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Pandya blitz helps India rout South Africa in T20 opener



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Norris knows life will change as champion, starting with number one

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**FOOTBALL**

# Algeria, UAE into quarters as Egypt make shock exit

Algeria needed just a point to secure passage to knockouts but took all three points after win over Iraq



Jordan's Mohammed Abu Zraiqa celebrates with teammates after scoring against Egypt at the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor. (Reuters)

**By Sports Reporter**  
Doha

The FIFA Arab Cup group stage concluded in dramatic fashion in Doha as United Arab Emirates defeated Kuwait 3-1 to qualify for the knockout stages. Egypt were, in turn, eliminated after they lost 3-0 to Group C table-toppers Jordan. Later, Algeria ensured they progressed to the quarter-finals – and topped Group D in the process – with a 2-0 victory over Iraq. Meanwhile, Bahrain defeated Sudan in a 3-1 thriller, but both teams were eliminated.

**EGYPT 0-3 JORDAN**

Egypt's FIFA Arab Cup campaign was brought to a disappointing and premature conclusion as they suffered defeat at the hands of Group C winners Jordan at Al Bayt Stadium to exit the tournament without a win from their three matches.

After a break-neck opening spell with both goalkeepers forced into smart saves, Jordan grabbed the lead as a slick move down the right flank ended with the ball breaking somewhat fortuitously to the onrushing Mohammad Abuhasheesh in the box and he calmly slotted beyond Mohamed Bassam.

Jamal Sellami's World Cup-bound side doubled their lead before the interval in superb style as Mohammad Abu Zraiqa cut inside a defender on the right of the box before curling a sublime effort beyond the diving Bassam, with the ball kissing the inside of the post en route to the net.

Jordan looked to have added a game-sealing third early in the second period, but

**Quarter-final line-up**

**Tomorrow:** Morocco vs Syria at 5:30pm at Khalifa International Stadium;  
Palestine vs Saudi Arabia at 8:30pm at Lusail Stadium

**Friday:** Jordan vs Iraq at 5:30pm at Education City Stadium  
Algeria vs United Arab Emirates at 8:30pm at Al Bayt Stadium

Odeh Fakhoury's cheeky dink over Bassam was ruled out for handball as he challenged Yassin Marei in the build-up after Nour Baniateyah's booming clearance. Egypt were then inches away from reducing the deficit as Marwan Hamdy struck the base of the post from range.

Al Nashama set the seal on their victory in added time, when Marei's desperate last-ditch sliding tackle only succeeded in felling substitute Ali Olwan, who stepped up to score from the spot.

**UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 3-1 KUWAIT**

Yahya al-Ghassani scored two goals in as many minutes to help seal United Arab Emirates' passage into the quarter-finals as ten-man Kuwait bowed out in spirited fashion.

UAE's fate was not in their hands but they knew they needed at least a victory to reach the knockout stages. They got off to the brightest of starts when they were awarded a penalty in the 16th minute after Ahmad Aldhefeery brought down al-Ghassani, who calmly converted his spot

kick. Just two minutes later, al-Ghassani found the net again after Kuwait lost possession near their goal and, after some neat passing play, the 27-year-old winger slotted home in style.

Kuwait's hopes of a comeback suffered a serious setback early in the second half when Sultan al-Enezi was sent off for an off-the-ball incident with al-Ghassani. Despite being a man down, they gave themselves hope when Fahed al-Hajri headed in a deep inswinging free-kick from Mohammad Daham.

UAE, however, quickly capitalised on their numerical advantage to retake the lead in style in the 66th minute when Nicolas Gimenez struck an emphatic effort from the edge of the area in one of the goals of the tournament so far.

**ALGERIA 2-0 IRAQ**

Algeria headed into this section settler knowing that they needed just a point to secure passage to the knockouts but they ended up with all three after a tetchy, stop-start affair at the Khalifa International Stadium. Their cause was greatly aided after Iraq's Hussein Ali saw red in just the fifth minute and they took the lead on the stroke of half-time as Redouane Berkane nodded a free-kick back across the face of goal where it was headed home by Mohamed Amine Touga.

Before the goal, Iraq had lost influential forward Mohamad Ali to injury and they struggled to cause any real threat to a Fennecs side that doubled the advantage shortly after the restart. A teasing cross from the impressive Yacine Brahimi led to confusion between Iraq goalkeeper Fahad Talib and defender Saad Natiq with the



Algeria's Adil Boulbina and Iraq's Sajad Jassim vie for the ball during the FIFA Arab Cup match at the Khalifa International Stadium in Doha. (Reuters)



Kuwait's Eid al-Rashidi (left) attempts to get past United Arab Emirates' Mohammad Jumah at Stadium 974 yesterday. (Reuters)

former clattering the ball into the latter before it ricocheted into goal.

Despite several missed chances from Algeria, that was the way that things finished, with the 2-0 win sending the Fennecs top of the section and booking a last eight date with United Arab Emirates, while Iraq will face Jordan.

**BAHRAIN 3-1 SUDAN**

Bahrain ended their campaign on a positive note after defeating ten-man Sudan in a thrilling contest as both teams were eliminated following Algeria's victory.

In a balanced opening half, Bahrain got the breakthrough when Abdulla al-Khalasi broke down the right flank and crossed the

ball to Mahdi Abdouljabbar who finished with style. Sudan's comeback hopes then took a dent early in the second half when defender Mohamed Ahmed was given his marching orders after lashing out at Abdouljabbar off the ball.

The Africans kept on pushing and levelled the scores courtesy of an own goal by Vincent Emmanuel as he tried to clear the ball under pressure from Yasir Mozamil.

Bahrain retook the lead with a penalty after Mustafa Mohammed brought down Ali Madan in the area and substitute Mohamed al-Romaihi dispatched the spot kick. Mahdi Al Humaidan put the icing on the cake with a clinical strike just before the final whistle.

**CHAMPIONS LEAGUE**

# Karl and Gnabry spark Bayern to comeback win over Sporting

**AFP**  
Munich

Revitalised striker Serge Gnabry and teenage forward Lennart Karl helped inspire Bayern Munich to a come-from-behind 3-1 home win over Sporting Lisbon in the Champions League yesterday.

With Bayern trailing to a Joshua Kimmich own-goal midway through the second half and staring down the barrel of a second-successive European loss, Gnabry and Karl scored in quick succession to wrestle the match in Bayern's favour. Gnabry set up defender Jonathan Tah for a late goal to ensure Bayern claimed all three points and rose to second in the league phase standings, behind Arsenal on goal difference.

Karl, 17, became the youngest player to score in three consecutive Champions League games. Despite the loss, the Portuguese champions sit ninth in the 36-team table with two games remaining. The first 24 sides make it through to the knockout rounds, with the top eight qualifying for the last 16 directly.

Bayern coach Vincent Kompany made seven changes to his starting XI, recalling Harry Kane, Gnabry, Karl, Manuel Neuer and Tah who were rested on Saturday against Stuttgart with Sporting's visit in mind. Bayern have scored more goals than any other club in Europe's top-five leagues this season and went agonisingly close in the opening half.

Karl's fifth-minute goal was ruled out for offside and Kane hit the post on the half-hour mark. Kane, Karl and Gnabry all forced Rui Silva into acrobatic stops be-



Bayern Munich's Serge Gnabry scores against Sporting Lisbon in Munich. (Reuters)

fore the break. Sporting's best chance in the opening half came when Geny Catamo laid on a precise cross which Tah almost

guided into his own net, forcing Neuer into a reflex save. Some more Bayern friendly fire put Sporting in front early in the sec-

ond period, with Neuer this time helpless as Kimmich deflected a Joao Simoes cross in with 54 minutes gone. The goal jolted Bayern into gear and the German side soon struck back to take the lead with two goals in four minutes. Unmarked at the back post, Gnabry tapped in a Michael Olise corner to level things up. Karl latched onto a Konrad Laimer pass before blasting in on the turn from a tight angle. With 13 minutes remaining, Kimmich and Tah made good on their defensive errors by combining for Bayern's third, with a little help from Gnabry.

Kimmich looped in a dipping cross to Gnabry, who headed centrally for Tah to poke home. With three minutes remaining, Kompany withdrew Gnabry and brought Alphonso Davies onto the pitch, the Canada captain playing his first match since tearing his ACL in March.



CRICKET

# Pandya blitz helps India thrash South Africa in opener

‘It’s a quick turnaround and we’ll give it another crack in a couple of days’ times

AFP  
Cuttack

Hardik Pandya struck an unbeaten 59 and took a key wicket as India thrashed South Africa by 101 runs in the first T20 international yesterday.

Pandya’s 28-ball blitz, laced with six fours and four sixes, powered reigning world champions India to 175-6 after they were put in to bat first in Cuttack.

The Indian bowlers then combined to skittle South Africa for their lowest T20 total of 74 in 12.3 overs to take a 1-0 lead in the five-match series as part of their build-up for the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka in February-March.

India’s Test and ODI captain Shubman Gill returned from injury for the match but had a disappointing outing. He started with a boundary off Lungi Ngidi but got out next ball when he spooned a catch to mid-off.

Wickets kept tumbling as T20 skipper Suryakumar Yadav fell for 12 and swashbuckling opener Abhishek Sharma soon followed him for 17 as India slipped to 78-4.

But all-rounder Pandya made an instant impact at the crease on his international return after suffering a quadriceps injury in September.

“I was very satisfied with the way I was batting,” Pandya said after being named player of the match.

Pandya looked back at his recovery in the last 50 days at the National Cricket Academy, saying: “It’s very satisfying when you come here and the results follow.”

The 32-year-old came out firing as he hit Keshav Maharaj for two sixes and kept up the attack despite losing Axar Patel, who made 23 off 21 balls, and Shivam Dube (11).



India’s Hardik Pandya plays a shot during the first T20I match against South Africa at the Barabati Stadium in Cuttack yesterday. (AFP)

Pandya powered India to a position of strength as, alongside Jitesh Sharma, he helped India score 30 runs off the last two overs.

In reply, South Africa were hit hard when Arshdeep Singh sent back Quinton de Kock for a second-ball duck in the first over of the chase and in his next dismissed Tristan Stubbs for 14.

Skipper Aiden Markram and Dewald Brevis, who made 22, attempted to hit back with boundaries before Axar cut short the

captain’s knock on 14. Pandya had David Miller out for one with his first ball, and when spinner Varun Chakravarthy dismissed Donovan Ferreira, South Africa slumped to 50-5.

South Africa kept losing wickets and Jasprit Bumrah dismissed Brevis for his 100th T20 wicket and took one more in the over.

“There was some good form with the ball and field; some boxes ticked,” said Markram.

“From a batting point of view,

it’s unfortunately something that can happen in this format.

“It’s a pity that it had to happen in the first game. It’s a quick turnaround and we’ll give it another crack in a couple of days’ time.”

The second match is tomorrow in New Chandigarh.

**BRIEF SCORES: India 175 for 6 (Hardik 59\*, Ngidi 3-31) beat South Africa 74 all out (Brevis 22, Bumrah 2-17, Chakravarthy 2-19, Axar 2-7) by 101 runs.**

FOOTBALL

# Miami’s Messi wins second consecutive MLS MVP award

AFP  
Miami

Lionel Messi won his second consecutive Major League Soccer Most Valuable Player award yesterday after propelling Inter Miami to the MLS title and leading the league in goals.

Messi became the first player to win back-to-back MLS MVP awards and only the second player in the league to capture two MVP awards after Preki in 1997 and 2003.

“I’m happy to receive this award and be the first in the history of this league to win it in two consecutive years,” Messi said. “I’m very thankful.”

The 38-year-old forward, who led Argentina to the 2022 World Cup crown, scored 29 goals in the regular season - the fourth-most in any MLS campaign - and set up 19 others to claim the MLS Golden Boot. “I’m thankful for this recognition,” Messi said. “It’s always nice to receive individual awards but I want to share it with my teammates. I was also fortunate to win the MLS Golden Boot thanks to the help of my teammates.”

Messi, who signed a three-year contract extension with Miami in October, also became only the second player to lead the league in regular-season goals and assists, joining Toron-

to’s Sebastian Giovinco in 2015.

Messi also netted six goals and created nine others in this year’s MLS playoffs, which concluded last weekend with Inter Miami beating Vancouver 3-1 for its first MLS Cup title, Messi delivering two key assists in the triumph to claim MLS Cup MVP honors. It’s the latest award in a trophy haul for the South American maestro that includes a record eight Ballon d’Or titles, three FIFA Men’s Best Player awards and two FIFA World Cup Golden Balls.

Messi was a runaway season MVP award winner with 70.43 per cent of total voting compared to 11.15 per cent for runner-up Anders Dreyer of San Diego FC. Messi took 83.05 per cent of media votes, 73.08 per cent of club votes and 55.17 per cent of player votes. He became the first MLS player with 10 multi-goal games in a season, breaking the old mark of eight shared by Stern John in 1998, Mamadou Diallo in 2000 and Zlatan Ibrahimovic in 2019.

In 2024, Messi won the MLS MVP award with 20 goals and 16 assists over 19 matches.

Messi joined Inter Miami in July 2023 and helped the Herons hoist the Leagues Cup, a tournament for MLS and Mexican League clubs, that year and take the 2024 MLS Supporters’ Shield with a league-best 74 points in the regular season.



Lionel Messi of Inter Miami poses with MLS Commissioner Don Garber with the 2025 Landon Donovan MLS MVP trophy at Chase Stadium in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. (AFP)

## QMMF concludes two-day Off-Road Shoot-Out ahead of Qatar Motorsports Academy and National Team selections



The Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) has wrapped up a two-day Off-Road Shoot-Out designed to assess national drivers for potential selection into the Qatar Motorsports Academy and the Qatar National Team. The programme was held over two days: Day 1 at the Academy building at Lusail International Circuit, where drivers underwent physical assessments, cognitive testing, and theoretical evaluations. Day 2 in Sealine, where participants were tested in real off-road conditions to evaluate driving technique, consistency, and terrain adaptation across various off-road disciplines.

The participating drivers were: Abdulaziz al-Kuwari, Mohammed al-Marri, Abdulla al-Rabban, Ahmed al-Kuwari, Mohammed al-Atteya, Mohammed al-Harqan, Mohammed al-Meer, Ahmed al-Muhannadi, Nouef al-Sowaidi, and Rashid al-Mohannadi. Throughout the Shoot-Out, QMMF assessed each driver’s cognitive performance, includ-



ing reaction time, focus, situational awareness, and decision-making. All evaluations were conducted without copilots, placing emphasis on independent navigation and full vehicle control.

Following the assessments, the top-performing drivers will be selected to join the Qatar Motorsports Academy and represent the Qatar National Team.

They will embark on a structured weekly training programme covering physical preparation, cognitive development, and advanced driving skills. QMMF reaffirmed its commitment to developing Qatari talent and preparing national drivers to compete at the highest international standard in off-road motorsport.

FOCUS

# Alonso under pressure but upbeat as Real prepare for Man City clash

Reuters  
Madrid

Real Madrid manager Xabi Alonso faces mounting pressure ahead of today’s Champions League group-stage meeting against Pep Guardiola’s Manchester City, but the Spaniard was confident the team could turn their poor form around.

Sunday’s 2-0 loss to Celta Vigo, in which Real were reduced to nine players after defenders Fran Garcia and Alvaro Carreras were sent off, left the club second in La Liga with 36 points, four behind leaders Barcelona.

Adding to Alonso’s challenges, Madrid could be without as many as eight key players, including top-scorer Kylian Mbappe, who missed training yesterday with a muscle injury.

“Football can change quickly... for good or for bad,” Alonso told a press conference yesterday. “After the Celta match, we’ve already drawn our conclusions.

“Now it’s just City in our minds. It’s the Champions League, we’re at the Bernabeu. It will be different because of the energy that’s created. That’s what’s on our minds, what’s ahead of us.”

Asked whether his job could be at risk if Real falter against City, Alonso remained defiant.

“When you coach Real Madrid, you have to be prepared for situations like this. We are a team, we are all united,” he said.

“To reverse the disappointment, which is normal, all we’re thinking about now is City.”

Mbappe’s absence would be a significant blow for Alonso’s team, with the Frenchman leading both the La Liga and Champions League scoring charts this season. The 26-year-old joins



Real Madrid’s coach Xabi Alonso leads a training session yesterday, on the eve of the Champions League match against Manchester City in Madrid. (AFP)

an already packed injury list that includes Dani Carvajal, Trent Alexander-Arnold, Dean Huijsen, Eder Militao, David Alaba, Ferland Mendy and Eduardo Camavinga. Today’s clash will be the 13th meeting between the clubs in the past decade, a rivalry that has intensified as Real and City combined to claim three of the last four Champions League titles.

Real won the competition in 2022 and 2024, beating City en route to both titles, while the English side lifted their maiden Champions League trophy in 2023 after overcoming the Spanish club in the semi-finals that year.

Despite a disappointing run in recent weeks, with two victories in their last seven matches across all competitions, Alonso

remained optimistic.

“We’re all in this together. United. Convinced that this is an opportunity. We need to have the energy to connect with the Bernabeu. If that happens, we have a chance to win,” he said.

“In football, you have to adapt and learn. Some days are good, others are not,” he added. “But we are making progress with every match. Good thing we have a challenge tomorrow. The best way to move forward is to face it. It’s a challenge that we must rise to.”

Real are fifth in the Champions League standings on 12 points, three behind leaders Arsenal. City are ninth on 10 points, chasing a top-eight finish that would secure direct qualification to the last 16.



MOTORSPORT

# Norris knows life will change as F1 champ, starting with No. 1

‘Otherwise, you know, it’s just prep for next year already’

Reuters  
Abu Dhabi

Lando Norris recognised life would change as Formula One world champion, although he hoped to stay the same as a person, and an immediate sign was the decision made on Monday to race with the number one on his McLaren next season.

The 26-year-old told Reuters Television, a day after he clinched the title in the season-ending Abu Dhabi Grand Prix in a three-way battle at Yas Marina, that he was setting aside his familiar number four.

“I actually had to decide today,” said the Briton, standing on a hotel balcony with the bright lights of Yas Marina reflected on the water behind him.

“In a way, I wanted to keep number four, because I’m just happy with that and it goes well with my logo... but I will go with number one, because I have to. I have to.

“It can be my only opportunity in my life that I get to do such a thing, and not many people in the world get to do that kind of thing.”

“And it’s not for me. It’s just for my mechanics, this is for my engineers. It’s the fact that they

get to run with the number one on the car, and I think it’ll mean a lot more to them than it does to me as a number, and for me that’s a lot more important.”

## BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS

Norris, whose breakfast of champions was an early morning McDonald’s after a night of partying that left his throat and voice slightly the worse for wear, said last week that his life would not change if he won the title but that was just words to relieve some of the stress before battle.

Another immediate mark of his changed status became obvious when he went for a swim.

“I was by the pool earlier, and there were a lot more people, I think, that came up to me than originally would have come up to me,” he said.

“But look, it’s not going to change me, which for me is the most important thing. It’s not going to change my life in terms of how I live it, how I want to live it.”

That said, he expected people to see him differently as a champion, rather than one of 20 drivers - or 22 next year.

“People are going to know my face a little bit more, sadly, and they’re going to see my face and maybe just notice me a bit more. But apart from that, you know, my

life’s the same.

“I’m going to go and be with my friends, my family, go play golf, go play padel... nothing changes from that side.”

Norris clinched the title by two points from Red Bull’s Max Verstappen, ending the Dutch driver’s four-year reign, and 13 clear of 24-year-old Australian teammate Oscar Piastri, who will be back next season to try and beat him.

“Oscar did an incredible job this season and out of anyone I’m glad I got to race against him and fight against him,” said the Briton.

“There’s going to be a lot more battles between me and Oscar and many other drivers, and there’s many more years of me and Oscar together, and I look forward to partnering with him and continuing to be good mates and also be strong, fierce competitors.”

Norris will be back in the car at Yas Marina soon, testing already for 2026.

He said he would be driving with “probably a little bit more of a smile on my face than normal” while reliving the final laps from Sunday.

“Otherwise, you know, it’s just prep for next year already. This is, ‘OK, one done’, and what can we already start to do that’s going to help achieve us the same thing next year?”



McLaren’s British driver Lando Norris celebrates after finishing the race third to win the world championship title at the end of the Abu Dhabi GP at the Yas Marina Circuit in Abu Dhabi on Sunday. (AFP)

FOCUS

## LIV Golf CEO says informal talks with PGA Tour ongoing, no deal imminent

LIV Golf CEO **Scott O’Neil** has said informal conversations between the Saudi-funded circuit and the PGA Tour are continuing but any hope of ending the sport’s longest-running civil war is not currently on the horizon.

O’Neil maintains regular contact with PGA Tour CEO Brian Rolapp, a friend and former business-school classmate, but said their communication has not brought any meaningful progress towards finalising the framework agreement the two circuits announced in June 2023 before either were in their current role.

“The reality is we continue to have conversations, and Brian and I do have a relationship - we text, we talk relatively regularly,” O’Neil told Reuters during an interview from LIV Golf’s New York office.

“We are not in any serious negotiation at this point. We both believe that there are opportunities to work together, and we both believe that there is plenty of space in golf. We at LIV Golf are intently focused on developing LIV Golf around the world.”

## TRUMP’S INVOLVEMENT

LIV Golf, which held its inaugural event in June 2022, has shaken up the golf world like never before and, with the help of mega-money contracts and lucrative purses, has lured several top names from the PGA Tour into its stable of players.

LIV players include the likes of Bryson DeChambeau - considered golf’s greatest showman - and fellow major champions Jon Rahm, Dustin Johnson and Brooks Koepka. After a year of acrimony, the PGA Tour, Europe-based DP World Tour and Saudi backers of LIV Golf announced in June 2023 a framework agreement to house their commercial operations in a new entity but have failed to reach a definitive agreement.

The divide has even captured the attention of US President Donald Trump, an avid golfer who was part of two meetings on the matter at the White House in Feb-



ruary when there was optimism that the schism between LIV Golf and the PGA Tour would soon be resolved.

O’Neil said he still felt LIV Golf should “do something” with the PGA Tour but did not elaborate on what any sort of agreement would look like. He also did not give details on when, or if, the two sides plan to meet next, a stance he said he shared with Rolapp.

“We both agreed that we are going to keep all that stuff between the two of us,” said O’Neil. “If there is ever anything to report we’ll report it.”

## WORLD RANKING POINTS

When it comes to LIV’s ongoing bid for world ranking points, which are considered critical given the majors use them to help determine their fields, O’Neil is hopeful a decision on the matter could happen in the coming weeks.

LIV’s initial bid to have its players earn world ranking points was unanimously rejected by the Official World Golf Ranking (OWGR) in October 2023, with a key concern said to be limited access for players to join a circuit that, barring injury, featured the same players all season.

The OWGR also said at the time that LIV’s 54-hole format was an issue but one that was capable of being managed through an appropriate mathematical formula.

In June, LIV Golf renewed its pursuit of world ranking points by submitting an application with the OWGR, whose governing

board includes non-voting Chairman Trevor Immelman, members from all four majors plus members of the PGA Tour, DP World Tour and Participating Eligible Tours.

LIV has also since announced it will expand its tournament format to 72 holes in 2026.

“We continue to have constructive dialogue,” said O’Neil. “We are hoping to get something done by the turn of the calendar (year) and we are still on that timeline.”

“I have a lot of time for Trevor Immelman, a lot of respect for him as a chairman and as a leader. I found him strong, demanding, tough at times, and I think really constructive.”

## ‘BULLISH ON THE FUTURE’

After 11 months as CEO, O’Neil is upbeat about LIV’s future with the circuit on pace to sell out all premium hospitality seating for 2026 - when it will stage 14 events across 10 countries - after what it called a record-setting year in 2025.

“I’ve never had this much fun in a job. I’ve never been this challenged, this exhilarated, this bullish on the future,” said O’Neil.

“When I talk about being bullish on the future I am specifically referring to the stars, so Bryson, Jon Rahm... and the emerging young talent we have. Seeing what’s actually happening here gives me hope.

“And then the commercial momentum and success has been like nothing I have seen in 30 years in this business.”

after collecting nine wins on the PGA Tour, including three PGA Championships (2018, 2019, 2023) and two US Opens (2017, 2018). Should he not play for LIV Golf in 2026, Koepka would still have access to each major next year based on his win at the 2023 PGA Championship. Former LIV Golf players have competed on the PGA Tour after serving a one-year suspension, dated to their final LIV Golf tournament. None of those players previously held PGA Tour cards, however, and it’s not clear if Koepka would face additional disciplinary actions if he tried to come back. Koepka’s most recent event with LIV Golf was at Michigan in August, meaning August 2026 would likely be his earliest possible return to the PGA Tour.

SPOTLIGHT

## Red Bull part ways with adviser Marko

AFP  
Paris

Red Bull confirmed yesterday the departure of influential adviser Helmut Marko who oversaw the progression of serial world champions Sebastian Vettel and Max Verstappen.

The 82-year-old Austrian has been front and centre of Red Bull’s remarkable run in F1 since their arrival on the grid back in 2005, helping them to six constructors’ championships and eight drivers’ titles.

The 1971 winner of the Le Mans 24 Hours for Porsche is a close ally of Verstappen, who missed out on a fifth successive title by only two points to McLaren’s Lando Norris in Abu Dhabi on Sunday.

Marko was responsible for Red Bull’s young driver programme, and was behind Vettel’s four titles, along with Verstappen’s emergence as one of the all-time greats. His departure comes months after Red Bull sacked team principal Christian Horner, who like Marko was at the team for its launch two decades ago.

Horner’s successor, Laurent Mekies, commented: “It is very sad news that Helmut is leaving us. “He has been such an integral part of our team and of Red Bull’s entire motor racing programme for more than two decades.

“This is therefore the end of a



Red Bull Racing’s driver Max Verstappen with director of the Red Bull Formula One teams Helmut Marko in Monza, on August 30, 2024. (AFP)

remarkably successful chapter. His departure will leave a void, and we will truly miss him.”

Marko reflected on his “extraordinary and extremely successful journey” with Red Bull.

“Narrowly missing out on the world Championship this season has moved me deeply and made it clear to me that now is the right moment for me personally to end this very long, intense, and successful chapter,” he added.

“I wish the entire team continued success and am convinced that they will be fighting for both world championship titles again next year.”

Red Bull’s CEO of corporate projects and investments Oliver Mintzlaff said the decision to

leave had been Marko’s. “Helmut approached me with the wish to end his role as motorsport adviser at the end of the year.

“I deeply regret his decision, as he has been an influential figure for more than two decades, and his departure marks the end of an extraordinary era,” he said.

Mintzlaff singled out Marko’s ability to spot talent via the team’s junior programme.

“Names like Sebastian Vettel and Max Verstappen stand for the many drivers who were discovered, supported, and guided to the very top under his leadership. “His passion, his courage to make clear decisions, and his ability to spot potential will remain unforgettable,” he added.

TENNIS

## American Fritz to headline \$1mn MGM Slam in Las Vegas

Reuters  
New York

Eight of the world’s elite men’s professional tennis players, including American **Taylor Fritz**, will compete for a \$1mn prize pool at the MGM Slam in Las Vegas next year. The exhibition in March will feature a 10-point tiebreak knockout format. Fritz, the world number six and highest-ranked American, will headline the event. He will be joined by compatriot Tommy Paul, who is currently ranked 20th.

Also competing are Norway’s Casper Ruud, Australia’s Nick Kyrgios, Brazil’s Joao Fonseca, France’s Gael Monfils, Italy’s Lorenzo Musetti and Kazakhstan’s Alexander Bublik.

In its third year, the MGM Slam has featured several high-

profile match-ups, including last year’s showcase between Aryna Sabalenka and Naomi Osaka, and one of Rafael Nadal’s final appearances before his retirement.

The event comes at a time when tennis is facing criticism over its relentless tour schedule. In March, the Professional Tennis Players’ Association (PTPA) filed a lawsuit against the sport’s governing bodies, including the ATP and WTA, labelling the crowded calendar unsustainable.

Nevertheless, exhibition matches continue to be scheduled. World No. 1 Carlos Alcaraz and second-ranked Jannik Sinner, who have won nine of the last 10 Grand Slam titles between them, will meet in South Korea in January. The exhibition, which takes place eight days before the Australian Open, has featured greats such as Roger Federer, Nadal, Novak Djokovic and Maria Sharapova.



### Five-time major winner Koepka might skip LIV Golf’s ’26 season

Five-time major winner Brooks Koepka might not play in the upcoming LIV Golf season despite being under contract, Sports Business Journal reported on Monday. Koepka, one of the breakaway circuit’s highest-profile signings when it launched in 2022, could be seeking a return to the PGA Tour. SBJ, which cited “at least four golf sources” in its report, put the question to LIV Golf CEO Scott O’Neil in an article published Monday. “I know you’re not going to want to hear this one, just the individual players, and this goes back to our policy, we’re just going to run it through,” O’Neil said when asked about Koepka’s status. “So, we haven’t made any announcements on players, but he is signed for 2026.” Koepka, 35, has won five times on the LIV Golf tour



SPOTLIGHT

# FIFA Intercontinental Cup begins today with Cruz Azul facing Flamengo

‘We believe in Qatar’s ability to deliver the best tournaments in the world’

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The FIFA Intercontinental Cup Qatar 2025 Local Organising Committee (LOC) yesterday announced its full readiness to host the final three matches of the prestigious club competition during a press conference held in Doha.

The tournament will be contested at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium from today with FIFA Derby of the Americas pitting Mexico's Cruz Azul against Brazil's Flamengo.

Two more matches will be held on December 13 and 17, during the rest days of the ongoing FIFA Arab Cup, further showcasing Qatar's capability to seamlessly stage world-class football events and reinforcing international confidence in its hosting abilities.

Organisers highlighted that the tournament has garnered strong interest from regional and international fans alike. Hassan al-Kuwari, LOC Executive Director of Marketing, Promotion and Commercial, said: “Qatar’s commitment to hosting world-class tournaments stems from our belief in advancing football at every level. This includes strengthening competition within the GCC region, uniting the Arab world at the Arab Cup, supporting the development of young talent and now welcoming global champions for the FIFA Intercontinental Cup. By hosting multiple tournaments in parallel, we’re showcasing the operational excellence that embodies our nation’s vision and reflects the proud sporting legacy of the Arab region.”

Roberto Grassi, FIFA Tournament Lead, said: “We are here to announce our readiness to host the third tournament which Qatar is successfully delivering in a few weeks. This is a reaffirmation of the strong partnership with Qatar. We believe in Qatar’s ability to deliver the best tournaments in the world using world class infrastructure. We want to thank all the stakeholders involved in the delivery of these events and look forward to a second edition of the FIFA Intercontinental Cup, one that will echo the success of last



Mexico's Cruz Azul train in Doha yesterday, ahead of their FIFA Derby of the Americas clash against Brazil's Flamengo.

year’s wonderful tournament.”

Organisers also announced that the Doha Metro will be free of charge for ticketholders attending the FIFA Intercontinental Cup Final on December 17, which will see Paris Saint-Germain face the winner of the FIFA Challenger Cup in the tournament’s decisive match. Throughout the competition, the metro will provide comprehensive accessibility services and direct access to Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium via Al Riffa Metro Station (Green Line).

Fans travelling to Qatar are encouraged to explore the country’s cultural and entertainment events during their stay in Doha.

Tickets are available at [www.road-toqatar.qa](http://www.road-toqatar.qa). All tickets will be digital and will include accessible seating options for disabled fans. Disabled fans wishing to request accessible seats can do so by sending an e-mail to [accessibility-fic@sc.qa](mailto:accessibility-fic@sc.qa). Prices for accessibility tickets start from QR20. Fans must download the Road to Qatar app to access their tickets ahead of arrival at the stadium. A maximum of 6 tickets per person can be purchased per match. Qatar successfully hosted the first edi-



Hassan al-Kuwari, LOC Executive Director of Marketing, Promotion and Commercial and Roberto Grassi, FIFA Tournament Lead, address a press conference yesterday.

tion of the Intercontinental Cup in its new format in 2024 when Real Madrid were crowned club champions in front of a sell-out crowd at the iconic 80,000-seat Lusail Stadium.

The Intercontinental Cup serves as part of an exhilarating football calendar in Qatar, which also includes the AGCFF U-23 Gulf Cup and the FIFA Arab Cup, showcasing the nation’s continued ability to deliver world-class sporting events.

## TOURNAMENT SCHEDULE FIFA Derby of the Americas

Today, December 10 | 8pm  
Cruz Azul (Mexico) v CR Flamengo (Brazil)  
at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium

**FIFA Challenger Cup**  
Saturday, December 13 | 8pm  
FIFA Derby of the Americas winner v Pyramids FC (Egypt) at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium

**FIFA Intercontinental Cup Final**  
Wednesday, December 17 | 8pm  
Paris Saint-Germain (France) v FIFA Challenger Cup winner at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium

## Club Brugge players caught off guard by coach’s dismissal

**Bruges, Belgium:** Club Brugge captain Hans Vanaken said he and his teammates had been caught off guard by the sudden dismissal of coach Nicky Hayden on Monday, two days before their Champions League clash against Arsenal.

Hayden was sacked after the club lost to St Truiden at the weekend and slipped into third place in the Belgian league. He was immediately replaced by Croatian Ivan Leko, whose club KAA Gent were unaware of his decision to leave until they read about it in the media. Vanaken said Club Brugge players had learnt after Monday training of the coach’s dismissal. “A surprise for the squad,” he said.

“Nobody expected that. There wasn’t really a reason or anything we thought was a reason. Look, the board has made a decision and it’s up to the players to accept that. We know that in football, tough decisions are made sometimes. Firing a coach is always unpleasant. Secretly, we’re all convinced that things could have got better in the coming months.”

Vanaken was then asked if the players and the board were on the same page but hesitated before answering: “That’s difficult to say. As a group of players, we were surprised. The board may have viewed it differently or had other conversations behind closed doors that we don’t know about.”

Leko returns for a second spell as coach and debuts against Arsenal, who will be looking to make it six wins from six group games in their Champions League campaign.

Belgium international Vanaken played with Leko when he first started out and also worked under him in Leko’s previous spell at Brugge from 2017-19.

“Ivan is a completely different personality than Nicky, he has a bit more fire in him. That’s not to say one is better than the other, but in the past, we clicked.”

Leko had a release clause in his Gent contract, allowing him to leave, but he did not tell anyone until Club Brugge named him as their new coach at the same time as they fired Hayden. The fee was reportedly around one million euros, Belgian media said.

## ANNOUNCEMENT

# Qatar Sports Investments to acquire Belgian football club KAS Eupen

Qatar Sports Investments (QSI) – one of the leading strategic investment groups in sports, culture, entertainment and lifestyle – announced its forthcoming acquisition of KAS Eupen, a historic Belgian football club, currently competing in the Challenger Pro League.

The addition of KAS Eupen to the QSI group further strengthens its position as a global football and business operator – added to QSI’s majority ownership of Paris Saint-Germain and minority ownership of Sporting Clube de Braga – alongside QSI’s other leading investments in padel (Premier Padel), art (Art Basel) and other multi-sport projects spanning motorsports, basketball and more.

QSI has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) confirming the forthcoming full acquisition – subject to standard regulatory approvals – and the immediate takeover of the sporting operations of KAS Eupen.

Under the terms of the MoU, QSI will ultimately take full operational control of the Club, including all associated sporting, commercial, and operational assets, in short order. In addition to strategic investment, QSI will support the Club’s transformation through world-class expertise, experience and know-how, while also connecting the Club to QSI growing, fully integrated and high performance, multi-club, multi-sport and multi-business model.

KAS Eupen is being acquired from the Aspire Zone Foundation (Aspire). Under Aspire’s ownership, the club established itself as a stable and well-respected team. Belgium is also a highly attractive football market, where strong competition between high quality teams enhances talent development across the country, with KAS Eupen offering significant potential for long-term sustainable growth.



The investment reflects QSI’s principal strategy of developing sports assets, enhancing athlete development and pathways, and fostering high-performance environments within – and between – properties in its Group.

QSI and the Club’s executives will focus on strengthening KAS Eupen’s sporting model, expanding its commercial capabilities, and identifying growth opportunities across both domestic and international markets.

Key priorities will include youth academy development, infrastructure upgrades, and enhanced community engagement.

Nasser al-Khelaifi, Chairman of Qatar Sports Investments, said: “Qatar Sports Investments is proud to become the custodian of KAS Eupen and contribute to the development of football in Belgium. With QSI’s global expertise and passion for football, our objective is to build a modern, competitive football and business structure – bringing pride to KAS Eupen supporters and building on the Club’s great legacy to date. We warmly welcome into our family a fantastic Club and community.”

## FOCUS

# Salah trains alone as Saudis plan transfer move

AFF  
Liverpool

Mohamed Salah reported for Liverpool training yesterday as doubts grow about the star’s future at the Premier League champions with Saudi clubs intent on making a move for the striker in the winter transfer window.

The 33-year-old Egypt forward was left out of Liverpool’s squad for their Champions League tie at Inter Milan following his extraordinary public criticism of Reds manager Arne Slot after he was left on the bench for the third consecutive game. Salah said after the 3-3 draw with Leeds on Sunday that he felt like he had been “thrown under the bus” by Liverpool and no longer had a relationship with Slot, sparking reports that Liverpool’s third-highest goalscorer in history could be on his way out of Anfield in January despite signing a lucrative new contract in April.

He posted a picture of himself training alone in Liverpool’s weights room yesterday. Salah’s outburst has piqued interest in Saudi Arabia with a source at the kingdom’s Public Investment Fund (PIF) saying it will do “whatever it can” to buy him. “We follow Salah’s position thoroughly and believe there can be a move either by loan or buying his contract,” the source said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Asked at a pre-match press conference in Milan on Monday whether Salah, who has scored 250 times for Liverpool since signing from Roma in 2017, had played his last game for the Reds, Slot replied: “I have no clue.” “He has every right to feel what he feels, but he doesn’t have the right to share it with the media,” Slot added. The Saudi source said there were “no direct negotiations or talks with the club at the moment but there will be a move at the right moment”.

The PIF source said the Gulf monarchy



wanted to sign the Egyptian winger in January to join stars such as Cristiano Ronaldo in the Saudi Pro League. PIF holds a 75 percent share in Al-Hilal, Al-Nassr, Al-Ahli and Al-Ittihad, but the source said it was not alone in wanting the Arab world’s biggest football star. “There is a competition inside the Saudi league who will bring Salah,” the source said, adding that the Al Qadsiah club backed by Saudi Arabia’s state-owned oil and gas company Aramco was also keen.

Ronaldo plays for Al Nassr, Salah’s former Liverpool teammate Darwin Nunez is at Al-Hilal, another former Premier League player of the season N’Golo Kante is at Al-Ittihad, but Salah is the biggest star from an Arab country along with Paris Saint-Germain’s Moroccan defender Achraf Hakimi.

Salah, who was not even used as a substitute at Elland Road, is set to depart for the Africa Cup of Nations after next weekend’s home Premier League match against Brighton. He said he was “very, very disappointed” to have again been named among the substitutes at

Leeds, adding: “I got a lot of promises in the summer and so far I am on the bench for three games so I can’t say they keep the promise. I said many times before that, I had a good relationship with the manager and all of a sudden we don’t have any relationship. I don’t know why but it seems to me, how I see it, that someone doesn’t want me in the club.”

Salah made his explosive comments in the midst of a dismal season for both him and Liverpool. He has played a key role in Liverpool’s two Premier League titles and one Champions League triumph during his iconic spell on Merseyside.

But he has been a shadow of his former self during Liverpool’s struggles this season – the title-holders are 10th in the Premier League – with just four goals in 13 top-flight appearances. “All players have their ups and downs. Salah is just 33 and has a lot to do here,” insisted the PIF source. “Salah is a beloved footballer around the globe and will have a massive impact on the Saudi League both on and off the pitch.”

## Gabriel added to Arsenal’s Champions League squad

**London:** Gabriel Jesus has been added to Arsenal’s Champions League squad as the Brazil striker steps up his long-awaited return from injury. Jesus has not played for Arsenal since January after suffering a knee injury during an FA Cup tie against Manchester United.

The 28-year-old is back in training and has been an unused substitute for the Gunners’ recent matches against Chelsea and Brentford. With Arsenal’s teenage winger

Max Dowman picking up an ankle injury in an under-21 match last weekend, Jesus has been elevated to the Champions League squad in time for today’s clash with Club Brugge in Belgium.

“Gabriel Jesus has replaced Max Dowman on our UEFA A list with immediate effect. Therefore, Gabby is eligible to play in our match against Club Brugge in Belgium on Wednesday night,” a statement on Arsenal’s

website said.

Jesus’s return is a boost to Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta after injuries to Viktor Gyokeres and Kai Havertz forced him to use Spain midfielder Mikel Merino as his central striker. Arsenal are top of the Premier League despite last weekend’s loss to Aston Villa and are also in pole position in the Champions League group phase after five successive wins in the tournament.