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slams unbeaten  
142 to crush  
England's hopes



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superstar Salah  
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**FIFA ARAB CUP  
QATAR 2025**

**FOOTBALL**

# Flair and focus fuel Morocco's Arab Cup triumph in Qatar

Morocco won the title despite missing several Europe-based players ahead of Africa Cup of Nations



Morocco players hoist coach Tarik Sektioui in celebration after their FIFA Arab Cup victory at Lusail Stadium on Thursday. (Reuters)

**By Sports Reporter**  
Doha

FIFA tournament finals at Lusail Stadium have a special kind of buzz. Three years to the day after Argentina and France staged an incredible showdown in the 2022 FIFA World Cup final (3-3 extra time, 4-2 on penalties), the recently concluded FIFA Arab Cup final was another thrilling encounter.

After a fiercely contested match between a pair of heavyweight nations, Morocco ultimately came out on top against Jordan following goals at both ends of the clock. Oussama Tannane scored arguably the best goal of the tournament in the fourth minute. His audacious strike from the halfway line left Jordanian goalkeeper Yazeed Abulaila with no chance and stunned the crowd as well as his teammates, including Mounir Chouiar, who was still on the bench when the former Saint-Etienne player worked his magic.

“(Oussama) Tannane and I often chat, and now he's scored a goal that reflects

who he is as a player,” Chouiar said following his 50-minute appearance in the final. “I didn't expect it at all. We were all taken by surprise, but he showed us what he can do tonight, and I'm very happy for him. I sprinted towards him when he scored! I felt like I was on cloud nine. Since the start of the competition, he has worked hard and put his heart and soul into it, so this goal has helped him regain his confidence.”

On the pitch, defenders Soufiane Bouftini and Marwane Saadane were best placed to appreciate their teammate's moment of brilliance and are sure to remember it for a long time to come.

“I had a feeling he would score today. I encouraged him to take his chances in front of goal because I knew he would score,” Saadane said. “I thought he'd get his goal, but not from that far out. It's an incredible goal, and hopefully, he'll win the FIFA Puskas Award.”

“Words don't do justice to this goal,” Bouftini said. “I was in complete shock. As soon as I saw the ball cross the line, I ran over to Tannane and said to him, ‘Did you actually just do that?’”

Unfortunately, the strength of Morocco proved just too much in the end for an equally impressive Jordanian side. After a comeback led by Ali Olwan's brace, the Nashama regained control and held on until the 88th minute, when Morocco's second hero of the evening, substitute Abderazzak Hamdallah, stepped up to the plate.

The former Al Nassr striker first equalised with a poacher's finish following a corner, before adding another in extra time from inside the box. The Atlas Lions' knack for scoring key goals at key points of the match helped them clinch victory in a game that seemed destined to go to their opponents.

“He's a striker with an eye for goal. You can see it in training and during matches,” said Chouiar about the two-goal scorer. “We knew it was our job to support him, motivate him, and boost his confidence so his talent could shine. I'm delighted I could be a part of it.”

As the 2025 CAF Africa Cup of Nations looms, with Morocco kicking off at home tomorrow, there is a growing sense that spectacular performances akin to those



Morocco players celebrate with the FIFA Arab Cup trophy. (Reuters)

seen in this Arab Cup final are likely to be repeated in upcoming major tournaments.

Three years have passed since the Atlas Lions hoped their semi-final run at Qatar 2022 would usher in a new era for Moroccan football. Now, as the 2026 World Cup approaches, they stand more formidable than ever on the global stage.

“Moroccan football's rise to dominance has become a cultural phenomenon in the country,” explained Marwane Saadane. “Since our fourth-place finish at the 2022 World Cup, the team now approaches

every competition with a winning mentality, always looking to win titles. Moroccan players from all age groups are stepping on to the podium.”

“In truth, it's not the way we scored that matters most. The most important thing for us was to become champions,” said Soufiane Bouftini. One lesson that can definitely be learned from the 2025 Arab Cup is that Moroccan football is on the up and, with new heroes cropping up everywhere, the country can set its sights high for the foreseeable future.

**Saudi and UAE to share third place at Arab Cup: FIFA**

**Doha:** FIFA announced that the Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will share the third place at Arab Cup after the third-place playoff was cancelled on Thursday due to heavy rain at Khalifa International Stadium.

In a statement, FIFA said: “Following the suspension and subsequent abandonment of the FIFA Arab Cup third place playoff between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and in line with the relevant FIFA regulations and the FIFA Statutes, the FIFA Men's National Team Committee has decided as follows: The match is declared a 0-0 draw, third place is shared between both teams and the total prize money allocated for third and fourth place will be combined and split equally amongst both participating teams.”

While the stadium remained fully operational and the pitch was in good condition, the referee, his assistants, and the match commissioner opted to cancel the match to ensure the safety of players and spectators.

**SPOTLIGHT**

## Sellami proud of Jordan players despite loss

**By Sports Reporter**  
Doha

Jordan coach Jamal Sellami expressed pride in his players' performance despite a narrow 3-2 extra-time defeat to Morocco in the final of the FIFA Arab Cup at Lusail Stadium on Thursday.

Speaking at the post-match press conference, Sellami said the final lived up to expectations, praising the high technical level shown by both teams after the match finished 2-2 at the end of regular time.

Despite conceding early, Sellami highlighted Jordan's strong response in the second half, during which Ali Olwan scored twice – a header and a penalty in the 48th and 68th minutes – to put his side ahead. “The players gave everything and even exceeded expectations,” Sellami said. “We were very close to winning the title.”

He commended the fighting spirit, discipline, and collective effort of his squad but acknowledged that Morocco's experience ultimately made the difference.

Morocco had taken the lead in the fourth minute through an audacious long-range strike from Oussama Tannane, whose shot from the centre circle caught advancing goalkeeper Yazeed Abulaila off guard. Ab-



Dejected Jordan players greet the fans after their loss to Morocco in the FIFA Arab Cup final at the Lusail Stadium. (AFP)

derrazraq Hamed Allah later proved decisive, scoring three minutes from the end of regulation time to force extra time before netting the winner from close range.

Sellami admitted there was regret over losing the title but stressed that Jordan's long-term project remains on track, with the focus now turning to preparations for the 2026 World Cup, where Jordan are set

to make their debut. “This generation has shown strong character,” he said. “The opportunity will be there for them to compete for titles in the future.”

He also emphasised the importance of developing Jordan's domestic league to help nurture young talent capable of representing the national team at the highest level.

For Morocco, the Arab Cup triumph

added to a growing list of achievements, despite the absence of several Europe-based players ahead of the Africa Cup of Nations.

The Atlas Lions continue to build on their historic run to the World Cup semi-finals in Qatar three years ago and recent successes across their youth teams, underlining the depth and strength of Moroccan football.

THIRD TEST

# Head slams ton to crush England's Ashes hopes

Australia stretch their lead to 356 runs with two days still to go

AFP  
Adelaide, Australia

Danger man Travis Head crunched his fourth century in as many Tests at Adelaide Oval yesterday as Australia built a 356-run lead over England to stand on the brink of retaining the Ashes.

The hosts were 271-4 at stumps on day three of the third Test with Head on 142 and first-innings century-maker Alex Carey not out 52, taking the five-match series out of England's reach.

England must win after crashing inside two days at the first Test in Perth and inside four in Brisbane, both by eight wickets.

But it appears to be an impossible task with the highest run chase at the ground 316 by Australia against England in 1902.

Head said the job was not finished yet and Australia had to "rock up again" today.

"We've had another really, really good day today.

"Tomorrow will be another huge day, the wicket is deteriorating and starting to spin.

"The goal is to try and put on as many as we can in the morning and get to work and try to win the Test match."

Head's crucial ton, his 11th, came off a composed 146 balls although he almost didn't get there, dropped on 99 by Harry Brook as impatience got the better of him.

He has now scored a century in four consecutive Tests on his home ground, following 140 against India last year and 119 and 175 against the West Indies.

"The way Head has batted is next level, and he has shown us how to go about it," conceded England spin coach Jeetan Patel.

"Every game of Test cricket we play, especially out here in Australia, calls for heroes.

"And we haven't had them just yet, but maybe we will have them tomorrow and the day after."

Australia suffered an early setback in a tense 20 minutes before lunch after England were all out for 286 on the back of Ben Stokes's gritty 83 in response to Australia's first innings 371.

Bryson Carse trapped Jake Weatherald lbw for one and he did not review although replays showed the ball was pitching outside leg stump.

It gave England a glimmer of hope, but after the break Head slammed the door shut, cutting and chopping boundaries all around the ground.

Marnus Labuschagne went for 13 when he edged Josh Tongue to Harry Brook at slip, with reviews showing it carried.



Australia's Travis Head plays a shot on the third day of the third Ashes Test against England at the Adelaide Oval in Adelaide yesterday. (AFP)



England's Ben Stokes reacts after getting bowled by Australia's Mitchell Starc in Adelaide yesterday. (Reuters)

Usman Khawaja, who hit a defiant 82 in the first innings after his last-minute call-up for the ill Steve Smith, was a perfect foil for the more aggressive Head.

But on 40 he was caught behind off Will Jacks and Cameron Green followed soon after for seven, edging Tongue to Brook.

hold the belief." England struggled to remove Australia's batters, with captain Ben Stokes having opted not to bowl in the second innings and part-time spinner Will Jacks hit for 107 runs from 19 overs with just the one wicket as his reward. The 27-year-old all-rounder conceded 105 runs in the first innings and his performances have brought into question England's decision to leave Shoaib Bashir out of the side on the more spin-friendly surface in Adelaide. "I don't think he has bowled poorly," Patel said. "They've played him very well. They've used the crease, they've got deep, they've run down at him, they've used the off side and the leg side, and they've looked to score. "Looked to put him under pressure. It's probably what you would do against the spin of Jacks, where it's not his front-line skill as such. "I still believe that Bashir is our number one guy and he does a fantastic job for us... "But in these conditions, we're horses for courses. With all four seamers firing and Jacks backing them up, I think that works very well. But it probably didn't play out as well as I would have liked."

After getting through the nervous 90s, Head finally brought up his century with a four off Joe Root, taking off his helmet and kissing the turf before pumping his fists.

While not in the same vein as his match-winning 69-ball century in Perth, it was a critical

knock, supported by Carey and aided by Stokes not bowling.

#### Gutsy Stokes

Patel said Stokes, who batted for two sessions on Thursday in 40 Celsius heat, was not injured.

"From what I understand he is fit to bowl," said Patel.

"He's just knackered, he's taken a lot out of himself to get to this point in the game."

On resumption yesterday, Stokes and Jofra Archer kept England's dreams just about alive with a stirring 106-run ninth-wicket stand.

They began at 213-8 in muggy conditions with Stokes not out 45 and Archer on 30.

Stokes, who suffered leg cramps and dehydration during his gutsy rearguard action on Thursday, brought up his slowest ever 50 in Tests, off 159 balls.

He finally fell when Mitchell Starc took the new ball and bowled him, with Stokes one of the few players who showed the fight he had demanded before the game.

Archer was another, ably helping his captain.

The fast bowler was the last man out when caught by Labuschagne off Scott Boland for 51 - his highest Test score and a maiden half-century

Boland ended with 3-45 while Pat Cummins took 3-69 in his first Test since July.

#### BRIEF SCORES

**Australia 371 and 271 for 4** (Head 142\*, Carey 52\*) **lead England 286** (Stokes 83, Archer 51, Boland 3-45, Cummins 3-69) **by 356 runs**

#### FOCUS

## Pandya blitz powers India to T20 series win over South Africa



India's Hardik Pandya (left) celebrates with teammate Tilak Varma after scoring a half-century during the fifth Twenty20 international against South Africa in Ahmedabad yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Ahmedabad, India

Hardik Pandya led India's batting assault with his 16-ball 50 to set up a 30-run win over South Africa and clinch the series 3-1 in the fifth T20 yesterday.

A punishing 105-run fourth partnership between Pandya, who hammered 63 off 25 balls, and Tilak Varma (73) swept India to 231-5 at the world's biggest cricket stadium in Ahmedabad.

In reply, South Africa started strongly thanks to a 35-ball 65 by Quinton de Kock, who played his 100th T20 for the national team, but the opener's departure triggered a collapse and the Proteas ended on 201-8. The win sealed India's eighth consecutive T20 series triumph, a streak that began in December 2023.

"From the start of the series, we wanted to stick to a particular brand of cricket and we did exactly that," said India skipper Suryakumar Yadav.

"We wanted to express ourselves in all departments and the results are right there in front of everyone."

South Africa began the tour with a stunning 2-0 triumph in the Test series but the white ball contests proved disappointing as they also lost the one-day series 2-1.

Pace bowler Jasprit Bumrah returned figures of 2-17 including the key wicket of De Kock who chipped a yorker straight back to him.

Spinner Varun Chakravarthy took four wickets, bowling Donovan Ferreira and George Linde. He returned with 10 wickets in four matches to be named Player of the Series.

The series was part of the build-up for the T20 World Cup which starts in February in India and Sri Lanka.

Put in to bat after the fourth match was abandoned due to fog in Lucknow, Indian openers Sanju Samson and Abhishek Sharma started briskly before Pandya tore into the opposition attack.

Seam bowler Corbin Bosch cut short left-handed Abhishek's knock on 34 and Samson fell for 37, bowled off left-arm spinner Linde.

#### Suryakumar's batting flop

India lost their third wicket when Suryakumar got out for five to extend his lean run with the bat.

T20 specialist Suryakumar has managed just 244 runs across his last 22 innings in this format with no fifties.

"Only thing is we couldn't find Surya the batter, I think he's missing somewhere," said Suryakumar. "But he'll come back strong."

Pandya walked in and smacked Bosch for a six to signal his intent with the bat and in the next over hammered Linde for two sixes and two fours and was named player of the match. The middle-order batter registered India's second fastest T20 fifty, behind Yuvraj Singh's record 12-ball half-century in 2007.

The left-handed Varma also impressed with his clean hitting but Pandya's carnage that included five fours and five sixes stole the show.

Pandya finally fell to Ottneil Baartman and Varma got run out on the penultimate ball but the pair helped India add 116 runs from the last eight overs.

Vice-captain Shubman Gill missed the match after he injured his right foot while batting in the nets in Lucknow.

In the South African chase, De Kock's 51-run second-wicket partnership with Dewald Brevis, who made 31 off 17 balls, gave the Proteas hope but regular wickets and a rising asking-rate proved too much.

"230 was always gonna require a near-to-perfect chase," said South Africa skipper Aiden Markram. "Top three set it up, middle-order couldn't take it forward. But these lessons could prove to be very valuable looking ahead to the World Cup."

#### BRIEF SCORES

**India 231 for 5** (Tilak 73, Hardik 63, Bosch 2-44) **beat South Africa 201 for 8** (De Kock 65, Varun 4-53, Bumrah 2-17) **by 30 runs**

### 'England need to produce something magical to save Ashes'

**Adelaide:** England need to produce "something magical" on day four of the third Ashes Test against Australia if they are to have any chance of turning the tide, the visitors' spin bowling coach Jeetan Patel said yesterday. Travis Head scored his second century of the Ashes to put Australia on the brink of a series triumph at Adelaide Oval, with the hosts needing only a draw to retain the urn. England, who have suffered 5-0, 4-0 and 4-0 defeats in their last three series Down Under, trail Australia by 356 runs with the hosts on 271-4 in their second innings, but Patel had faith they could still pull off the win. "I still believe there's an opportunity for us. It won't be easy. We're going to need something magical," he told reporters. "But I think it's about time we saw something magical from us. It's three games in, we've thrown some (punches) but taken a lot, and I think it's about time now we're backed into a corner to throw some haymakers back. I thought some of the plans we chose today, the way we executed at times, was fantastic, but didn't quite go our way. We've just got to

#### SPOTLIGHT

## West Indies 110-0, trail by 465, after Conway's brilliant 227 for New Zealand in the third Test

AFP  
Mount Maunganui, New Zealand

Brandon King and John Campbell comfortably negotiated 23 overs in fading light before stumps to take the West Indies to 110-0 at the end of day two of the third Test after New Zealand declared on a mammoth 575-8 at Mount Maunganui.

The West Indies, with King unbeaten on 55 and Campbell not out 45, are still 465 runs behind.

New Zealand opener Devon Conway's epic 227 and some late hitting from Rachin Ravindra, who had six fours and two sixes in his 72 not out, and Ajaz Patel (30 not out) allowed captain Tom Latham to give his bowlers more than an hour at the West Indies openers.

But King and Campbell were more than up to the task, seeing off the new ball and scoring freely on a flat Bay Oval wicket as New Zealand's bowlers struggled to find a good length.

King's 50 came from just 62 balls, hitting nine fours and Campbell's 45 was made from 60 deliveries, and included seven fours.

Campbell was nursing a sore right-hand that was struck in the nets prior to the match.

If the injury-depleted West Indies had any other options, he may have sat out the Test such was the swelling and pain he was experiencing.



West Indies' Brandon King bats on day two of the third Test against New Zealand at Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui yesterday. (AFP)

The visitors also have doubts over whether Kemar Roach, who is nursing a hamstring strain, will bat, while leading batsman Shai Hope was ill and stayed at the team hotel yesterday.

West Indies all-rounder Justin Greaves said it had been a good day for his side, particularly given the adversity they faced.

"After the day we had yesterday, actually to come today and get eight wickets, it's a really, really good effort from our boys," Greaves said. "Especially with Kemar Roach being down

for us as well, everyone had to put in a pretty big shift today, so I'm very happy for us."

Three West Indian bowlers took two wickets each, Justin Greaves the pick with 2-83 from 29 overs, while Jayden Seales had 2-100 and Anderson Phillip 2-154.

The battered West Indian bowling corps did show some fight after lunch, led by a sharp and accurate spell from Seales.

He trapped Conway lbw to make it 432-4 and the West Indies removed two more batsmen as New Zealand went to tea at 508-6.

Glenn Phillips lost his battle with Phillip after tea, edging to first slip, and Zak Foulkes was bowled by a peach of a ball clipping the top of off stump.

Recalled spinner Patel lofted two sixes in the final over before the declaration in his 30 from 30 balls.

"We're pretty pretty chipper with that," Ravindra said of the team batting performance. "Dev's knock was incredible, and I think the way him and Tommy set the tone... obviously when you get the chance to declare in your first innings on that total, it's a hell of an effort."

#### BRIEF SCORES

**Stumps West Indies 110 for 0** (King 55\*, Campbell 45\*) **trail New Zealand 575 for 8** dec (Conway 227, Latham 137, Ravindra 72\*, Greaves 2-83) **by 465 runs**

FOOTBALL

# Superstar Salah chases AFCON glory in Morocco

THE 24-TEAM TOURNAMENT KICKS OFF TOMORROW

AFP  
Johannesburg

**E**gyptian football icon Mohamed Salah is a serial medal collector, helping Liverpool win the three domestic competitions, the Champions League and Super Cup in Europe and the Club World Cup.

But there is one prized medal missing, and he gets a fifth chance to obtain it at the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations in Morocco, which kicks off tomorrow.

Salah has come agonisingly close twice and, on two other occasions, has seen the record seven-time AFCON champions crash out in the first knockout round.

He created the goal that gave Egypt the lead in the 2017 final against Cameroon in Gabon, but a late goal gave the Indomitable Lions victory.

Hosts Egypt were favourites two years later, but suffered a stunning last-16 loss to South Africa in Cairo.

Salah and his teammates ground their way into the 2022 final in Cameroon, but after 120 goalless minutes against Senegal, Egypt lost the penalty shootout.

In the Ivory Coast last year, Salah converted a late penalty to salvage a draw in their opening group match against Mozambique, then was injured against Ghana and ruled out of the tournament.

He returned to Liverpool for treatment while Egypt lost another penalty shootout, this time to the Democratic Republic of Congo in a last-16 showdown.

After four consecutive failures Salah has every reason to wonder whether he will ever wear an AFCON winners' medal.

But pessimism is not part of the DNA of the 33-year-old prolific goal scorer Liverpool supporters call the "Egyptian king".



Egypt's Mohamed Salah trains in the gym in Agadir, Morocco, yesterday. Egypt have arrived for 2025 CAF Africa Cup of Nations. The hugely popular tournament will be staged in Morocco from Dec 21-Jan 18, 2026, bringing together 24 teams from across the continent to compete for African football's biggest prize.

"I am confident that one day I will be part of an Egyptian team that wins the Africa Cup of Nations," he has told reporters several times.

But whereas Egypt were once the team to beat at an AFCON, they now face increasingly stiff competition and are no more than one of many potential winners in Morocco, with the hosts the favourites.

Egypt face Zimbabwe first in Group B, on December 22, then

come potentially tougher matches against South Africa and Angola.

#### Striking options

Assuming the Pharaohs make it to the knockout phase, they must win four matches to be crowned champions for the first time since defeating Ghana in the 2010 final in Angola.

Head coach Hossam Hassan was once a leading striker and AFCON gold medallist and Salah

is but one of his many exciting attacking options.

Among them are Omar Marmoush of Manchester City, Mostafa Mohamed of Nantes and two stars from record 12-time African club champions Al Ahly in Mahmoud 'Trezeguet' Hassan and Ahmed 'Zizo' El Sayed.

What may concern Hassan, though, is the form of veteran Ahly goalkeeper Mohamed El Shenawy, once the undisputed top goalkeeper in Africa but now error prone.

Salah arrived in Agadir, a coastal city in southern Morocco where they will play all three first round matches, after a week of drama concerning his future at Liverpool.

Upset at being a substitute for three straight Premier League matches, an emotional Salah told reporters after a draw at Leeds United that he had "been thrown under the bus".

He also believed his once good relationship with manager Arne Slot had deteriorated, and that he was the scapegoat for a dismal run by Liverpool in the Premier League and Champions League.

Amid speculation that he might leave Anfield during the January transfer window and move to the lucrative Saudi Pro League, Salah came off the bench last weekend in a 2-0 win over Brighton.

Slot insisted after the desperately needed victory that there was "no issue to resolve" with his star forward, who is in the first season of a new two-year contract.

Salah set up the second Liverpool goal for Hugo Ekitike to overtake Wayne Rooney as the player with the most goal involvements for a single club in Premier League history, reaching 277.

Salah has struggled for goals with the Reds this season.

He hopes a change of scenery from Liverpool to Agadir will see him regain his clinical finishing touch.

SPOTLIGHT

## PSG penalty hero Safonov ended Intercontinental win with broken hand



Flamengo's Leo Pereira has his penalty saved by PSG's Matvey Safonov during a penalty shootout in the FIFA Intercontinental Cup final at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Qatar on Wednesday. (Reuters)

AFP  
Poissy, France

**M**atvei Safonov probably saved two penalties with a broken hand to win Paris Saint-Germain the Intercontinental Cup win, his coach Luis Enrique said yesterday.

The Russian stopped four spot kicks in the shootout in Qatar on Wednesday as PSG edged Brazilians Flamengo to lift another trophy.

"The player himself doesn't know how it happened," said Luis Enrique.

"We think it was on the third penalty kick. He made a strange movement and fractured it. He saved the last two shots with the fracture. The adrenaline was so powerful that the player was able to do it without pain. It's incredible."

The club released a statement saying that "a further update will be provided in three to four weeks".

Luis Enrique, who has had to deal with a string of injuries this season, said he had not spoken to Safonov.

"It's karma," Luis Enrique added. "Life is telling him he needs to rest, recover, and accept it. With his mentality, he'll come back stronger."

Luis Enrique was speaking on the eve of the trip to face fifth-tier Vendee Fontenay in the French Cup.

The coach could continue his habit of using backups in the domestic cups and pick third-choice Renato Marin will be in goal, but he could also take the opportunity to hand Lucas Chevalier a first game since recovering from an ankle injury.

Safonov's exploits appeared to fuel a bubbling debate over who should start in goal for the European champions.

The 26-year-old Russian began the season as the number two, but his match-winning exploits in Qatar followed several impressive displays standing in for the injured Chevalier, who made a shaky start to the season.

Chevalier, who turned 24 in November, was acquired in the summer because coach Luis Enrique liked his footwork with the ball but he has sometimes looked less reliable stopping shots.

BADMINTON

## An to face Yamaguchi in last 4 of World Tour Finals



Japan's Akane Yamaguchi hits a return to South Korea's An Se-young during their women's singles match at the BWF Badminton World Tour Finals at the Hangzhou Olympic Sports Centre Gymnasium in Hangzhou, in eastern China's Zhejiang province yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters  
Hangzhou

momentum and win the second game.

Yamaguchi pushed hard in the decider but An's stout defence helped her pick up a 14-21 21-5 21-14 win.

Ratchanok sailed past her opponent 21-17 21-10 to finish second in Group B and book a spot in the next stage of the competition, along with China's Wang Zhiyi, who had won both her games.

Pornpawee Chochuwong exited due to an injury on Thursday, leaving the group to be contested by the remaining three players.

In men's Group B, China's Li Shifeng was forced to retire in his match against Taiwan's Chou Tien-chen after the Asian Games gold medallist twisted his right foot while leading 21-14 14-11. Both players were already eliminated after losing their first two games.

Shi beat Naraoka 21-9 21-11 to take top spot in Group B, while Popov topped Group A with a 18-21 21-16 21-13 win over Jonatan Christie.

Paris Olympics silver medallist Vitidsarn outplayed Denmark's Anders Antonsen 21-15 18-21 21-13 to finish second in Group A.

"Really happy. It was difficult to control, I had to attack first. It was a long match with long rallies and I am very tired," Vitidsarn said.

COMMENT

# Alonso wants Real to end 2025 on a positive note

Reuters  
Madrid

**R**eal Madrid manager Xabi Alonso wants to leave the club's recent struggles behind and end the year on a high with a win over Sevilla today to keep the pressure on La Liga leaders Barcelona.

Alonso's men were five points clear at the top before their form took a downturn in November. They drew three league games in a row before suffering a shock loss to Celta Vigo at home earlier this month, allowing champions Barcelona to surge four points ahead in the title race.

Real have shown signs of a turnaround with two wins in their last three league games, but Alonso, who has been under pressure due to the team's inconsistent form, is eager to go into the Christmas break on a positive note.

"We want to finish well, it's been a tough and difficult period. We want to start 2026 well," Alonso told reporters yesterday.

"The opposition is tough, they demand a lot, they play one-on-one situations, the players go for the tackle a lot. They're good with the ball. We want people to enjoy themselves."

Asked about his relationship with club management, Alonso said he was on good terms with them despite the high expectations, with Real looking to recapture their success of the 2023-24 season, when they won the Spanish top-flight and the Champions League.

"From the outset, we have had a close relationship, based on respect and affection. The demands are high. It is a long road, there will be good times and not so good times," he said.

Real's drop in form has coincided with a goalless streak for forward Vinicius Jr. The Brazilian, who scored 22 goals last season, has struck only five times this term and is goalless since October.

The 25-year-old has gone 16 matches without scoring for club or country, but set up Ro-



drygo to score Real's winner against Alaves tomorrow. Alonso said it was a matter of time before Vinicius was back on the scoresheet.

"We've spoken to Vini and we're working with him, it's a matter of matches. He's been close and he'll get there, hopefully tomorrow," the manager added.

#### Liverpool have 'moved on' from Salah furore, says upbeat Slot

Arne Slot said Liverpool have "moved on" from the furore caused by Mohamed Salah's explosive outburst at being dropped and are showing signs of growing into the side he wants to see. The Reds begin what could be up

to a month without Salah, who is representing Egypt at the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON), away at Tottenham today.

After a run of nine defeats in 12 games, Slot has steadied the ship in a five-game unbeaten run, during which Salah did not start a single game.

"Actions speak louder than words. We moved on," Slot told reporters yesterday, referring to his decision to bring Salah on as a substitute in last week's 2-0 victory over Brighton.

"Now he's at the AFCON playing big games for himself and the country. All the focus for him is over there and there should not be any distraction of me saying anything because we moved on after the Leeds interview and he played against Brighton."

Despite a difficult second season for Slot in England, Liverpool sit seventh in the Premier League and would move into the top four with victory against struggling Spurs.

The English champions transformed their squad over the summer transfer window, spending nearly £450mn (\$602mn) to bring in Alexander Isak, Florian Wirtz, Hugo Ekitike, Jeremie Frimpong and Milos Kerkez.

Apart from the impressive Ekitike, all the new signings have struggled and Slot conceded he had been overly optimistic over how long it would take for his new-look squad to perform consistently.

"I think we are getting closer and closer to the team I want us to be and that has gone with ups and downs," said the Dutchman.

"But for me that makes complete sense because all the changes we've made during the summer and we made them on purpose because we thought we needed to.

"If I'm completely honest, maybe I didn't expect it to take maybe as long as it did, but, looking back on it, reflecting on it now, I think I've been too positive because if you go with a new group where not all of them are completely ready to play every single game, 90 minutes in this intensity, you have to adapt."

FIDE WORLD RAPID & BLITZ CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP

# Top 10 women players who will fight for the crown in Doha

The FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Chess Championship will take place in Doha in less than a week. Over six days from December 25-30 at Qatar University's Sports and Events Complex, the world's best players will compete for four world titles and a share of a prize fund exceeding €1mn, with €300,000 reserved for the women's events, split between rapid and blitz.

Headlined by World Champion Ju Wenjun, the women's competition will feature 130 players, including leading contenders Zhu Jiner, Lei Tingjie, Aleksandra Goryachkina, Humpy Koneru and others. Anna Muzychuk – who won both the Women's Rapid and Blitz titles in Doha in 2016 – will also return, alongside her sister Mariya.

The women arriving in Doha for the World Rapid and Blitz represent the very top of the pyramid. The ten highest-rated players in the field combine world title experience, blitz prowess and a blend of established champions and emerging stars. Below is a brief look at the top women players who will be in action in Doha.

### JU WENJUN

Top seed Ju Wenjun, with a rapid rating of 2530 on the entry list, comes to Doha as the player everyone else measures themselves against. In April she defended her Women's World Championship title for the fifth time, beating Tan Zhongyi 6.5-2.5 in a match played in Shanghai and Chongqing. Earlier, she had already dominated the World Rapid and Blitz in New York. Ju won the 2024 Women's World Blitz Championship, beating Lei Tingjie in an overtime final, and shared second to seventh place in the Women's Rapid.

She is not just a classical specialist. Ju is a complete all-around champion who handles every time control with calm and precision. In Doha, she is the natural favourite, but also the main target.

### TAN ZHONGYI

Tan Zhongyi, second seed on 2507 and a former Women's World Champion, has been locked in a rivalry with Ju for almost a decade. While she could not stop Ju in the 2025 title match, Tan scored the first win before the champion pulled away. In tournaments, Tan stays near the top in both classical and rapid. At the 2025 Women's World Cup, she again reached the latter stages but was eliminated in the semifinals by the eventual



winner IM Divya Deshmukh.

### ALEKSANDRA GORYACHKINA

Aleksandra Goryachkina is another well-known face in women's chess. Rated 2505, she is one of the strongest women players, a former world championship challenger and often a participant of Open rather than Women's competition.

Her recent performances have been strong. In 2024, she won the Tata Steel Chess India Rapid women's event in Kolkata, scoring 7/9, staying undefeated and finishing a point and a half ahead of her nearest rival. In the same season, she took first place at the Shymkent leg of the FIDE Women's Grand Prix, then followed it in February 2025 with victory in Monaco, again winning a three-way tie on tiebreak.

### LEI TINGJIE

Lei Tingjie, seeded fourth on 2496, has been near the summit of women's chess since her run to the 2023 world championship match against Ju Wenjun, which she lost by the narrowest of margins, 5.5 – 6.5.

Last December, in New York, she reached the final of the 2024 Women's

World Blitz Championship and only lost to Ju in a dramatic, sudden-death finish. She also fought for top places in the Women's Rapid and collected important points in the women's series standings.

In the 2025 Women's World Cup Lei started as the top seed, but in Batumi she was knocked out in the semifinals after an eight-game match against Humpy Koneru that went deep into rapid and blitz tie-breaks. Even in defeat, she reminded everyone how hard she is to put away.

### BIBISARA ASSAUBAYEVA

Bibisara Assaubayeva, world number five on the Doha list with 2461, is already a force in blitz. She won the Women's World Blitz Championship in 2021 and 2022 and entered the Guinness World Records as the youngest ever women's blitz world champion. In classical chess, she has now crossed another milestone.

At the 2025 Sharjah Masters she earned her final norm and passed 2500, and in July FIDE officially confirmed her as a grandmaster, the 43rd woman in history to gain the title. Her peak rating in autumn 2025 is listed as over 2500.

### KATERYNA LAGNO

Kateryna Lagno, on 2452, has been one of the strongest fast chess players in the world for more than a decade. She holds the Women's World Rapid title from 2014 and has three blitz world crowns from 2010, 2018 and 2019. Her recent results show that the speed has not gone away. At Tata Steel Chess India 2024 she won the women's blitz tournament with 11.5 points from 18 games, securing first place with a round to spare. In New York, she reached the later stages in both rapid and blitz, again confirming her status as a top threat in fast time controls.

### ALEXANDRA KOSTENIUK

Alexandra Kosteniuk, rated 2450 on the starting list, brings huge experience. She was Women's World Champion from 2008 to 2010 and won the Women's World Rapid Championship in 2021, along with two Fischer Random world titles (2006 and 2008) and many team gold medals.

She remains very active in the Grand Prix circuit and fast chess. In the 2024 Women's World Rapid Championship, she finished sixth, staying on the top boards throughout the event.

### HUMPY KONERU

India's Humpy Koneru, seeded eighth with 2448, is the reigning Women's World Rapid Champion. In New York, she recovered from a loss in the very first round to score 8.5 points from 11 games and take the title for the second time in her career, five years after her first rapid crown in 2019.

Her rapid win and strong blitz result put her second in the overall FIDE women's series standings behind Ju Wenjun. In the women's Grand Prix, she has been a constant contender, sharing first place in Monaco and fighting for the top in Shymkent.

In 2025 Humpy reached the final of the Women's World Cup in Batumi after a dramatic semifinal victory over top seed Lei Tingjie, decided in rapid and blitz tie-breaks. She then lost a tight all Indian final to Divya Deshmukh, but secured a place in the next Candidates Tournament.

### HARIKA DRONAVALLI

Then there is Harika Dronavalli – the ninth seed with 2435 points and one of India's most experienced players at the top. Dronavalli has three bronze medals from past Women's World Championships and a long list of team achievements.

She played an important role in India's victory at the 45th Chess Olympiad in Budapest, leading the team. At the World Rapid in New York in December 2024 Dronavalli shared the lead with Ju Wenjun and Humpy Koneru after the second day, and remained in the fight for medals until the final rounds.

### ZHU JINER

Zhu Jiner completes the top ten with a rapid rating of 2435 on the Doha list, but that number hides the scale of her recent achievements.

She is already one of the most successful young players in the world, the highest-ranked woman under 20 in classical chess according to FIDE's profile. In 2024 and 2025 she had a breakthrough in the Women's Grand Prix. Zhu shared first place in the Grosslobbing leg in Austria, then finished second on tie-break, and her consistent results across the series brought her overall victory in the 2024–25 Grand Prix standings with 352.5 points. That win also secured her qualification for the next Women's Candidates Tournament.

(www.fide.com)

PREMIER LEAGUE

# Arsenal in the ‘right place’, says coach Arteta

Victory at Everton will guarantee Arsenal are top of league at Christmas

AFP  
London

Mikel Arteta believes his transformation of Arsenal has put the Gunners in a position to win major trophies as he celebrates six years as manager.

Victory at Arteta's former club Everton today will guarantee Arsenal are top of the Premier League at Christmas as they aim to win the title for the first time since 2003/04.

An FA Cup success early in the Spaniard's reign is the only major trophy Arteta has delivered, but he has turned Arsenal back into Premier League title contenders and Champions League regulars. They failed to finish in the Premier League's top four for six consecutive years between 2017 and 2022 but have come second in each of the past three seasons.

"The transformation has been around the club in terms of the size, in terms of revenues, in terms of the squad that we built, the value of it, the sporting success that we had, even though we haven't won any major trophies yet," Arteta said.

"I think it's very, very consistent, so we're in the right place. One man cannot really change anything, especially when you talk about the size of the issue of this football club. You need a lot of good people, very committed people around you with the same vision, the same work ethic, the same

passion," Arteta said.

"I'm very lucky because I had (them) throughout that. At the end you need a lot of support, starting from upstairs with everybody that makes decisions alongside you. But the most important ones are the players. I think the players have to buy into what you say and what you do. I feel very lucky because those players give you 100% in the direction that you want every single day," he said.

Arsenal lead Manchester City by two points at the top of the table but the gap has narrowed in recent weeks, with draws at Sunderland and Chelsea followed by just a second defeat of the season at Aston Villa.

Arteta's men face a demanding festive season, with six games between December 20 and January 8.

And the 43-year-old is clear on what he wants for Christmas. "Win, win, win, win, win all the games," he said. "I'll say the rest will come naturally, but my mood, my energy is going to be much better (if we win), so that's what I want."

Arsenal will not see any of their injured players return this week, with defender Ben White out for the next few games, but forward Kai Havertz and centre-back Gabriel Magalhaes are close to recovery, the Spaniard added. Arteta was also excited about playing at Everton's new home ground, the Hill Dickinson Stadium, for the first time. "Strange but very exciting ... we're going to have the opportunity to win at the incredible stadium they have built," he said.



Arsenal forward's Gabriel Jesus (left) and Viktor Gyokeres train yesterday, ahead of their match against Everton.

FOCUS

# Guardiola dismisses Man City exit talk ahead of West Ham clash

Reuters  
Manchester

Manchester City boss **Pep Guardiola** dismissed speculation over his future at the club, insisting contract talks are not on the agenda despite rumours he could leave at the end of the season, but added his side were not yet good enough to win the title.

While Guardiola's team, who host lowly West Ham United today, could overtake Arsenal for top spot in the Premier League this weekend, the Spaniard's job status



was the hot topic at his pre-game press conference.

"I always get asked this question, so sooner or later I will quit Manchester

City," Guardiola told reporters. "I have 18 months, so I'm so happy with the development of the team. That question is there every single season at some point. Whatever is going to happen will happen. They are not discussions. End of the subject. I will not be here forever. What is going to happen will happen. The club must be prepared but that subject is not on the table right now."

Reports linked Enzo Maresca as a potential successor, although the Chelsea manager dismissed them earlier. When pressed again on whether he will be at City next season, an annoyed Guardiola said: "I answered that question two questions

before. I am here. What's going to happen, who knows? Even if I have 10-year contract or six months, football changes a lot. Now I am focusing on West Ham and then golf after a few days with my dad and that is all."

While second-placed City only trail leaders Arsenal by two points in the table, Guardiola does not believe his team are not yet at the standard needed to win the league title. We have results but a lot of things we have to do better. It helps for the fact that the mentality and commitment are incredible," he said. "We are not at the level required to win the title."

City are unbeaten in their last six games

across all competitions, and the emergence of midfielder Rayan Cherk, who joined the club in June for 34mn pounds (\$45.44mn) from Lyon, is one of the reasons why.

The 22-year-old rifled home from just outside the box in a 2-0 win over Brentford in the League Cup quarter-finals on Wednesday and had fans roaring with his audacious rabona cross for Phil Foden's goal against Sunderland earlier this month.

Guardiola praised 22-year-old Nico Gonzalez for City's recent run of form amid injuries to midfielders Rodri and Mateo Kovacic.

City's opponents today West Ham are 18th in the table.

## Amorim takes aim at Man United youth stars over 'entitlement'

**London:** Ruben Amorim said provocative social media posts from two of Manchester United's academy stars showed a damaging "feeling of entitlement" at the Premier League club.

The United boss last week said Harry Amass was "struggling" at Sheffield Wednesday, bottom of the Championship, and pointed out that Chido Obi was not always a starter in United's under-21s. The 18-year-olds both uploaded and subsequently deleted Instagram story posts. Amass posted a photo of himself holding the Sheffield Wednesday's player of the month award for November with a grinning emoji. Obi's post showed him with arms out celebrating a goal for the Under-21s against Manchester City in August.

Amorim defended his direct approach. "I think it's a little bit the feeling of entitlement that we have in our club," the Portuguese said when asked if he had seen the posts. Sometimes strong words are not bad words. Sometimes difficult moments are not bad things for the kids. We don't need to be always with accolades in everything, in every situation."

The United boss called for a change of culture at the club, who are sixth in the Premier League ahead of tomorrow's visit to high-flying Aston Villa. "The players sometimes forget about what it means to play for Manchester United. We as a club sometimes forget who we are," he said. "And that's the feeling that I have. So I understand everything. It's the environment, it's the moment of the players, the kids. They feel entitled."