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SPORT

**FIFA ARAB CUP
QATAR 2025**

FOOTBALL

Jordan set up Arab Cup final showdown against Morocco

Al-Rashdan's header powers Jordan past Saudi, Morocco brush aside the United Arab Emirates



Jordan's Nizar al-Rashdan (third left) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Saudi Arabia in the FIFA Arab Cup semi-final at the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor. (Reuters)



Morocco's Abdelazak Hamdallah celebrates with Mohamed Boulacsout and Aschraf El Mahdioui after scoring against United Arab Emirates at the Khalifa International Stadium in Doha. (Reuters)

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Nizar al-Rashdan's brilliant header proved decisive as Jordan beat ten-man Saudi Arabia at Al Bayt Stadium yesterday to set up a FIFA Arab Cup final against Morocco.

In the earlier semi-final, Morocco secured their place in the title clash with another imperious defensive display, brushing past the United Arab Emirates 3-0 at Khalifa International Stadium.

Jordan were without star forward Yazan al-Naimat, who suffered a serious knee injury in the quarter-final victory over Iraq. But the World Cup-bound nation showed why they are the highest-scoring side in the Arab Cup in Qatar as they ground out a deserved win against Saudi Arabia.

After a first half with few chances for either team, the game opened up when al-Rashdan met an inswinging cross from Mahmoud al-Mardi with a powerful, leaping header to give Jordan the lead. Saudi Arabia responded, with Feras al-Brikan's smart turn-and-shot well saved by Jordan goalkeeper Yazid Abu Leila. Drama came late when Saudi defender Waleed al-Ahmad was shown a straight red card in stoppage time for denying a clear goalscoring opportunity, as Jordan held on for victory.

Jordan, who lost the Asian Cup final to hosts Qatar in February last year, will hope for a better outcome as they return to Lusail Stadium for another final on Thursday, this time against Morocco.

Yesterday, Morocco put on a brilliant defensive display against the UAE. So far in the tournament, they have conceded only one goal – an own goal in the first hour of



A total of 62,825 fans turned up at the Al Bayt Stadium to watch FIFA Arab Cup semi-final between Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

their opening match. Going forward, they have been clinical in converting the chances they create. On this occasion, a Karim El Berkaoui header, from a Hamza El Mousaoui cross just before the half-hour mark,

proved decisive. The UAE struggled to penetrate centrally, relying on long-range efforts or a string of crosses, most of which were comfortably dealt with by the superb central pairing of Soufiane Bouftini and

Marwane Saadane. The Atlas Lions then sealed the win with two late goals. The first came as a pair of substitutes combined, with Abderrazzaq Hamdallah squaring for Achraf El Mahdioui to guide his shot

home from inside the box. The second saw the provider turn finisher, as Hamdallah tucked home a Mohamed Boulacsout cross to book Morocco's passage to the final.

UAE coach Cosmin Olariu expressed regret over the loss. "The scoreline does not reflect the course of the game. My team performed well, especially in the second half, but we did not capitalise on our opportunities."

He added: "We started the match positively, but conceded an early goal. In the second half, we controlled the ball and created more chances than in any previous match, but Morocco took advantage of counter-attacks before the end of the half and scored two more goals that decided the match."

Olariu continued: "We took risks to try to recover, but faced a strong, well-organised defensive team. Even when they made mistakes, we did not take advantage of them."

He also noted that physical fatigue and injuries affected the team's performance in the semi-final.

"We played 120 minutes against Algeria, and it was difficult to prepare in just two days for a tough match against Morocco. We also played five matches in nine days and lost four players to injuries, which impacted us greatly."

Concluding, Olariu said: "At the start of the tournament, no one expected us to progress from the group stage, but we reached the semi-finals and faced strong teams like Egypt and Algeria, proving our ability to handle pressure."

Despite fielding many young players, they gained valuable experience that will benefit their future through this tournament."



Jordan's Mahmoud Nayef Ahmad al-Mardi (right) vies for the ball with Saudi Arabia's Mohamed Kanno at Al Bayt Stadium.



Saudi Arabia's coach Herve Renard shows his frustration on the touchline during his team's loss to Jordan.



Morocco's El Amine Zouhrouh attempts to get past United Arab Emirates' defenders at Khalifa International Stadium.

BOXING

‘Saviour’ Joshua targets Paul thrashing

Reuters
Mexico City

Anthony Joshua says boxing needs saving – and he is happy to play the hero – as the former heavyweight champion prepares to face YouTube star-turned-boxer Jake Paul in Miami on December 19.

The fight, which pits the former twice unified heavyweight champion against the social media celebrity, has attracted its fair share of critics.

Former WBC heavyweight titleholder Deontay Wilder has dismissed it as a ‘money grab’ while some of Joshua’s previous opponents have raised concerns for relative novice Paul’s safety in the ring against one of boxing’s heaviest hitters.

Joshua is no stranger to crossover clashes, knocking out former UFC heavyweight champion Francis Ngannou after just two rounds in March 2024.

The London 2012 Olympic gold medalist told Reuters he is aiming for another statement win against Paul.

“I’ve been called out of my hia-

tus to save boxing once again,” said Joshua, referring to his year out of the ring after losing his last fight against Daniel Dubois in a fifth-round stoppage.

“I’m the saviour. I saved boxing from Ngannou and now I have to save boxing from Jake Paul,” Joshua added, embracing the biblical symbolism of his surname.

Since first entering the ring in 2020, Paul has amassed a 12-1 record with 7 knockout wins. In that time the former YouTube-prankster and Disney Channel star has fought and beaten other influencers, basketball star Nate Robinson and a host of MMA champions, including Anderson Silva and Tyron Woodley.

Such a record pales in comparison to Joshua, who has fought some of the heavyweight division’s greatest champions in Wladimir Klitschko and Oleksandr Usyk. At their November 21 face-off, 6’6 Joshua towered over 6’1 Paul, and the British veteran is expecting an easy payday.

INTEGRITY OF BOXING

“I’ve got to take the positives from this: I get to go home early,” Joshua quipped, adding that it was not his

responsibility to be concerned for a ‘deluded’ Paul’s well-being in the eight-round, 10-ounce glove contest.

“This is boxing. I can’t go in there thinking about him. I’ll think about myself. He’d do the same thing to me if he could.”

Asked whether the bout would erode the integrity of the sport, Joshua told Reuters he wasn’t paying attention to the criticism.

“I understand from the point of view of pugilist purists this shouldn’t be happening”, the 36-year-old explained.

“But God willing I live until I’m 70, I don’t want to look back and say, ‘I wish I took the opportunity and I didn’t do it because the purists said so.’”

The opportunity in question is a prize purse of \$50mn guaranteed plus bonuses for each fighter, with the spectacle to become only the second boxing event broadcast live on Netflix.

The first fight put on by the streaming giant was Paul’s controversial win over heavyweight great Mike Tyson last year, which was also criticised for pushing the boundaries of safety in sport. Aged 58 at the time of that fight, Tyson

had not entered a boxing ring in almost two decades, and squared off against the then 27-year-old Paul after struggling with sciatica and even occasionally using a wheelchair.

Allegations of match-fixing were subsequently raised when Paul claimed he pulled his punches to let the Netflix main event go the distance. What’s certain, however, is Paul’s ability to pull in viewers with the Tyson fight becoming the most streamed sporting event in history.

“Eyes are eyes and there’s more eyes on the sport. There’s no denying that,” Joshua said, crediting Paul for bringing boxing to new audiences at a time when other combat sports such as MMA were encroaching on its market share.

As for what happens after the Paul bout, Joshua said he was not ruling out the possibility of coaxing former heavyweight champion Tyson Fury out of retirement to finally deliver the mega-fight boxing enthusiasts have waited over a decade to see.

“It’s up to Fury. I’ve signed to fight him a number of times. I don’t want to get my hopes up and be let down again.”



COMMENT

Brook admits he needs to rein himself in with Ashes on the line



Reuters
Adelaide

England batter Harry Brook admits that he might need to curb his aggressive instincts a little bit when the Ashes go on the line in the third Test in Adelaide this week. Coach Brendon McCullum insisted on Sunday that England’s aggressive style of batting will not change despite heavy defeats in the first two Tests.

Brook, who has contributed 98 runs to England’s cause over four innings so far, conceded two of his dismissals in Perth and Brisbane were the result of “shocking shots” that he would reconsider if he had his time again.

“I’ll admit that every day of the week, especially that one in Perth, it’s nearly a bouncer and I’ve tried to drive it. It was just bad batting,” he told reporters yesterday at the Adelaide Oval, where the third Test starts tomorrow. “The one in Brisbane, I’ve tried to hit for six so that’s what I mean when I say that I need to rein it in a little bit. I can almost just take that and hit it for one and get down the other end.

“I’ll be the first person to stand up and say that they were bad shots. I don’t regret them, but if I was there again, I’d try and play it slightly differently.”

With Australia able to clinch

the series and retain the Ashes in Adelaide, vice-captain Brook said the England players had discussed trying to “be in the moment” more and not look too far ahead.

Brook paid tribute to the skill and discipline of the Australian bowlers and said the England players also needed to stand up and be counted in crunch moments if they were to avoid going 3-0 down in the five-match series.

“There’s them pressure situations, which we haven’t been really that good at so far,” he conceded.

“When we’re head-to-head, they’ve managed to be the better side and sneak in front. And everybody realises that. We’ve just got to stand up in them certain situations, read the game slightly better (and) just have a little bit of grit and determination about you.”

As England’s star batter, Brook has come in for criticism after the two Test losses but the 26-year-old said he was concentrating only on trying to score runs.

“I don’t read any of them criticisms, I just try and crack on with my game and focus on what I’m trying to do,” he said. “These are the moments that you want to turn up in, and you want to be the man that takes the game away from them and puts them in a tough position. So hopefully I can turn up, stick to my processes and stay in the moment as much as possible. And what will be will be.”

CRICKET

England looking for Ashes miracle in the third Test

The visitors under huge pressure trailing 0-2 in the five-Test series

AFP
Adelaide, Australia

England are on the ropes and “need a miracle” heading into tomorrow’s third Ashes Test in Adelaide, with ruthless Australia boosted by the return of Pat Cummins as they look to seal the series.

Eight-wicket defeats in Perth and Brisbane mean England have now gone 17 Tests since winning in Australia, dating back to their last series victory there in 2010-11.

Equally damning, a win for the hosts will ensure the five-match showdown will be over inside three Tests for the fourth consecutive series in Australia.

England great Geoffrey Boycott, who toured Australia four times, winning two Ashes series and drawing the other two, has led criticism of the team’s “irresponsible batting, bowling too short, too wide or too full and catches dropped”.

“Somehow, after just six days of Ashes cricket, England need a miracle,” he said in a column.

Coach Brendon McCullum is unrepentant, declaring on Sunday: “We’re a massive chance in this Test match. We do that, and the narrative changes in the series.”

Frustrated skipper Ben Stokes criticised his side after Brisbane for crumbling in pressure moments, demanding they toughen up.

Former England captain Alastair Cook believes Stokes will read the riot act leading into the must-win day-time encounter at historic Adelaide Oval.

“Ben Stokes is the most competitive person I’ve ever come across,” Cook told *TNT Sports*.

“He won’t want to lose a game



England's Ben Stokes ducks down on a ball by Australia's Brendan Doggett during the second Ashes Test at the Gabba, Brisbane, Australia, on December 7, 2025. (Reuters)

of tiddlywinks or table tennis, and he’s seeing his side failing under pressure.

“I think for the first time in his captaining career, some home truths are going to be said to players.”

The mountain England must climb is huge. Only once in history has a team come from 2-0 down to win the Ashes, all the way back in 1936-37, when a Don Bradman-inspired Australia overcame the deficit.

England selectors may look to freshen up the side with the series on the line.

Mark Wood is injured and fast bowler Josh Tongue likely to replace Josh Atkinson.

McCullum said the top seven would be unchanged with un-

der-fire Ollie Pope remaining at number three. Spin is likely to play a role and it is a toss-up between Shoaib Bashir and Will Jacks, who played in Brisbane and looked good with the bat.

Australia are set to be reinforced by skipper Cummins, who missed the first two Tests with a back injury, leading the attack alongside the outstanding Mitchell Starc.

Starc has already bagged 18 wickets. Veteran spin king Nathan Lyon is also expected to play after being overlooked for Brisbane, with Brendan Doggett and either Scott Boland or Michael Neser likely to make way.

The other big question surrounds a fit-again Usman Khawaja and whether he reclaims

his place as opener or Australia persist with the aggressive Travis Head alongside Jake Weatherald.

Chief selector George Bailey has indicated he was open to Khawaja dropping down the order. He could also be axed, potentially spelling the end of his 85-Test career. Despite Australia having all the momentum bowling great Glenn McGrath warned against letting their guard down.

“They have England by the throat and must not let up just because some big names are returning. They cannot get complacent,” he said in a column.

“An Australia team should always think it can win every Test it plays, so for that reason this team should be thinking about winning 5-0.”

FOCUS

PCB says PSL 11 to be held from Mar 26 to May 3

Chairman Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) Mohsin Naqvi yesterday announced the official window for the 11th edition of the HBL Pakistan Super League (HBL PSL).

The HBL PSL 11 is scheduled to take place from 26 March to 3 May, 2026.

The confirmation of the HBL PSL 11 window marks a significant milestone as preparations intensify for the league’s next phase of expansion.

The PCB will also host the New Teams Auction on 8 January, 2026 at the Islamabad Convention Centre, where the rights for two new HBL PSL franchises will be offered.

The auction will be broadcasted, providing transparency and global visibility to prospective investors and cricket fans worldwide.

The HBL PSL continues to attract strong international interest, reflecting the league’s growing commercial strength,

expanding global footprint and long-term growth potential.

Recent engagements with global stakeholders have underlined confidence in the league’s business model and its positioning among the world’s leading T20 competitions.

Recognised for its high-quality cricket for about six weeks, competitive balance and role in developing elite international talent, the HBL PSL has firmly established itself as a premier global T20 league.



AXAR RULED OUT OF LAST TWO T20IS AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA

NEW DELHI: Axar Patel has been ruled out of the last two T20Is against South Africa due to illness. Shahbaz Ahmed has been named his replacement. “He (Axar) is with the team in Lucknow (the venue for the fourth T20I), where he will be further medically assessed,” the BCCI said in a statement. Axar had missed the third T20I in Dharamsala as well. Jasprit Bumrah, too, was unavailable for that game because of personal reasons. India replaced them with Kuldeep Yadav and Harshit Rana and went on to win by seven wickets.

Axar had mixed returns in the first two games. In Cuttack, he scored 23 off 21 and took 2 for 7 in a winning cause. In New Chandigarh, he picked up 1 for 27 from three overs and then, with India chasing 214, he was promoted to No. 3. He could score only a run-a-ball 21.

Shahbaz has played three ODIs

and two T20Is for India, the last of which was the 2023 Asian Games final against Afghanistan in Hangzhou. He had lukewarm returns in the ongoing Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy. Playing for Bengal, he scored only 60 runs in five matches at a strike rate of 133.33 and took four wickets at an economy of 8.25. After the fourth T20I in Lucknow, the teams will move to Ahmedabad for the finale. India currently lead the five-match series 2-1.

India's updated squad for last two T20Is

Suryakumar Yadav (capt), Shubman Gill (vice-capt), Abhishek Sharma, Tilak Varma, Hardik Pandya, Shivam Dube, Jitesh Sharma (wk), Sanju Samson (wk), Jasprit Bumrah, Varun Chakravarthy, Arshdeep Singh, Kuldeep Yadav, Harshit Rana, Washington Sundar, Shahbaz Ahmed

DOHA INTERNATIONAL ARABIAN HORSE SHOW TO BE HELD FROM DEC 19 TO 22

DOHA: The Qatar Racing & Equestrian Club (QREC), chaired by Hamad bin Abdulrahman al-Attiyah, will stage the 5th Doha International Arabian Horse Show from December 19 to 22.

The competitions will be held in the main arena of the Qatar Equestrian Federation and will feature 222 horses, representing four countries: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain.

Qualifying competitions for colts, fillies, mares and stallions will be contested over the first three days of the Show, with the final day dedicated to the championships to determine the overall champions across the participating classes.

Gold, silver and bronze medals will be awarded at the conclusion of each championship. Prize money for each championship is set at QR120,000 for first place, QR90,000 for second and QR70,000 for third. The total prize fund for the show stands at QR3.915mn, distributed across the various class competitions as well as the championship finals.

Local and international participation

Among the prominent participating studs from Qatar are Al Shaqab Stud, Al Sraiya Stud, Al Khor Stud, Al Jaham Stud, Al Amer Stud, Al Yaqoub Stud and Umm Al Adham Stud. International participation includes Al Khawolid Stud, Nasser bin Khaled Nasser Aludail and Rayan Alsayqal from Saudi Arabia, Mohamed Ahmed Alhayki and Abdulla al-Mudahka from Bahrain and Talal al-Rashidi and Al Shuraian & Al Rasman Stud from Kuwait.

The fourth edition of the Doha International Arabian Horse Show was held in last December. In the Yearling Fillies Championship, the gold medal was won by SAA Deem, owned by Sulaiman Abdullah AlAjmi, with BG eman from Alsawaida Farm taking silver and Asma Aljassimya, owned by Al Thamer Stud, claiming bronze.

In the Yearling Colts Championship, Azzam Umm Aludham, owned by Nasser Mohammed al-Hajri, secured gold while Lazzaz Al Bariq, owned by Franklin Delano, won silver and Moth'el Al Hawajer, owned by Abdulaziz Almutairi, took bronze.

The Junior Fillies Championship saw Mzoon Al Diriyah, owned by Mesfer Mohammed al-Hajri, capture gold, with Resalah Al Khashab from Aljumail Stud earning silver and Joud Al Hamad, owned by Sheikh Hamad Khaled Alsabab, finishing third for bronze.

In the Junior Colts Championship, AJ Tayam, owned by Nasser Mohammed al-Hajri, won gold, followed by Omeir Al Sraiya from Al Sraiya Stud in second and Bahi Al Jaham, owned by Al Jaham Stud, in third.

The Senior Mares Championship was claimed by Galerida, representing Al Thumama Stud while D Fala from Al Salem Stud secured silver and DA Magic Moment, owned by Nasser Mohammed Mesfer al-Hajri, collected bronze.

In the Senior Stallions Championship, the gold medal went to D Shajei, owned by Hajas Hajlan al-Hajlan of Saudi Arabia. Silver was awarded to Areeb Al Nasser, owned by Rashid Faraj al-Marri, with Fakhir BHM, owned by Nagham Sehair Fahad al-Dabbous, taking bronze.



SPOTLIGHT

Messi mania peaks in New Delhi as 3-day tour ends

CLAD IN A PINK JERSEY AND BLACK TROUSERS, MESSI ENTHRALLED THE AUDIENCE WITH HIS CHARM

AFP
New Delhi

Football superstar Lionel Messi ended his whirlwind tour of India yesterday with a lap of honour in New Delhi, thrilling thousands of fans and thanking them for “all the love and support”.

The 38-year-old Argentine great greeted chanting supporters at a nearly packed Arun Jaitley Stadium, usually home to cricket, with fans dressed in Argentina jerseys waving flags and shouting his name.

“It was beautiful to receive all the love and support. I knew it was there, but to receive it first-hand was, well, amazing”, Messi told the crowd, speaking in Spanish, saying he will “definitely be back”.

Clad in a pink jersey and black trousers, Messi enthralled the audience with his charm as he kicked footballs into the crowd and obliged star-struck delegates and fans with selfies.

Messi and his fellow stars played football with children before being presented with a T20 World Cup ticket and an Indian jersey by

the chairman of the International Cricket Council (ICC) Jay Shah.

India – a nation of 1.4 billion – are a cricket powerhouse, but struggles on the football pitch and are 142nd on the FIFA rankings.

Former India football captain Bhaichung Bhutia took the stage with Messi, who signed Argentine jerseys for the Indian star and his family.

His final stop in India went smoothly after a chaotic opening day on Saturday, when fans vandalised a stadium in the city of Kolkata, where his brief presence left the crowd frustrated.

Heavy security left fans struggling to catch a glimpse of him. Many had paid more than \$100 for tickets, and they broke down barricades and stormed the pitch after the superstar abruptly left the arena.

In New Delhi yesterday, thousands of excited fans dismissed hazardous choking air pollution to see their hero.

“I’m very excited to see Messi, I have been watching him since my childhood”, said 29-year-old fan Sumesh Raina.

New Delhi, and its wider sprawling metropolitan region of 30 mil-



Argentina and Inter Miami’s Lionel Messi with his Inter Miami teammates Rodrigo De Paul and Luis Suarez pose with a replica FIFA World Cup trophy during his tour of India in New Delhi yesterday. The official three-day tour ended yesterday. (Reuters)

New Delhi yesterday, according to monitoring organisation IQAir, 20 times the World Health Organisation’s recommended daily maximum. A study in *The Lancet Planetary Health* last year estimated that 3.8 million deaths in India between 2009 and 2019 were linked to air pollution.

Messi, who is in India as part of his so-called GOAT Tour along with his Inter Miami teammates Luis Suarez and Rodrigo de Paul, seemed unperturbed by the toxic air. He looked in good spirits as he kept up his energy with fans and football enthusiasts in his 35-minute stay at the stadium.

Messi had also visited the cities of Hyderabad and Mumbai, where he met cricket icon Sachin Tendulkar and Indian football star Sunil Chhetri.

The footballer won his second consecutive Major League Soccer Most Valuable Player award last 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.

2026 WINTER OLYMPICS

Athletes to stay in pop-up cabins in the woods

AFP
Cortina d’Ampezzo, Italy

Hundreds of athletes at Italy’s Winter Games in February will stay in mobile homes as part of a high-altitude Olympic Village offering mid-winter luxury camping at 1,300 metres (4,240 feet).

The 377 cabins have been installed in the grounds of the old airport at Cortina d’Ampezzo, on the edge of a forest and a ten-minute drive to the centre of town.

A spokeswoman for delivery company SiMiCo told AFP yesterday the village was designed “to be installed and then dismantled without leaving a trace”.

The €38mn (\$44.7mn) project will accommodate 1,400 athletes, coaches, support staff and delegates to the February 6-22 Games, and is in addition to the Olympic Village built in Milan.

Located at the foot of the Dolomite mountains, the 18-square-metre (194sq ft) cabins are designed for two people, each boasting two bedrooms with en-suite bathrooms.

Despite the snow on the ground outside, temperatures inside will reach a balmy 23 degrees Celsius (73.4 Fahrenheit).

But the athletes will have to brave the cold to reach the restaurant, lounge, gym and laundry, which are a ten-minute walk away, or to take the shuttles to the competition sites.

For now, the cabins are only partially furnished, according to an AFP photographer who visited



A drone view shows the Cortina Curling Olympic stadium and the Cristallo mountain ahead of Milano Cortina Winter Olympics 2026. (Reuters)

the site on December 11. “We’ve done our job, it’s now up to the Milan-Cortina organising community to provide furnishings and equip the common spaces,” the SiMiCo spokeswoman said yesterday.

The Games in 2026 are spread out across a wide area of northern Italy, and there is another Olympic Village, housing 1,700 people, in the city of Milan.

The cabins have the advantage

of being close to the chic resort of Cortina d’Ampezzo, which will host the women’s alpine skiing events.

The resort, the site of the 1956 Winter Olympics, is also home to the curling, the bobsleigh, luge, and skeleton competitions.

However, skiing stars such as Americans Lindsey Vonn and Mikaela Shiffrin, and Italians Sofia Goggia and Federica Brignone, will not be staying in the Olympic

Village. Instead, they will stay in one of Cortina d’Ampezzo’s many upscale hotels, their respective federations told AFP.

Many of the cabins are designed to be accessible, and will be reused by the athletes in the Paralympic Games from March 6 to 15.

After that, the mobile homes “will be put back on the market”, the SiMiCo spokeswoman said yesterday.

ANNOUNCEMENT

LA28 to open ticket draw on Jan 14 with seats from just \$28

Reuters
Los Angeles

LA28 said yesterday that fans will be able to register starting January 14 for a random ticket draw covering all Olympic sports at the Los Angeles Games with organisers promising at least 1 million tickets priced at \$28.

Registration via the LA28 tickets page will give fans a chance to secure a time slot to purchase tickets in April, with fans who are not selected automatically registered for subsequent ticket drops.

“Every sport starts at \$28 and that’s not just lip service to a couple tickets in the corner of some venue, but a meaningful number of tickets,” said Allison Katz-Mayfield, LA28’s senior vice-president of Games delivery revenue. “We’re looking at at least a million tickets at \$28 and we’ve got about a third of our tickets under \$100.”

LA28’s announcement comes amid backlash to high ticket prices for next year’s FIFA World Cup.

Registration will be open until March 18 and there is no advantage to registering early.

No purchase or payment is required to sign up for the draw.

“No matter when you go in, whether you’re the first person in or the last person in, you have the same opportunity,” Katz-Mayfield said.

She called the draw “the fairest way to ensure that the broadest number of people can get access to tickets and that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged.” She added that the registration process will help ensure the tickets get into the hands of fans and not brokers or bots.



LOCALS BOOSTED

Residents living near Olympic venues who register will also have a chance to obtain slots in a special locals’ presale, allowing them to buy before tickets go on sale to the general public.

Paris 2024 sold a record 12 million tickets. LA28’s registration puts it a year ahead of the timeline used for those Games, and ticket sales are expected to account for about a third of LA28’s overall revenue target.

The ticketing process will be run by LA28’s official ticketing service providers AXS and Eventim, and all tickets will be digital.

Tickets for the Paralympic Games will go on sale in 2027. Officials encouraged fans to sign up to the LA28 newsletter for updates, including further details on the January 14 ticket draw registration launch.

FIFA INTERCONTINENTAL CUP

Marquinhos, Dembele train as PSG gear up for Flamengo clash

If they win FIFA Intercontinental Cup tomorrow, PSG will complete an extraordinary quintuple in 2025

By Sahan Bidappa
Doha

Captain Marquinhos and Ousmane Dembele both took part in Paris Saint-Germain's training session in Doha yesterday, offering a major boost to the French champions ahead of their Intercontinental Cup final against Brazil's Flamengo at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium tomorrow.

Marquinhos, who had been recovering from muscle fatigue in his right hip, showed encouraging signs of readiness in training. The Brazilian defender missed PSG's Ligue 1 outing against Metz on Saturday but has been included in the squad following positive assessments from the medical staff.

Dembele, meanwhile, returned to full training after overcoming a viral illness that ruled him out of the previous two matches. The winger was involved in ball retention and high-intensity drills and is expected to be available for selection. His return strengthens PSG's attacking options alongside Khvicha Kvaratskhelia and Bradley Barcola. Dembele, who won his first Ballon d'Or award just three months ago, is also a frontrunner for FIFA "The Best" award, with the ceremony taking place today in Doha.

PSG's training session was held behind closed doors at the Al Ersaal Training Site, with almost the entire squad in attendance. Only young midfielder Senny Mayulu was absent as he continued his recovery from illness, though he is expected to re-join the group shortly.

Defender Achraf Hakimi remains unavailable due to an ankle injury. PSG will hold their final training session at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium today before turning their full focus to tomorrow's final, which kicks off at 8pm in Al Rayyan.

The reigning European champions arrived in Doha on Sunday and are contesting the Intercontinental Cup final for the first time in the club's history. Already winners of Ligue 1, the Trophée des Champions, the Coupe de France and the Champions League in 2025, PSG have the opportunity to complete an extraordinary quintuple.

PSG progressed directly to the title clash, while Flamengo took a longer route. The Brazilian side edged Mexico's Cruz Azul 2-1 in the FIFA Derby of the Americas before defeating Egypt's Pyramids 2-0 in the FIFA Challenger Cup to book their place in the final.



Paris Saint-Germain players train at the Al Ersaal Training Site in Doha, ahead of their Intercontinental Cup final against Brazil's Flamengo at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan.



Captain Marquinhos, who had been recovering from muscle fatigue in his right hip, arrives for training.



MIDDLE EAST RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

QMMF unveils new look for next year's Qatar International Rally

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Entries are now open for the 2026 Qatar International Rally, which takes place from February 4 to 7. The event will be the second round of the 2026 FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC).

The Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) has unveiled a revised itinerary and format for the most popular round of the regional rally series. It takes its place in a series that also includes gravel rounds in Oman, Jordan, Cyprus and Saudi Arabia and an asphalt surface event in Lebanon.

In a revised route of 704.90km, the QMMF has planned 225.16km to be timed competitively against the clock. In a compact format to alleviate additional costs for competitors, administration checks will take place on Tuesday, February 3rd from 10am at the Lusail International Circuit with the day also including a permitted recce of the opening super special stage. Competitors will be permitted a full day of reconnaissance of the gravel desert stages on Wednesday, February 4th with scrutineering scheduled in tandem at Lusail from 9am.

A hectic Thursday (February 5th) sees a new one-hour practice session with a maximum of two passes through a new 5.56km special scheduled for Rally2 cars at Al Khor from 8.15am. This will also act as the new qualifying stage for Rally2 crews, starting at 10am. The result of that will determine the starting order for leg one. The slowest driver in the qualifying stage will run as the first Rally2 entrant on the road on Friday.

Non-Rally2 machines will be permitted a maximum of two passes apiece during a 90-minute shakedown on the Al Khor stage from 10.45am. The ceremonial start will then take centre stage at Lusail from 14.30am and this precedes a planned super special stage at Lusail. Friday's action features two loops of three gravel stages and a proposed second pass through the Lusail stage to round off the day's action.

The morning's loop of three timed tests features runs through the brand new Lejthaya (16.54km) stage, the revised Waab Al Mashrab (16.11km) and Al Waab (18.14km). The three stages are repeated after a return to Lusail for



Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah in action in Qatar last year.

a regroup and service.

Six further special stages are planned for Saturday (February 7th) before the rally reaches a conclusion with a ceremonial finish at 6.30pm

An opening run through the slightly modified Umm Birka (22.98km) special gets the day's action underway and is followed by the first passes through Ras Laffan (16.73km) and a revised Al Thakira (15.28km) stage. Another return to the service park in Lusail precedes the repeat runs of the three specials.

The second pass through Al Thakira will also act as the event's Power Stage, with additional bonus points available for the leading crews. Five points will be awarded to the stage winner down to a point for fifth place.

The event will be held under the chairmanship of QMMF President Abdulrahman al-Mannai, senior committee member Abdulrazaq al-Kuwari and the QMMF's Executive Director Amro al-Hamad. Portugal's Pedro Almeida again works as the Clerk of the Course alongside his deputy Rashid al-Sulaiti.

"No sooner have we crowned our champions for 2025 and we are looking ahead to the first of our exciting international sporting events in 2026," enthused QMMF Executive Director Amro al-Hamad.

"Our team at the QMMF has been working hard in recent weeks to fine-tune another challenging route to test competitors for the

second round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship. This is the 46th Qatar International Rally to be held in the last 51 years. It is one of the oldest motor sport events in the Middle East and continues to write its own chapter in the expanding history of the QMMF."

Supplementary regulations and further details are available from www.qmmf.com, with the first closing date for entries set for Wednesday, January 7th. A final cut-off has been set for Wednesday, January 21st.

The QMMF has also announced a series of generous concessions for international and GCC competitors. International entrants will be given a \$6,000 shipping allowance, with GCC teams receiving \$3,000, subject to all vehicles passing scrutineering and administrative checks.

In addition, the QMMF will arrange a flight ticket allowance for both driver and co-driver and supply one twin room with breakfast for five nights, again subject to vehicles passing scrutineering and administrative checks. Full details are available in the supplementary regulations.

Start prizes will also be awarded: entrants who pass scrutineering and administrative checks and enter before the first cut-off date will receive QR2,500 and QR2,000 will be awarded to starters who enter after the early cut-off and before January 21st.

SPOTLIGHT

Chelsea coach Maresca declines to clarify 'worst 48 hours' comment

Reuters
London

Chelsea manager Enzo Maresca said his weekend comment about spending the "worst 48 hours" since joining the club needed no further explanation as his team focus on today's tricky trip to Cardiff City for a League Cup quarter-final clash.

After Saturday's 2-0 Premier League home win over Everton, Maresca said his players had been through a "complicated week," adding that "many people didn't support" them. Asked if his comments had been explained to the club's management, the 45-year-old Italian said he did not need to add anything to what he had said.

"I can speak Italian, my language, Spanish very well, French and English. I think I was clear with what I said. When I want to say something, I am quite clear ... I said what I said after the game. It's finished," he told reporters. "I respect (the media's) opinion. I respect people's opinions. But again I don't have anything to add. My focus is on tomorrow's game where we can achieve a third semi-final in 18 months since I joined the club. We are in an era where everyone can say what they think. I respect people's opinion. I don't have anything to add. My focus is just on tomorrow."

Asked if he was committed to Chelsea, the manager said, "Absolutely yes." Maresca has guided Chelsea to victory in the Europa Conference League and the Club World Cup this year. But their recent form had faltered, as they went four matches without a win before the victory over Everton.

Chelsea are fourth in table, eight points below leaders Arsenal. "I

think we are in the right direction. For me, it is part of the journey. But for sure, I feel we are getting better and better," Maresca added. "When you are Chelsea manager you accept that expectations are higher ... the target for this club is always to improve."

Maresca said Chelsea will rest Cole Palmer for today's match, as the key midfielder eases back into action after being sidelined for much of this season due to injury. "Cole is one of the players who deserves to be protected. He is not in this moment available to play two games in three days," Maresca said.

But Chelsea will not take third-tier pacesetters Cardiff lightly, the coach added. "These are the worst games because we have everything to lose. Football is full of all of these games where the favourites can lose. That is why all the focus is on Cardiff," he said. "It's something we want to achieve for the fans. That's why we need to do our best tomorrow."

