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FOOTBALL | Page 4

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FIFA ARAB CUP QATAR 2025

FOOTBALL

Stage set for blockbuster semi-finals today

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The stage is set for absorbing semi-finals of the FIFA Arab Cup today. The semi-finals are set to be thrilling affairs with three Asian sides looking to lift the coveted trophy.

Standing in their way are Morocco, who are aiming to keep the trophy in Africa following the elimination of defending champions Algeria in the quarter-finals.

Morocco vs UAE

UAE showed steely resolve in defeating Algeria in the quarter-finals and will have to produce more of the same against Morocco.

While penalties were needed

to decide UAE's passage to the last four stage, Morocco saw off the challenge of Syria in 90 minutes, winning 1-0. UAE's hero in the 7-6 penalty shootout win was goalkeeper Hamad al-Meqbali, who denied Yassine Benzia and Mohamed Khacef from the spot.

The Shabab Al Ahli shot-stopper paid tribute to UAE head coach Cosmin Olariou after his heroics against Algeria.

"We deserved the win, and this success has brought us immense joy despite a tough match. The coach instilled positive energy in us, he motivated us in the right way and showed a lot of faith in us, like we were his own sons. That helped us to fight for our flag, for ourselves and for the coach," said Meqbali.

Morocco will be another tough

test but Meqbali, who is normally Khalid Eisa's understudy, and his teammates are looking forward to locking horns with the African side.

With just days to recover, Lucas Pimenta said it was crucial for UAE to quickly refocus.

"We need to prepare and recover in time to face Morocco, and hopefully we'll manage to win again," said the centre-back.

Saudi Arabia vs Jordan

These are thrilling times for Jordan and they will head into their semi-final against Saudi Arabia with confidence.

Their runners-up finish at the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 was followed by a first-ever qualification for the FIFA World Cup and Jordan are now just two wins

away from lifting the FIFA Arab Cup trophy. They showed grit in the 1-0 win against Iraq in the quarter-finals, soldiering on despite losing the creative Yazan al-Naimat to injury in the first half, with his teammates attributing the victory to their determination to continue showcasing Jordanian football.

"The injury to al-Naimat was a blow to our morale after he had to leave the match so early but everyone showed real responsibility, and in the end we were rewarded with the win," said left-back Mohammad Abu Hashish. "We deserve to be in the semi-finals; we didn't get here by chance. The next match will be tough, and we'll prepare for it properly. We hope to deliver a performance worthy of the Jordanian national team."

Saudi Arabia had to work hard to earn their semi-final spot, needing extra-time to see off the challenge of a resilient Palestine.

Midfielder Mohammed Kanno was the hero for Saudi Arabia, netting the winner in the final minute of the match for his third goal of the tournament.

Head coach Herve Renard has a talent-laden squad at his disposal and will expect to see his side progress.

SEMI-FINALS:
Morocco vs United Arab Emirates
Venue: Khalifa International Stadium (Al Rayyan)
Kick-off: 5:30pm

Saudi Arabia vs Jordan
Venue: Al Bayt Stadium (Al Khor)
Kick-off: 8:30pm



PREVIEW

Saudi Arabia are ready for 'battle' against Jordan

COACH HERVE RENARD SAYS HIS TEAM CAN REACH THE FINAL

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Coach Herve Renard yesterday said Saudi Arabia are expecting a feisty clash against Jordan in the semi-final of the FIFA Arab Cup today.

Renard, who coached Saudi Arabia at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, yesterday also said his players won't adopt half measures against the 2023 AFC Asian Cup finalists.

"After reaching this stage of a tournament, all matches are usually difficult and tough, and require the best effort from every player. And certainly all of my players are aware of this and they are ready for Jordan," Renard said yesterday at a press conference.

"I have confidence in the players' ability to perform at their best and win so we can reach the final," Renard said ahead of the match scheduled to take place at Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor.

"Our preparations have been good for this match. We will be playing to win so we can play the final," the popular Frenchman added.

The Saudi coach added: "Our goal is to get the win in order to please the Saudi fans who have come to Qatar in large numbers to support the team. We will spare no effort to raise the flag of Saudi football here."

Renard, 57, said that he has 'a good relationship' with Jordan's coach Jamal Sellami.

"I know he is focused on working with his own team just like any other coach. I have worked with him for a long time," he said.

Morocco coach Sellami yesterday said: "Our preparations are good, we gave some players a rest yesterday and Sunday will be the final preparation."

The coach added: "We will face a strong and a title favourite team. They have no absences while we have a key player miss-



Saudi Arabia coach Herve Renard and midfielder Murad al-Hawsawi smile during a FIFA Arab Cup 2025 press conference in Doha yesterday.



Jordan coach Jamal Sellami during a press conference in Doha yesterday.

ing out. For the first time, we will play without Yazan al-Naimat and Musa al-Taamari together. We will have to defend smart in the match."

Sellami continued: "We know the strength of the Saudi national team. We will have to be at our best."

The Jordan coach admitted Saudi Arabia will be a tough opponent and that his side won't be thinking of the final just yet.

Sellami told reporters yesterday: "My focus is on the next match. We will face a solid team in defence, attack and midfield. They have some of the best players in Asia. They also have Mohammed Kanno, who has returned to his best form."

"The most important thing now is to face Saudi Arabia, and then consider the final."

"I have a good relationship with Herve Renard and there's mutual respect also. He deserves respect and is worthy of it."

FOCUS

Morocco another tough challenge, says UAE coach Cosmin



Tariq Sektioui, coach of the Moroccan national team, addresses a news conference in Doha yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Coach Cosmin Olariou said yesterday UAE are ready to grind out against a 'tough' Morocco side when the two teams face each other in the FIFA Arab Cup semi-finals today.

"We've faced many tough matches throughout our journey in this tournament and now we are playing another tough team," Olariou said yesterday during a press conference.

"A tough match awaits us, we know that. But reaching the semi-finals of this major tournament is a significant achievement. The atmosphere within the team is positive. Everyone is ready for this important game," he added.

"Playing against a team as strong as Morocco presents a difficult challenge, and at this stage of the tournament, mental preparation becomes a crucial factor, especially under challenging circumstances. I am confident that the players will give their all to get the win," the Romanian said.

"We will try to impose our control over the course of the match (against Morocco) as much as possible," he said without elaborating.

Olariou added in the pre-match press conference: "We will also strive to implement our plans in the defence correctly and find solutions for every chance we get (to score)."

Cosmin continued: "When you reach these (knockout) stages (of a tournament) you rely a lot on the mental strength of the players."

UAE midfielder Adel al-Hosani yesterday said that his team's ambitions are high after reaching the semi-finals.

He said yesterday: "We are determined to make our fans happy who have stood by us in this tour-



UAE coach Cosmin Olariou celebrates after his team reached the semi-finals of the FIFA Arab Cup 2025.

nament. Everyone is fully prepared to face the challenge against Morocco."

Moroccan national team coach Tariq Sektioui said yesterday the 'Atlas Lions' remained ready for their semi-final against the UAE.

At the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, Morocco topped a group that included Croatia, Canada and Belgium. Morocco went on to beat Spain and Portugal, becoming the first African and first Arab team to reach a World Cup semi-final.

"The Moroccan team is ready. The UAE team has brilliant players, we are aware of that. But my players know that mental focus has to be sharp and that discipline at the back has to be good as well," Sektioui said.

Sektioui added that he has complete confidence in his players to give their best so that the travelling Moroccan fans and the ones residing in Qatar 'are happy with the performance' today.

Sektioui pointed out key striker Abderrazak Hamdallah is ready to be named in the squad after his suspension for two matches due to the red card he received against Oman. Sektioui also confirmed winger Tarik Tissoudali has recovered from a leg injury.

FOCUS

Arshdeep helps India beat SA to take series lead

‘Sport teaches you a lot of things, how you come back is more important’



India's Arshdeep Singh (Centre) celebrates with teammates Harshit Rana (right) and Hardik Pandya after taking the wicket of South Africa's Reeza Hendricks during the third Twenty20 match at the Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association Stadium in Dharamsala yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Dharamsala, India

Arshdeep Singh led an inspired bowling attack to help India beat South Africa by seven wickets in the third T20 international yesterday as the hosts took a 2-1 lead in the five-match series.

Left-arm quick Arshdeep returned figures of 2-13 as India bowled out South Africa for 117 after the hosts elected to field first in the Himalayan hill town of Dharamsala.

Fast bowler Harshit Rana, spinners Varun Chakravarthi and Kuldeep Yadav also took two wickets each.

In reply, Indian opener Abhishek Sharma hit 35 off 18 balls as India achieved the target with 25

balls to spare to bounce back from their previous defeat in the series.

“Sport teaches you a lot of things, how you come back is more important,” said India skipper Suryakumar Yadav.

“There was a lot of learning after last game in the meeting and then did what we did in Cuttack (opening match) today.”

It was the home side's bowlers who set up victory after Arshdeep and fellow quick Rana struck in the first two overs to send back Reeza Hendricks, for a duck, and previous-match hero Quinton de Kock, for one.

Skipper Aiden Markram made a valiant 61 off 46 balls to stem the tide but the visitors continued to lose regular wickets.

Rana bowled Dewald Brevis for two, before pace bowler Hardik Pandya dismissed Tristan Stubbs

for nine for his 100th T20 wicket.

Chakravarthi rattled the middle order with his mystery spin as he cut short Donovan Ferreira's knock on 20 and then had Marco Jansen bowled for two in his next over.

Arshdeep, who was named player of the match, had Markram out and left-arm wrist spinner Kuldeep took two in the 20th over to wrap up the innings on the final ball.

“They got the ball in the right areas and before you know it we were four-five down,” said Markram.

“They didn't give us much to score off. I tried to take it deep. Whole time I thought if I got us to 140-150 it could have been a closer game.”

India started the chase briskly thanks to Sharma's attacking

knock laced with three fours and three sixes, as well his 60-run stand with fellow opener Shubman Gill (28).

Sharma fell to Corbin Bosch and Jansen took down Gill.

Suryakumar's struggles with the bat continued as he fell for 12 off Lungi Ngidi, before Tilak Varma (26) and Shivam Dube (10) steered the team home.

T20 specialist Suryakumar has managed just 239 runs across his last 21 innings in this format with no fifties.

The fourth match is on Wednesday in the north Indian city of Lucknow.

BRIEF SCORES: India 120 for 3 (Abhishek 35, Gill 28, Bosch 1-18) **beat South Africa 117** (Markram 61, Varun 2-11, Kuldeep 2-12, Arshdeep 2-13) **by seven wickets.**

SPOTLIGHT

England's 2023 fightback a useful Ashes reminder for Australia's Green

Reuters
Sydney

England's fightback to draw the last Ashes series 2-2 is a useful reminder to Australia that they cannot afford to take their foot off the gas with a 2-0 lead this time around, **Cameron Green** said yesterday.

Australia go into the third Test, which starts in Adelaide on Wednesday, looking firmly in control of the five-match series after victories by eight wickets in Perth and the day-nighter in Brisbane.

The memories of 2023 in England, when the hosts came back from a similar deficit to level the series, were a cautionary tale for Green, however, as Australia look to lock up series honours with two matches to spare.

“That's a really good reminder for our team,” the all-rounder told reporters at Adelaide Oval yesterday.

“It's a good reminder for us to stay really level. I think you can at times look a bit far ahead, but that's a great reminder for us to stay as good as we can be and finish it off.”

Former Australia paceman Mitchell Johnson wrote this weekend that England could avoid a 5-0 series sweep but they would need to change their mindset to do so.

Green, though, does not ex-

pect England to change their aggressive approach to batting even with the series on the line, regardless of what kind of wicket or weather Adelaide serves up.

“I think they've been really consistent the last three years with how they want to go about it, so I don't think conditions or heat really changed that,” he said.

“I always think that the heat probably plays into our hands a little bit better. I think it's the same for when we go over to England, it's really cold.”

Local TV, always eager to spot any signs of disgruntlement in the England camp, has been broadcasting footage this weekend of a cameraman being ushered away from England players by security as they headed to their flight to Adelaide on Saturday.

Media have been repeatedly told that neither team will be available for interviews while in transit between matches during the series, and that any video should be “captured from a respectful distance”.

Green said he had some sympathy for the England players.

“You never like getting filmed, especially when you want to get away from it all,” he said. “So there's always sympathy for anyone in life that's getting filmed in public or in a private space. It's never a nice feeling.”



COMMENT

England coach McCullum doubles down again with Ashes on the line

Reuters
Sydney

Brendon McCullum said there will be no major changes to England's approach in the third Ashes test with the coach hoping for better execution from his players in what he expects to be more conducive conditions in Adelaide.

New Zealander McCullum has come under fire for his aggressive approach to the game after England slumped to losses by eight wickets in two days in Perth, and four days in Brisbane.

Another defeat in Adelaide, where the third Test starts on Wednesday, means the end of England's hopes of wresting back the Ashes and exposes the tourists to the possibility of the dreaded

5-0 whitewash. “We came here with high hopes and high expectations. We had a plan that we felt was going to give ourselves the best chance of being successful,” McCullum told reporters at Adelaide Oval yesterday.

“We haven't quite executed that so far, and Australia has seized those key moments and hence they sit 2-0 up. It doesn't mean that we throw that plan out. We just need to chisel away at some of the things we haven't got quite right and make sure that we still have that conviction of what we're trying to achieve.

“I think these conditions should suit our style a little bit better as well ... this is probably more attuned to our best style of cricket.”

Several of England's batters have struggled for runs in Australia but McCullum said whole-

sale changes to the line-up for Adelaide were highly unlikely.

“We've had a top seven now for a period of time, and we've been reasonably successful with it,” he said. “We know we haven't got enough runs so far in the series ... but for us to go on and win the series, it's not about throwing out what's been successful.

“It's about having more conviction. It's about making sure that we have our plans and our disciplines around it. Just screw it down a touch more. Knee-jerk reactions and chopping and changing settled batting line-ups is not really our thing.”

McCullum, who took over as a coach in May 2022, said the last thing on his mind was the security of his own job. “You do the job to the best of your ability. You have conviction in what you're doing,

and whatever happens, happens,” he said.

“I certainly don't coach to protect a job. I coach to get the best out of people ... and that won't be changing this week, just because the prize is at its highest.

“I firmly believe if we play our best cricket, we're a massive chance in this Test match. If we do that, then the narrative changes, the series momentum changes.”

McCullum also addressed an incident at the airport over the weekend when team security ushered Australian media away from the players. “I think we've been very respectful right throughout this tour,” he said.

“We knew that the scrutiny ... would be more extreme than we're used to and I think over the last few weeks, I think we've dealt with it really well.”



ENGLAND'S ASHES HOPES HANG BY A THREAD AS 'BAZBALL' BACKFIRES

England arrived in Australia with genuine hopes of a first Ashes series win “Down Under” since 2010-11 and seeking their first series triumph home or away against their oldest rivals in a decade. But after just six days of cricket they are 2-0 down with three matches to play, with their “Bazball” style of ultra-attacking cricket under fire following crushing eight-wicket defeats in Perth and Brisbane.

AFP Sport looks at what has gone wrong for England so far.

Approach

Coach Brendon McCullum and captain Ben Stokes injected fresh energy into an England side that had won just one of 17 Tests when they joined forces in 2022, urging players to play fearless cricket. Yet Bazball has at times morphed from a guiding ethos into something nearing a dogma, with a self-defeating inflexibility

at times. Early success has been replaced by more modest results - England have won 13 and lost 14 of their 29 matches in the World Test Championship (WTC) since June 2023. A bristling Stokes last month labelled former players critical of England's approach as “has-beens”, drawing a sharp rebuke.

“They are up their own backsides convinced that Test cricket has changed so much that only they know anything about the modern game,” England multiple Ashes winner Geoffrey Boycott wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*.

Strategy

England managing director Rob Key has long believed in the need for sheer pace on typically hard Australian pitches. “I don't care how many wickets you take,” he said last year. “I want to know how hard you are running in, how hard you are hit-

ting the pitch and are you able to sustain pace at 85 to 88 miles per hour?” Veteran Australia fast bowler Mitchell Starc has shone for the home side, taking 18 wickets in the series so far. But the surfaces in the opening two Tests have also rewarded traditional English-style seam bowling, with Australia's Michael Neser, averaging just above 80mph, taking 5-42 in the second innings at Brisbane.

Preparation

McCullum was ridiculed following defeat in the pink-ball clash in Brisbane after saying England had trained too much and were over-prepared. The tourists played only one pre-series warm-up fixture and wicketkeeper Jamie Smith, along with others, had never appeared in a pink-ball Test before the match in Brisbane. England's lack of match practice came back to haunt them as they

dropped five catches in the first innings. Stokes' men also opted against having a tour game between Brisbane and next week's third Test in Adelaide. “Nowhere in a million years has preparation been right,” said former England captain and Ashes winner Michael Vaughan.

Discipline

England have been found wanting in basic disciplines, with batsmen taking unnecessary risks and bowlers unable to maintain an accurate line and length. Stokes' team have also ignored repeated warnings about the dangers of trying to clear the bigger boundaries of Australian grounds and the need to minimise risk when facing Starc. After their defeat in the second Test, Stokes demanded his players toughen up, insisting his England team is “not a place for weak men”. But it may be too late to turn the tide after

Australia triumphed in Brisbane despite being without three senior bowlers - skipper Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and Nathan Lyon - who have more than 1,100 Test wickets between them.

Selection

England have indulged certain players to an extent previously unthinkable. Opener Zak Crawley has been retained despite averaging a modest 33.7 in WTC matches since June 2023 in the belief he would come good in Australia, reflecting a unhealthy obsession with the Ashes to the exclusion of all else. Fellow top-order batsman Ollie Pope averages a mere 31.8 over the same period, yet Jacob Bethell, the man next in line, has yet to make a first-class hundred. “This lot aren't even afraid of getting dropped, which is why we see the same old failings, particularly in the batting,” said an exasperated Boycott.

FOOTBALL

Saudi, Iraq to host AGCFF U-15, U-23 tournaments

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Minister of Sports and Youth and AGCFF President HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani yesterday chaired AGCFF's General Assembly meeting in Doha.

The meeting approved Saudi Arabia and Iraq as hosts for the Gulf Cup tournaments for under-15 and under-23 age groups, with dates to be determined later after referral to the federation's Competitions Committee.

Several items, topics, and proposals submitted by member states were discussed, with the agenda adopted and the financial and administrative report reviewed. The meeting also addressed Saudi Arabia's hosting of the 27th Gulf Cup, scheduled from September 23 to October 6, 2026.

The Executive Office of the Gulf Federation emphasised the need to continue Gulf football's successes and further develop tournaments, especially at the youth level. The Federation also praised Qatar for

its successful hosting of the Under-17 and Under-23 Gulf Cup tournaments, noting the organisation left a positive impression on all teams.

Jassim al-Rumaihi, Secretary-General of the Gulf Football Federation, said during a press conference after the meeting that the key decisions included Iraq organising the under-23 Gulf Cup in Basra, and Saudi Arabia hosting the under-15 Gulf Cup, with dates to be set later by the Competitions Committee according to the international calendar. Al-Rumaihi also commended the efforts of all Gulf federations in developing competitions and exploring the possibility of inviting teams from outside the Gulf region in the future.

He added that the timing of the 27th Gulf Cup, from September 23 to October 6, 2026, was chosen to accommodate Saudi Arabia's hosting of the 2027 Asian Cup.

The Gulf Football Federation's inspection committee will make several visits to Saudi Arabia in the next phase to monitor preparations, assess the host country's readiness, and review alternatives as customary.



President of AGCFF HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani presided over its Ordinary General Assembly meeting in Doha yesterday.

BUNDESLIGA

Late Kane penalty saves Bayern point against Mainz

DORTMUND HELD AT FREIBURG AFTER BELLINGHAM SEES RED

AFP

Berlin

Harry Kane converted a penalty with three minutes remaining to save Bayern Munich's blushes in a 2-2 home draw against last-placed Mainz in the Bundesliga yesterday.

Mainz came from a goal down to snatch the lead thanks to an excellent Lee Jae-sung header, putting Bayern on track for a first league defeat since March.

So often Bayern's saviour this season, Kane won and converted the penalty to keep Vincent Kompany's side undefeated and extend their lead atop the table to nine points.

Borussia Dortmund's draw at Freiburg earlier on Sunday had given league leaders Bayern a chance to go further ahead of their rivals with victory over a Mainz side, who have just one win all season and coach Urs Fischer making his league debut in the dugout.

Bayern's teenage forward Lenart Karl continued his impressive form, turning in a Serge Gnabry cutback to give the hosts the lead on 29 minutes.

Mainz won a free-kick just before the break and William Boving floated in a clever cross right to Kacper Potulski, who powered an unstoppable header in from close



Bayern Munich's Harry Kane reacts after scoring against Mainz during the Bundesliga match yesterday. (Reuters)

range Midway through the second half, Mainz's Lee then headed his side into an unlikely lead.

As he did when scoring to snatch Bayern a draw against Union Berlin in November – the only previous time the defending champions had dropped points this season – England captain Kane was again the late difference-maker for the Bavarians.

Kane went down in the box under a challenge and coolly converted for his 18th league goal this season and his 29th for Bayern in all competitions.

Borussia Dortmund missed a chance to climb to second in the Bundesliga past RB Leipzig, conceding an equaliser in a 1-1 draw at Freiburg after Jobe Bellingham saw red.

Ramy Bensebaini's 31st-minute goal had Dortmund in front but Bellingham was sent off for a professional foul shortly after half-time.

The hosts made the most of their one-man advantage, camping out in Dortmund's half and levelling things up thanks to an acrobatic Lucas Hoeler strike.

"We're definitely disappointed," Dortmund's Gregor Kobel told DAZN.

"If the red card doesn't happen, the result would look different. We had the game under control and were very dominant."

Dortmund striker Serhou Guirassy missed a header while unmarked in the box five minutes in, continuing his recent dry spell.

Guirassy scored 38 goals in all competitions last season but has just one in his past 10 Bundesliga matches.

Dortmund took the lead when Bensebaini smashed in a lofted Yan Couto free-kick from close range.

The visitors had looked comfortable but lost control of the match when Bellingham, as the last man, felled an on-rushing Philipp Treu on the edge of the box.

With Freiburg peppering the Dortmund goal, Kobel made a string of impressive saves but could not keep out Hoeler's curling strike.

FOCUS

Saudi and Iraq enter U-23 Gulf Cup final

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Saudi Arabia and Iraq reached the AGCFF U-23 Gulf Cup final after winning their respective semi-finals at Aspire pitches yesterday.

Iraq defeated Qatar 7-6 on penalties after the match ended 1-1 in regular time. Al Annabi's goal was scored by Rashid al-Abdullah in the 84th minute, while Iraq's goal came from a

penalty by Amouri Faisal in the 10th minute. Saudi Arabia qualified for the final after defeating UAE 2-0 in their semi-final.

Abdullah Radif opened the scoring for Saudi Arabia in the 31st minute, and Thamer al-Khaibari sealed the victory with a goal in the 89th minute.

The final will take place tomorrow at the iconic Stadium 974 – the first fully demountable covered football stadium in FIFA World Cup history, which hosted matches during the 2022 tournament.



Action from Qatar-Iraq semi-final match.

Higa becomes first Japanese golfer to win Asian Tour order of merit

Kazuki Higa made history as the first golfer from Japan to win the Asian Tour order of merit after finishing seventh at the season-ending Saudi Open. Higa carded a four-under-par 68 in Saturday's final round at Dirab Golf and Country Club, near Riyadh, to finish on 16-under, seven behind the winner Bjorn Hellgren of Sweden. It was enough to see Higa top the standings ahead of Zimbabwe's Scott Vincent.

"I am so, so happy. This is a great honour," said the 30-year-old Higa. "I just love playing golf. That's what it's about. I can't wait to get home to see my family." Higa also earned an exemption into the British Open for his achievement. The ultra-consistent Higa started the year with three top 10s in the Philippines, India and New Zealand.

MOTORSPORT

Second round of Qatar Drift Championship concludes

By Sports Reporter
Doha

After a break of more than six weeks, drifting competitions returned to the spotlight with the second round of the Qatar Drift Championship for the 2025/2026 season.

The round was held under the patronage Qatar Racing Club Chairman HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani and witnessed a large crowd that filled the club's grandstands, alongside the participation of an elite group of drift champions from the Gulf countries and the wider region.

In the local category, Abdullah al-Mouhtasib topped the qualifying standings, ahead of Yasser al-Shater and Mohammed al-Jaber in second and third respectively, while last season's local category champion Yazan Jabshah finished fourth. The tandem battles also featured strong and intense

matchups. Qualifying leader Ali Makhseed advanced to the second round after defeating Meysiar Abu Shaiba. The second matchup was an all-local duel between Yasser al-Shater and Mohammed al-Jaber, which ended in favour of al-Shater, who progressed to the next round. Last round's runner-up Riyadh al-Mabsali continued his campaign by overcoming Mohammed al-Azmi, while Salem al-Sarraf secured his place in the second round after defeating Mazen Nasser.

On the other side of the elimination bracket, Mohammed Khourshid, who finished second in qualifying, defeated Saleh al-Rumaihi, making his first appearance in the championship, to advance to the second round. Meanwhile, last season's local category champion Yazan Jabshah moved on after overcoming Bakheet al-Hajri. The matchup between opening round champion Ahmed al-Amri and Saoud al-Abdulhadi produced no surprises, with al-Amri advancing. The final first-round



QRC Director General Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani poses with the winners of the second round of the Qatar Drift Championship.

duel brought together Abdullah al-Mouhtasib and Saoud al-Attiya in an all-local contest that ended in favour of al-Mouhtasib.

In the second round, Ali Makhseed and Salem al-Sarraf quali-

fied for the first semi-final, with Makhseed defeating Yasser al-Shater and al-Sarraf overcoming Riyadh al-Mabsali. On the other side, Mohammed Khourshid advanced to the second semi-final

after defeating Yazan Jabsha, while Ahmed al-Amri completed the semi-final lineup by beating Abdullah al-Mouhtasib. The semi-final battles were extremely tense and evenly matched, with

both encounters initially ending in draws, forcing the judges to order reruns to determine the winners. In the first semi-final, last season's champion Ali Makhseed faced his former runner-up Salem al-Sarraf. Makhseed managed to edge ahead with difficulty to become the first finalist of the second round.

In the second semi-final, Mohammed Khourshid defeated last round's champion Ahmed al-Amri, who later finished fourth overall after losing the third-place playoff to al-Sarraf, allowing the latter to climb onto the podium in third place for the second consecutive round. Attention then turned to the final showdown between qualifying leader Ali Makhseed and qualifying runner-up Mohammed Khourshid. The duel delivered the highest level of excitement seen in the round, but victory ultimately went to Makhseed, who secured his first win of the season, while Khourshid settled for second place and his first podium appearance of the season.

PREMIER LEAGUE

City smash Palace to fire title warning, Villa beat West Ham

Forest beat Tottenham to move five points clear of danger zone

AFP
London

Manchester City thumped Crystal Palace 3-0 yesterday to climb back to within two points of Premier League leaders Arsenal as Aston Villa twice came from behind to beat West Ham.

Elsewhere, Nottingham Forest demolished Tottenham 3-0 while Sunderland saw off local rivals Newcastle 1-0 thanks to a Nick Woltemade own goal.

Arsenal, who have set the pace in this season's Premier League, squeaked home on Saturday with a 2-1 win against bottom-club Wolves, thanks to two own goals.

That put the pressure back on City, who have been showing ominous signs that they are finding their feet in recent weeks.

Pep Guardiola's men braced for a tough task at Selhurst Park against high-flying Crystal Palace and Oliver Glasner's side were the more dangerous team in the first half. But Palace failed to take their chances, with Yeremy Pino hitting the crossbar with only goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma to beat.

Erling Haaland had largely been on the periphery of the game but scored his 101st Premier League goal when he headed a pinpoint Matheus Nunes cross across Dean Henderson and into the net shortly before the break.

Palace again started the second half brightly but could not break through and paid the price when Phil Foden swept home from distance after receiving the ball from Rayan Cherkil. It was the sixth goal in four Premier League games for the forward, being watched at Selhurst Park by England manager Thomas Tuchel.

City made certain of the three points when Haaland thundered a penalty past Henderson after Savinho was taken down by the goalkeeper following a surging run down the middle late in the game. Villa started their match at the London Stadium as the form team in the league, with nine wins in 10 league matches.

But they fell behind after just



Manchester City's striker Erling Haaland celebrates after scoring the opening goal of the Premier League match against Crystal Palace at Selhurst Park in south London yesterday. (AFP)

29 seconds when Mateus Fernandes robbed Ezri Konsa and rifled home. Unai Emery's men were level just minutes later when John McGinn's cross was headed into his own net by Konstantinos Mavropanos.

Jarrod Bowen put the Hammers back in front midway through the second half but Villa again drew level early in the second period through Morgan Rogers. Rogers fired Villa into the lead for the first time in the 79th minute, smashing home a dipping drive from outside the box to seal a 3-2 win.

The victory leaves Emery's men just one point behind City and five clear of fourth-placed Chelsea.

Tottenham travelled to Nottingham in desperate need of a win after just one victory in their past six league matches. But Callum Hudson-Odoi scored twice and Ibrahim Sangare lashed home a superb third to increase the pressure on manager Thomas Frank, struggling in his first season at the club and lifted his side five points clear of the danger zone in 16th

A costly mistake playing out from the back was punished by

Callum Hudson-Odoi, who then scored with an overhit cross as goalkeeper Guglielmo Vicario was caught out of position.

Ibrahim Sangare scored a wonder goal to deepen the visiting side's pain.

Spurs had appeared to be on the right track after a draw at Newcastle and wins over Brentford and Slavia Prague.

But the club have now won just once in their past seven Premier League matches and are mired in mid-table.

Manager Frank is in his first season at the club after taking over from the sacked Ange Postecoglou, whose side finished 17th last season.

Asked after the game if he would be given time to implement his ideas, Frank said: "I can't see why not. I think it's pretty evident that if no one gets the time, no one can turn this around. This is not a quick fix."

He added that, while he may appear cool, he is hiding a "hurricane" inside him.

"I do everything to control my emotions, which is a hurricane inside me, because, of course, it's deeply frustrating that we are not doing better today after three good performances," he said. The Dane was honest about his side's display at the City Ground, calling it a "very bad performance".

"But I also know that to change this will take some time," he said. "No one will want to hear about that. It's just reality."

"I think the ones who have followed the club and the team, I think it's fair to say there's been a few not too consistent performances and that's the thing. We are working very hard."

Sunderland were facing Newcastle in the Premier League for the first time in nearly a decade after spending years out of the top division.

Their goal came from an unlikely source when Newcastle forward Woltemade headed Nordin Mukiele's cross past his own goalkeeper in the opening moments of the second half. The win lifted Sunderland to seventh in the table.

Brentford and host Leeds United shared points in a 1-1 draw.

SPOTLIGHT

'Golden moment' as Messi meets Tendulkar, Chhetri

AFP
Mumbai

Football icon Lionel Messi's second day in India passed smoothly yesterday, after a chaotic opening to his three-day tour, as the World Cup winner kicked balls into the crowd and met cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar.

Messi greeted excited fans decked out in Argentina football jerseys at a packed Wankhede stadium in India's financial hub Mumbai, as supporters chanted his name.

The 38-year-old Argentina and Inter Miami superstar took centre stage in the presence of India's sporting royalty including Tendulkar and football star Sunil Chhetri.

Messi along with his Inter Miami teammates Luis Suarez and Rodrigo de Paul are part of a so-called GOAT Tour of a cricket-crazy nation.

Cricket great Tendulkar presented Messi with his iconic number 10 jersey from India's 2011 World Cup triumph at the same venue.

"I have spent some incredible moments here," said batting star Tendulkar.

"Mumbai is a city of dreams and number of dreams have seen the finish line here on this very venue and without your support we could never have seen those golden moments in 2011.

"And today having all three greats of game here is indeed a golden moment for Mumbai, Mumbaikars and India."

Although a cricket power-

house, the nation of 1.4 billion struggles on the football pitch and are 142nd on the FIFA rankings.

"Thank you for being here and encouraging youngsters," said Tendulkar. "I hope football here in India also reaches the heights that we all aspire."

The Mumbai event went smoothly compared to Saturday's in the eastern city of Kolkata where heavy security left fans struggling to catch a glimpse of Messi.

Frustrated fans, many having paid more than \$100 for tickets, broke down barricades and stormed the pitch after the superstar abruptly left the arena.

Spectators also ripped out stadium seats and hurled water bottles onto the track.

One person has been arrested for the incident.

Before the chaos erupted, Messi unveiled a 21-metre (70-foot) statue which shows him holding aloft the World Cup in 2022.

The footballer was in Hyderabad city later on Saturday where he addressed the crowd briefly in Spanish.

Messi wraps up his India tour today, with a possible meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The footballer won his second consecutive Major League Soccer Most Valuable Player award this week after propelling Inter Miami to the MLS title and leading the league in goals.

The former Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain forward will spearhead Argentina's defence of the World Cup in June-July in North America.



Argentina's footballer Lionel Messi with India's retired cricketer Sachin Tendulkar during Messi's GOAT Tour at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday. (Reuters)

FOCUS

Van Dijk wants 'leader' Salah to stay at Liverpool

AFP
London

Virgil van Dijk wants Mohamed Salah to stay at Liverpool despite the Egyptian star's incendiary rant about the club, but the Reds captain admits he does not know what will happen over the next few weeks.

Salah came off the bench against Brighton on Saturday for his first appearance since claiming he had been "thrown under the bus" by the club following last weekend's 3-3 draw with Leeds.

The forward also said in the same interview at Elland Road that he had no relationship with Liverpool manager Arne Slot, who had named him as a substitute for three straight games.

Salah was then omitted from the midweek Champions League trip to Inter Milan, a 1-0 win for Liverpool, but he was back in action as a first-half substitute against Brighton.

The 33-year-old provided an assist for Hugo Ekitike's second goal in a much-needed 2-0 win, but will now jet to the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) and could be absent for five weeks.

After the match, Slot said there was "no issue to resolve" with his star forward, but speculation continues to rumble over the player's future.

Van Dijk is adamant that he wants Salah to stay and said he had told him so. "I would love to have him around because he is one of the leaders, but the fact is he is going to AFCON. We will be in contact over the next days and weeks like we always are and let's see," the Dutch defender said.

"I wish him absolutely all the best - and (to) come back, hopefully. I have no control over that."

"We hope he will be absolutely successful there and we all hope he will be coming back to be important for the rest of the season. But, on the other side of it, we all know football and have no idea what is going to happen."

Premier League champions Liverpool ended a tumultuous week by extending their unbeaten run



Liverpool's Mohamed Salah applauds the fans following the Premier League match against Brighton and Hove Albion at Anfield in Liverpool. (AFP)

to five matches in all competitions. Van Dijk said it proved the dressing room had not been distracted by the Salah situation. "As a captain I have to deal with how the boys react to it and they reacted perfectly fine. Mo, in the end, reacted perfectly fine as well," he added.

Van Dijk also praised Slot for dealing with a tumultuous period at Liverpool, whose Premier League title defence has collapsed in recent weeks.

"There is a lot of noise, pressure from the outside world and rightly so as we've not been close to the standard we were showing last season," he said.

"But personally looking at it, and from the conversations we have on a daily basis, I think he has handled it very well."

"This moment of time is a very good moment to see how everyone responds. I think the manager has done perfectly."

LONGINES HATHAB - QATAR EQUESTRIAN TOUR

Al-Emadi claims Diamond Tour title

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Khaled Mohammed al-Emadi crowned a stand-out performance by winning the Diamond Tour as the ninth round of the Longines Hathab - Qatar Equestrian Tour concluded at the main arena of the Qatar Equestrian Federation.

Competing over fences set at 150cm, al-Emadi secured first place aboard Thor Ter Wilgen Z with a time of 72.68 seconds. Hamad Nasser al-Qadi finished second on Edison Z in 74.84 seconds, while Faleh Suwaid al-Ajami claimed third place on Karmalensky with a time of 75.75 seconds.

The ninth round featured a full program including Level 1 and Level 2 dressage competitions, the preliminary dressage test, the FEI World Equestrian Challenge, the Future Riders class at 90cm, the Bronze Tour at 120cm (individual and team), and the Diamond Tour at 150cm.

In the Bronze Tour (120cm) individual competition, Ibrahim Khalid al-Kuwari took first place on Flexy Bel Z with a time of 45.51 seconds. Khalid al-Hadi finished second on Capoen (48.43 seconds), followed by Ghanem Nasser al-Qadi in third on Harry UP (48.75 seconds).

In the team standings, Al Shaqab claimed first place with a combined time of 112.86 seconds, ahead of Ajwad in second (107.88 seconds) and The Dome in third (109.89 seconds). Dressage competitions also delivered strong performances. In the preliminary



Longines Hathab Event Director Abdullah al-Marri presented the trophies to the Diamond Tour podium winners Khalid Mohammed al-Emadi, Hamad Nasser al-Qadi and Faleh Suwaid al-Ajami.

test, Noura Fathi Nassar topped the standings with 63.571 points, followed by Al Anoud Rashid al-Nuaimi on 60.357 points.

In Level 2 dressage, Mona Mohammed Hammoudi claimed first place with 68.880 points, ahead of Hamad Nasser al-Marri (66.293 points) and Caroline Featherstone (64.741 points). In the junior Level 2 category, Hamad Nasser al-Marri finished first, followed by Hadi Nasser al-Hajri and Moza Hamza al-Kuwari.

Level 1 dressage honours went to Hemyan Khalifa al-Kuwari with a score of 68.642 points, narrowly edging Youssef Asamli in second (68.600 points), while Michelle Germes placed third with 67.067 points. The FEI World Equestrian

Challenge saw Suhaim Hamad al-Yafai take first place in 50.27 seconds. Ahmed Ali al-Jaber finished second (53.96 seconds), while Tamim bin Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani placed third with a time of 57.01 seconds.

Awards were presented by Bader bin Mohammed al-Darwish, President of the Qatar Equestrian Federation, and Mohammed bin Jaber al-Kharyar, Director of Equestrian Education at Al Shaqab.

In the Future Riders class at 90cm, Layan Sultan al-Thani won the title with a time of 17.84 seconds. Khalifa bin Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani finished second (18.13 seconds), while Salman Faisal al-Marri placed third with a time of 19.47 seconds.