Scheffler (68) and J J Spaun (65) shared fourth at 20 under, while England's Justin Rose (66) took sixth at 18 under and Canada's Corey Connors (65) was 17 under.

"It was a good week," Straka said after the round. "Came into the week really just trying to see where my game was after working on my swing a little bit in the offseason, working on a few things. Still feels a little bit like a work in progress, but it always is. So really happy with the progress we've made over the offseason and yeah, looking forward to continuing to work to the start of next season."

The small, elite field produced low numbers all week, but Matsuyama completed a bogey-free final round highlighted by a momentum-swinging hole-out eagle from 116 yards on the par-4 10th to catch Straka for a share of the lead.

Matsuyama credited watching Noren, his playing partner, hit a similar shot to helping set up his eagle.

"No 10, to win we (needed at least) a birdie," Matsuyama said. "Before he hits the second shot, Alex hits (a) really good shot and I was able to - yeah, I got the great imagination from Alex and (was) able to hit a great shot."



Winner Hideki Matsuyama of Japan poses with the trophy after putting in to win on the 18th green in a playoff during the final round of the Hero World Challenge 2025 at Albany Golf Course in Nassau, Bahamas. (AFP)

Scheffler's bid for a third straight win at the event unravelled on the back nine. Two shots off the lead at the par-5 11th, he found trouble and scrambled for bogey. A bunker-induced bogey at the par-3 12th followed, and Matsuyama's 30-footer for birdie at No. 13 stretched the gap.

Even so, Scheffler closed with yet another top-five finish in a year that hasn't seen him finish worse than tied for eighth since The Players Championship way back in March.

"I did a lot of good stuff," Scheffler said. "Hit the ball pretty nice. Definitely need to be sharper around the greens, but that's probably a bit of rust. But coming down here is always a good gauge to kind of see where you are around the greens because it's pretty challenging, so felt pretty good."

### 2028 British Open to move away from traditional July slot

The 2028 British Open will move away from its traditional July slot to avoid a clash with the Los Angeles Olympics, organisers the R&A

confirmed yesterday. Golf's oldest major has not been held outside of July in modern times but a change in 2028 is necessary as the Olympics will be staged from July 19-29.

The 156th Open will conclude on August 6. The venue for the tournament that year is yet to be announced.

"We have worked collaboratively with the relevant bodies and our partners to agree alternative dates for staging our major championships in 2028 to accommodate the Olympic golf competitions," Mark Darbon, Chief Executive of The R&A, said.

"We appreciate the constructive discussions we have had with all of the stakeholders and believe that providing clarity on the dates now will assist with the planning of the global golf calendar in 2028.

"We can also confirm that The Open will be returning to its normal mid-July dates in 2029."

The AIG Women's Open and Senior Open will also be staged in August in 2028, the R&A confirmed.

SPOTLIGHT

## QSL-ICSS collaboration continues with four awareness programmes

In a move reflecting its unwavering commitment to protect the integrity of football and promote principles of fair play, the Qatar Stars League (QSL), in collaboration with International Centre for Sport Security (ICSS), organised a series of four awareness programmes in October and November, engaging 400 individuals from the football community, including club officials, football integrity officers, players, technical staff, referees and match commissioners.

The programme was launched by Hani Taleb Ballan, CEO of QSL, and Massimiliano Montanari, CEO of ICSS, who both emphasised the importance of this initiative as a comprehensive system for protecting football from the dangers of manipulation and corruption.

Hani said: "Integrity is the foundation on which sports competition is built. At QSL, we consider prevention and awareness as a shared responsibility and fundamental component of our governance system. Training this large number of participants reflects our commitment to provide a safe and competitive environment that adheres to the highest international standards."

The programmes focused on four main areas:



- A workshop for football integrity officers at clubs, focusing on governance principles, and detection and reporting mechanisms.

- Two seminars for players and technical staff, addressing modern manipulation methods and digital platforms, supported by international certifications and case studies.

- A seminar for referees and match officials on potential pressures and how to handle suspected cases.

QSL affirms that this initiative is a key part of a sustainable annual plan to strengthen the integrity and governance framework within the football system through extensive awareness programmes and strategic collaboration with relevant authorities.

With more than 400 participants being trained in two months, QSL continues to solidify its position as a regional leader in protecting the integrity of football, and ensuring a safe and transparent professional environment.

## James shines as Lakers win



Los Angeles Lakers forward LeBron James passes the ball against the Philadelphia 76ers during the fourth quarter of their NBA game at Xfinity Mobile Arena at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, US. James scored 29 points as the Lakers won 112-108. (Reuters)



SPOTLIGHT

# Qatar launches ‘Aim Beyond’ project to empower youth through sport

The Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) in partnership with World Athletics and the Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD), has officially launched the ‘Aim Beyond’ project that aims to empower youth and underserved communities through the transformative power of sport.

The announcement of the project came pursuant to the agreement signed by the QOC Secretary-General Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain and the QFFD Director General Fahad Hamad al-Sulaiti on the sidelines of the Doha Forum, held from December 6-7 under the theme ‘Diplomacy, Dialogue and Diversity’. The signing ceremony was attended by the World Athletics CEO Jon Ridgeon.

As part of the project, 11 state-of-the-art, eco-friendly, and inclusive running tracks will be constructed across 11 countries around the world including, Palestine, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Cook Islands, Panama, Anguilla, Dominica, Burundi, Tanzania, and Ukraine.

The project reflects Qatar’s deep belief in the power of sport to promote sustainable develop-

ment, peace, and social cohesion. It also underscores the country’s determination to transform sporting legacy into a tangible tool for positive change in the lives of youth and communities.

The tracks to be built are distinguished by their inclusivity, accommodating the needs of athletes with disabilities, and by their sustainability, using eco-friendly materials. The new tracks will also serve as a community hub that promotes the values of sporting excellence and strengthens young athletes’ sense of belonging to their communities.

On this occasion, the al-Buenain said: “Aim Beyond is an ambitious project to create a world where every aspiring athlete has access to facilities to aim beyond their limits. Just as Doha 2019 allowed Qatar to aim beyond its limits in pursuit of its ultimate dream, so too will this project create opportunities for young athletes to reach their full potential.”

He added: “We are proud that through this ambitious project, the legacy of the Doha 2019 World Athletics Championships will continue to shape the future of athletics – transcending borders



and serving as a symbol of commitment, hope and opportunity.”

Speaking on the occasion al-Sulaiti said: “At Qatar Fund for Development, we firmly believe that sport is a transformative catalyst for human development and social progress and our part-

nership today with the Qatar Olympic Committee project reflects this commitment. By establishing inclusive and sustainable athletics tracks in underserved communities, we are creating pathways for young people to develop their talents, strengthen their capabilities,

and realise their full potential. This initiative is not merely about constructing facilities, it is about laying the foundations for brighter, more prosperous futures.”

“In many communities around the world, athletic talent is abundant, but facilities are not – and

that’s where Aim Beyond makes its mark,” said Ridgeon.

“Partnerships drive our mission to make athletics accessible and inspiring for all, and the collaboration between World Athletics, QOC and QFFD is exactly the kind of strategic, human-centred teamwork our sport needs. Together, we are strengthening infrastructure for our Member Federations, opening doors that many young athletes have never been able to walk through, and ensuring the legacy of the Doha 2019 World Athletics Championships continues to reach well beyond Qatar.

“My sincere thank you to HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, whose vision and commitment to athletics are helping to shape the future of our sport. Our sport owes you an enormous debt of gratitude.”

The signing ceremony during Doha Forum – a premier global platform for dialogue and diplomacy – highlights how sport can drive sustainable development, peace, and human development. The forum brings together global leaders, policymakers, and innovators to discuss critical challenges and shape action-driven solutions.

FOOTBALL

# Salah relationship not broken, says Liverpool boss Slot

SALAH DROPPED BY LIVERPOOL FOR INTER MILAN CLASH

AFP  
Milan

Arne Slot insisted that his relationship with Mohamed Salah has not broken down even after dropping the star attacker from Liverpool’s trip to face Inter Milan in the Champions League.

“That’s not the way I feel but he has the right to feel how he feels things. I haven’t felt that at all,” said Liverpool coach Slot to supporters.

The Egypt forward was not taken to Italy despite training earlier in the day with the first team, after saying he felt like he had been “thrown under the bus” by the club and no longer had a relationship with Slot.

Salah made those comments after he was left on the bench for the third consecutive game in a 3-3 draw against Leeds. Asked whether Salah, who has scored 250 times for Liverpool since signing from Roma in 2017, had played his last game for the Reds, Slot said: “I have no clue.”

“I cannot answer that question at this moment in time,” added Slot.

“He has every right to feel what he feels, but he doesn’t have the right to share it with the media.”

Liverpool are struggling in ninth place in the Premier League and are in a crisis of form which has only been made worse by Salah’s criticism of Slot.

Liverpool have won just four times in 15 matches in all competitions and sit 13th in the Champions League with nine points after being thumped 4-1 at home by



Liverpool’s Egyptian striker Mohamed Salah (Centre) attends a team training session in Kirkby, Liverpool, yesterday, on the eve of their Champions League match against Inter Milan in Milan. (AFP)

PSV Eindhoven in their most recent European outing.

Salah is the club’s highest-paid player in history, having signed a new contract in April, and played a key role in Liverpool’s two Premier League titles and one Champions League triumph during his iconic spell on Merseyside.

But Salah has been a shadow of his former self during Liverpool’s struggles this season - the Premier League champions are now ninth in the table - with just four goals

in 13 top-flight appearances.

Meanwhile according to Former Manchester United and England striker Wayne Rooney, Mohamed Salah is absolutely destroying his Liverpool legacy following an extraordinary outburst at manager Arne Slot, according to Wayne Rooney.

Rooney believes Slot must now demonstrate he is in charge at Anfield by leaving Salah out completely from the trip to Italy.

“Arne Slot has to show his au-

thority and pull him in and say ‘you are not travelling with the team, what you said is not acceptable,” said Rooney in his latest BBC podcast. “Take yourself off to AFCON (the Africa Cup of Nations) and let everything calm down. If I was him there would be no way he would be in the team.”

Rooney added: “He (Salah) is absolutely destroying his legacy at Liverpool. It would be sad for him to throw it all away. He’s gone about it all wrong.”

FOCUS

# Barcelona defence on ‘another level’ now, says Flick

AFP  
Barcelona

Barcelona coach Hansi Flick claimed yesterday his team’s defending is now on “another level” after a run of good results.

The Catalans have won three matches in a row after a 3-0 defeat by Chelsea in the Champions League near the end of November. Barca face Eintracht Frankfurt today in Europe as they fight for a top eight finish in the league phase. With several players back from injury last week Barca beat Atletico Madrid 3-1 and Real Betis 5-3.

“Everyone knows what happened in the last three months, a lot of injuries, very important players out, the last weeks we have to manage the minutes, the load of every player,” Flick told a news conference.

The coach said although his team shipped three against Betis, the use of his high defensive line system was good and the players were tired in the final stages, when two of those goals were scored. “The last 10 minutes, they were exhausted,” reasoned Flick, whose side also let in three at Club Brugge in a 3-3 draw earlier in November.

“I said this morning to them, the (back) line is doing really good, we’re getting pressure on

the ball, we are connected. This is what we need.

“And the (high) line, they play it on another level than maybe one month, five weeks ago.”

The win over Betis left Barca four points clear at the top of La Liga, with attention turning to the clash against Frankfurt.

In 2022 Barcelona suffered a humiliating Europa League elimination at the hands of the German side, whose fans filled the stands at Camp Nou.

Barcelona restricted access to tickets as a result this year, anxious to avoid similar scenes at their reopened stadium.

That defeat was arguably the club’s lowest ebb, but in the years since they have risen sharply, reaching the semi-finals of the Champions League last season. The Frankfurt match will be the club’s first game in the competition at Camp Nou since October 2022.

“For everyone it was a dream to come back and play in Camp Nou,” said Flick.

“It’s also important for the Champions League. It’s a really important match for us tomorrow. We have to win, we want to win three points. We want to show our best level.”

The coach said goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen may return to the squad after injury but made clear Joan Garcia “is number one”.



Barcelona’s coach Hans-Dieter Flick speaks during a press conference yesterday, on the eve of the Champions League match against Eintracht Frankfurt in Barcelona yesterday. (AFP)

## INTER’S THURAM BRACED FOR FIGHTBACK FROM CRISIS-HIT LIVERPOOL



Inter Milan striker **Marcus Thuram** insisted yesterday that the Italian side always rise to the occasion in the Champions League as he anticipates a fightback from crisis-hit Liverpool. The English giants are struggling in ninth place in the Premier League with only four wins in their last 15 matches and a crisis sparked by Mohamed Salah’s criticism.

The Egyptian has scored 48 goals in the Champions League across his career, but has been left out of manager Arne Slot’s squad for the match at the San Siro following his public airing of grievances after Liverpool’s 3-3 draw at Leeds on Saturday.

“The truth is that a champion, when doubts arise, wants to show what they’re really capable of,” Thuram told a pre-match press conference. “Everyone might think this is the perfect time to face Liverpool, but maybe not,” he warned of the English club who are 13th in the league phase standings.

“We’re going to face a great team with great players. It’s up to us to continue doing what

we’ve been doing lately and even do better.”

Thuram insisted Inter “have rarely faltered in the Champions League these past few seasons”, even if they have come up short in some of their big matches this campaign.

“Since I’ve been an Inter player, we’ve won some big matches,” said the French international.

“In a game of this calibre, anything can happen, but it’s true that we’ve been missing something in the top matches this season.”

Inter lost 5-0 in the final last season to Paris Saint-Germain and are fourth in the Champions League group stage standings with 12 points this campaign.

But they are coming off a 2-1 defeat in Madrid against Atletico, their first major opponent this season in the Champions League.

Inter are second in Serie A, one point behind leaders Napoli, but have already suffered four defeats, three of them against direct title rivals - Juventus, Napoli and AC Milan.

(AFP)

## Qatar reach Gulf Cup U-23 semi-finals



Qatar booked their place in the semi-finals of the Gulf Cup U-23 Championship after edging Bahrain 1-0 at Aspire Pitches 2. Mustafa al-Sayed scored the winner in the 90+3 minute with a well-placed header, taking Al Annabi’s tally to six points and securing their second consecutive win following a 3-0 victory over Kuwait.