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CRICKET | Page 2

Gill dropped,
Kishan back
as India name
World Cup squad



BOXING | Page 3

Joshua delivers
reality check
to Paul with KO
punch in Miami

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HORSE RACING

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Qatar Derby victory

Page 4

CHESS

Stage set for FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Championships 2025

MAGNUS CARLSEN, D GUKESH HEADLINE LIST OF PLAYERS AT THE DEC 26-30 CHAMPIONSHIPS

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar is ready to host the FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Championships 2025 from Dec 26-30, this was announced by Mohammed Ahmed al-Mudahka, President of Qatar Chess Association (QCA) and chairman of the organising committee of the tournament yesterday.

Al-Mudahka was joined by Hamad Mohammed al-Tamimi, Executive Director of QCA and the Tournament Director at a press conference at the Rosewood Hotel in Lusail. Addressing the media, al-mudahka confirmed that all preparations for the global event have been completed. He stated that the Open World Blitz Championship will feature 233 players, while the World Rapid Championship will see the participation of 230 players.

Al-Mudahka highlighted the participation of Norway's World No. 1 Magnus Carlsen, noting that his presence adds significant competitive and technical value to the tournament. After missing out on the crown in the Rapid and sharing gold in the Blitz in the previous edition in New York, Carlsen – who this year became a father – will be hoping to claim both titles. He will try to unseat the last year's Rapid champion, Volodar Murzin, who has had strong tournament performances throughout the year.

Al-Mudahka added that a number of the world's leading chess stars have confirmed their participation, including India's World Champion Gukesh D, Blitz co-champion Ian Nepomniachtchi – who shared the title with Carlsen – as well as Fabiano Caruana, Anish Giri, Wesley So, Levon Aronian, Vincent Keymer, Arjun Erigaisi, Nodirbek Abdusattorov, R Praggnanandhaa, Yagiz Kaan Erdogmus, Ediz Gurel, in addition to Russian grandmaster Alexander Grischuk and Ukrainian grandmaster Vasyl Ivanchuk, the winner of World Rapid title in Doha 2016.

The President of QCA said that Doha has become the only city to host the World Rapid and Blitz



Qatar Chess Association President Mohamed al-Mudahka and QCA Executive Director Hamad al-Tamimi during a press conference in Doha yesterday.

Championships twice, following the first edition in 2016.

He described this as a major achievement that reflects Qatar's growing stature on the global chess map, particularly with the tournament's return to Doha after nine years.

Al-Mudahka expressed appreciation for the support of the Ministry of Sports and Youth, the Social and Sports Activities Support Fund (Daam), as well as all partners and sponsors, emphasizing the shared objective of delivering an outstanding edition that contributes to the development of chess in Qatar and strengthens its international presence. He stressed that the federation continues to raise organisational and technical standards to ensure this edition is the best to date.

In the same context, the Local Organising Committee signed several sponsorship agreements. The committee also announced the participation of several emerging talents, including Russian grandmaster Ivan Zemlyanskii (15 years old), Turkish prodigy Yagiz Kaan Erdogmus (14 years old), and Uzbek International Master Mohammad Zahid Suyarov (16 years old).



In the women's competitions, five-time World Champion Ju Wenjun of China has confirmed her participation. The women's field will include 130 players, featuring many of the top-ranked players, such as China's Tan Zhongyi, world No 2, Russian GM Aleksandra Goryachkina, Kazakhstan's Bibisara Assaubayeva, and Anna Muzychuk, winner of both the Rapid and Blitz titles in Doha in 2016, alongside her sister Mariya Muzychuk and Russian grandmaster Kateryna Lagno.

Executive Director QCA and Tournament Director, al-Tamimi said that the organising committee is putting the final touches in place ahead of the event's launch.

He pointed to strong demand for tickets and anticipated wide

audience engagement, with the championships to be broadcast across multiple international chess platforms and websites.

Al-Tamimi added that the tournament offers an important opportunity for young players to follow elite global chess stars up close, encouraging new generations to take up the game and develop their skills toward professional levels.

For his part, Director of Sports Facilities at Qatar University, Engineer Hamoud al-Hajri, confirmed the full readiness of the Sports and Events Complex to host the championships.

He emphasised that every effort is being made to deliver an exceptional edition, noting that staging the competition on campus will have a positive impact on students and contribute to promoting chess culture while leaving a sustainable sporting legacy.

Doha hosted the championships in 2016, when Vasyl Ivanchuk won the World Rapid title and Sergey Karjakin claimed the World Blitz crown.

The total prize fund for the upcoming edition exceeds €1mn, distributed across the open and women's competitions.

Seven premium sponsors ink deals ahead of FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Championships 2025

Doha: A series of sponsorship agreements for the FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Championships 2025 were signed during a press conference on Saturday at Rosewood Hotel.

Mohammed Ahmed al-Mudahka, President of Qatar Chess Association (QCA) and chairman of the organising committee of the tournament, signed the sponsorship deals before the Dec 26-30 championships.

Representatives of Social and Sport Contribution Fund (Daam), Ooredoo, Mowasalat (Karwa), Total, Al Abdulghani Motors, AlkaLive and Qatar University were present to sign the sponsorship contracts. Ahmed al-Banai, Senior Manager of Corporate Social Responsibility and Sponsorship - Ooredoo; Yousef Mohammed al-Nuaimi, Director of Shared Services at Social and Sport Contribution Fund; Nasser Mamdouh al-Shammari, Director of Light Transport - Mowasalat Co; Mansur Zhakupov, General Manager - Total Energy; Osama Mariam, CEO AlkaLive; Sami al-Mubarak, Head of Corporate Partnerships - Al Abdulghani Motors; and Hamoudal-Hajri, Director of Sports Facilities at Qatar University; represented their esteemed organisations

at the press conference staged yesterday. Abdulghani Nasser al-Abdulghani, Chief Executive Officer of Al Abdulghani Motors, said: "We are proud to support the FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Championship Qatar 2025, an event that reflects excellence, discipline, and strategic thinking at the highest level. Our sponsorship underscores our commitment to supporting national initiatives that promote intellectual sports, empower talent, and reinforce Qatar's position as a global destination for world-class events. Through our long-standing partnership with the Qatar Chess Association, we remain dedicated to contributing to a vibrant, thoughtful, and future-ready community."

With over €1mn in prizes on the line, the stakes couldn't be higher for the year's final showdown. After nearly a decade, the championship returns to Qatar, and hence fans should not miss the speed, strategy, and intensity.

Key Details at a Glance
Dates: December 25-30, 2025
Venue: Sports and Events Complex, Qatar University
Prize Fund: €1,000,000+
Formats: Rapid & Blitz (Open and Women's)



Representatives of the sponsoring companies are seen with QCA President Mohamed al-Mudahka and QCA Executive Director Hamad al-Tamimi during a press conference in Doha yesterday.

SPOTLIGHT

Logo of 4th GCC Games – Doha 2026 unveiled

The Organising Committee of the 4th GCC Games – Doha 2026 unveiled yesterday the official logo of the Games during a ceremony held at Old Doha Port, in the presence of a number of officials, representatives of sports federations, and members of the media.

The official logo of the 4th GCC Games – Doha 2026 draws its inspiration from the palm tree, one of the most prominent symbols rooted in the environment and heritage of the Gulf region. The palm tree reflects the shared values of Gulf societies, including resilience, endurance, generosity, patience, and a deep connection to the land – values that have shaped the Gulf identity across generations.

The logo is composed of six palm fronds, representing the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), presented in a contemporary visual style defined by flowing lines that reflect the sporting character of

the Games. The harmonious arrangement of the fronds creates a central negative space that forms the number "4", offering a clear reference to the fourth edition of the GCC Games.

The logo was unveiled through a creative and interactive approach, based on the execution of an artistic mural using a "paint-by-numbers" concept.

Attendees and members of the public took part in gradually completing the logo by filling the numbered sections with their designated colours, in a scene that highlighted the importance of community participation and reinforced the concept of collective effort – values that the Games seek to promote.

Doha will host the competitions of the 4th GCC Games from May 11-22, 2026, with the participation of elite Gulf athletes competing in 18 sporting disciplines, held across nine sports venues.

On this occasion, Sheikh Khalifa bin Khalid al-Thani, General



Director of the 4th GCC Games – Doha 2026 expressed his pride in unveiling the official logo of the Games, affirming that the logo embodies the shared meanings that unite GCC countries and reflects the depth of historical and

cultural ties among their peoples.

He noted that the logo's design was the result of a carefully considered vision aimed at translating common Gulf values into a contemporary visual identity, explaining that the choice of the

palm frond was deliberate and based on its firmly established symbolism in the region's heritage, and what it represents in terms of authenticity and cohesion among Gulf states.

He added that the Organising

Committee was keen to ensure that the logo unveiling took place through an interactive and innovative method, allowing the public to participate in the moment of announcement and reflecting the Games' approach to engaging the community at various stages. He emphasised that this approach aligns with the Games' message of strengthening bonds among Gulf youth and reinforcing the values of cooperation and collective action through sport.

Sheikh Khalifa bin Khalid also confirmed that preparations for hosting the Games are progressing in line with the approved plans, drawing on Qatar's extensive organisational experience in hosting major sporting events. He expressed the Organising Committee's aspiration to deliver an outstanding edition of the GCC Games that contributes to the development of Gulf sport and further enhances Doha's position as a leading destination for hosting regional and international sporting events.

T20 WORLD CUP

Gill dropped, Kishan back for India's title defence

Reuters
New Delhi

India's Test and one day captain Shubman Gill could not find a place in their 15-member squad for next year's home Twenty20 World Cup, but stumper-batter Ishan Kishan returned to the side yesterday.

Opener Gill has gone 18 innings in T20 Internationals without a 50 and missed Friday's match against South Africa with a foot injury.

Wicketkeeper-batsman Sanju Samson has impressed in limited

opportunities and made a breezy 37 as Abhishek Sharma's opening partner in the 30-run win over the South Africans in Ahmedabad.

"It's more to do with the combination that we want to play, or what the team management is comfortable with playing," chief selector Ajit Agarkar told reporters in Mumbai. "We felt the keeper at the top at this point gives us a lot more solidity than anywhere else in the team to play different combinations. "There are only 15 that we could have picked. Someone has to miss out. It's him. It's not because he's not a good player."

Kishan was recalled after he led Jharkhand's successful campaign in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, smashing a hundred in Friday's final against Haryana. The same squad will play a five-match home T20 series against New Zealand next month. Jasprit Bumrah will lead India's pace attack that also contains left-arm seamer Arshdeep Singh.

Varun Chakaravarthy will spearhead the spin department, which also includes left-arm wrist-spinner Kuldeep Yadav. India will also expect Hardik Pandya, their premier seam-bowling

all-rounder, to play a crucial role in their title defence in the tournament to be played from February 7 to March 8 across eight venues in India and Sri Lanka.

SQUAD: Suryakumar Yadav (captain), Abhishek Sharma, Sanju Samson (wicketkeeper), Tilak Varma, Hardik Pandya, Shivam Dube, Axar Patel (vice captain), Rinku Singh, Jasprit Bumrah, Harshit Rana, Arshdeep Singh, Kuldeep Yadav, Varun Chakaravarthy, Washington Sundar, Ishan Kishan (wicketkeeper).



Captain Suryakumar Yadav (left) and BCCI secretary Devajit Saikia (centre) look on as chairman of the selection committee Ajit Agarkar speaks at BCCI headquarters in Mumbai yesterday. (AFP)

CRICKET

Australia 4 wickets from Ashes glory as England cling on

'HE TOILED AWAY ALL DAY AND FINALLY GOT SOME REWARD'



Australian bowler Pat Cummins (right) celebrates dismissing England's Joe Root on the fourth day of the third Ashes Test in Adelaide yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Adelaide

An unrelenting Australia were four wickets from retaining the Ashes at close of play in the third Test yesterday as England clung to the dying hope that they could chase a record 435 to save the series.

England clawed their way to 207-6 to take it to a fifth day in Adelaide with Will Jacks on 11 and Jamie Smith two, still 228 runs from their target.

They lost big guns Zak Crawley (85), Joe Root (39), Harry Brook (30), and Ben Stokes (5) in the final session with Nathan Lyon and Pat Cummins doing the damage.

Australia wicketkeeper Alex Carey, who made a century in the first innings, had another good day with his quick hands stumping Crawley off Lyon.

"I just thought Nathan was bowling really well and to continuing putting lots of energy on the ball," said Carey. "He toiled away all day and finally got some reward. There's enough in the pitch. We saw that, and finally he picked up a couple of late wickets."

Carey expected England to fight till the bitter end today and said he was still not thinking about winning the Ashes.

"We'll reflect on today and come up with plans for tomorrow. "We know these guys are quality players right to the end, and we want to keep working hard and probably not look too far ahead."

England must win to keep the five-match series alive after being crushed by eight wickets at Perth and Brisbane.

With attendance over the first four days swelling to more than 200,000 - a record for the Ad-

England 'flat' as Crawley admits Australia a better side

Opener Zak Crawley said the mood in the England dressing room was "flat" yesterday as they stared down the barrel of losing the Ashes within three Tests, admitting Australia were the better side. England are still 228 runs adrift from the mammoth 435 the hosts set them to win in Adelaide with just four wickets left and a daunting task ahead on day five. Should they lose, the five-match series will be decided with Tests in Melbourne and Sydney still to come after Australia won the opening two clashes in Perth and Brisbane by eight wickets. "They're just flat," said Crawley, who hit a composed 85, of his teammates. "We came here to win the Ashes, we're always an optimistic team, an upbeat team, and we'll try and put up as much fight as we can. "Obviously very disappointing," he added. "It's an uphill battle from here, but the boys are going to give it a good crack tomorrow."

Crawley at least found form with the grittiest of knocks, adding 78 with Joe Root then 68 with Harry Brook, defending well and attacking loose balls. He

was undone when spin wizard Nathan Lyon tempted him down the wicket to be stumped by Alex Carey. Crawley said while he was at the crease he always believed England had a chance. "When you're at the crease, you never consider that the game's over, you always think like that as long as you're there," he said. "When you get out, obviously those feelings change. But when I was out there I felt like we had great players at the crease and coming in." England headed to Australia with high hopes, but it has been mostly one-way traffic despite the series being hyped beforehand as having the hallmarks of being a classic. Crawley admitted England had been outplayed by a better side. "They're a very, very good side. I feel like it was always going to be tough coming here, against them," he said. "They were the favourites going into it and they've proven why. "Obviously we've been slightly short of our best, but a lot of credit has to go to them. They've not allowed us to be our best."

Root, who needed a big score to save his side but was undone by Cummins again.

The Australian skipper removed him for a 13th time in Tests, more than any other bowler, with a furious Root berating himself after prodding at a full delivery and feathering to Carey.

Crawley brought up a well-deserved 50 and with an uncharacteristically subdued Brook began a rebuild before his partner badly mistimed a reverse sweep and was bowled by a classic Lyon off-break. With the pitch deteriorating, Lyon unleashed another trademark delivery to bowl Stokes, then tempted Crawley down the wicket to be stumped by Carey, leaving England's Ashes campaign in tatters. Australia resumed at 271-4 with Head on 142 and Carey 52 and they feasted early on some mediocre bowling.

Stokes didn't turn over his arm

on Friday with assistant coach Jeetan Patel saying he was "knackered" after a stoic 83 with the bat.

The England captain opened the attack on Saturday but Head quickly got to work and reached his 150 with a boundary through backward point, earning a standing ovation from his home fans. Targeting a maiden double-century, Head pulled a short ball from Josh Tongue with Crawley in the deep doing well to get underneath it in glaring sun.

Carey was taken at slip by Brook off Stokes, with Josh Inglis (10) following, caught behind by Smith off Tongue. The tail folded quickly with Tongue taking 4-70 and Bryson Carse 3-80.

BRIEF SCORES: England 286 and 207 for 6 (Crawley 85, Cummins 3-24, Lyon 3-64) **need 228 runs to beat Australia 371 and 349** (Head 170, Carey 72, Tongue 4-70).

SPOTLIGHT

Dogged Hodge ton sees West Indies save follow-on against NZ

AFP

Mount Maunganui, New Zealand

Kavem Hodge scored his second Test century yesterday as the West Indies avoided the follow-on in the third Test at Mount Maunganui

At stumps on the third day, the West Indies were 381-6, still 194 runs behind with Hodge unbeaten on 109 and Anderson Phillip at the other end on 12.

The 32-year-old Hodge crawled to his century off 224 balls, hitting 12 boundaries and being dropped on 74 by Daryl Mitchell off Ajaz Patel.

It took him 33 balls to get through the 90s, including a long stoppage on 97 after he was hit a painful blow in the box by a Michael Rae delivery.

"Thankfully I was able to get over it and go past the landmark," Hodge said. "I told myself, hey, I spent all day to get 90. I still have all day tomorrow. Just stick to the processes.

"It makes no sense I work so hard from zero to 90 and then go change. So just stick to the processes, keep concentrating every opportunity I get."

Hodge shared in an 81-run partnership with Justin Greaves which edged the visitors closer to the follow-on target of 375, and fifty stands with Tevin Imlach and Alick Athanaze.

New Zealand received a spark from an unlikely source when Mitchell trapped Greaves lbw for 43, just his fourth Test wicket in his 35th match.

Batting suddenly looked a lot harder, as West Indies captain Roston Chase came and went, trapped lbw by Patel. Leading batsman, Shai Hope was missing Saturday because of food poisoning.

Phillip came to the crease and should have been out for two when edging Patel to wicketkeeper Tom Blundell, but New Zealand did not appeal. He was then dropped on eight from Patel's bowling by Rae at mid-on. Jacob Duffy had 2-79 from 31 overs, while Patel took 2-94 in 33 overs to end his unwanted record of being the bowler to take the most Test wickets without a single one at home.

Patel's 86th Test wicket was



West Indies' Kavem Hodge (left) celebrates his century with Anderson Phillip (right) during day three of the 3rd Test against New Zealand in Mount Maunganui yesterday. (AFP)

his first in New Zealand, bowling Athanaze in the middle session some 2,562 days since his first Test in New Zealand and with his 394th ball on home soil.

"It was more like, once that was out of the way, then I can focus solely on the game and not have that in the back of my mind," Patel said. "I think there were probably moments where I maybe went searching for it.

"But at the same time, I've played a lot of first-class cricket in New Zealand and you have to get to 25, 30 overs and then you reap your rewards."

England's Billy Bates, who took 50 wickets between 1882 and 1887, all in Australia, has regained the dubious honour in the Test history books.

The West Indies resumed yesterday at 110-0 and added only one run before Duffy struck in the second over as John Campbell edged to Tom Latham at second slip without adding to his overnight 45. The wicket ended the first West Indies century opening stand since February 2023. Duffy then bowled Brandon King, who had begun the day on 55, for 63.

New Zealand declared their first innings on Friday at a mammoth 575-8, anchored by Devon Conway's epic 227 and captain Latham's 137.

BRIEF SCORES: West Indies 381 for 6 (Hodge 109*, King 63, Duffy 2-79) **trail New Zealand 575 for 8 dec** (Conway 227, Latham 137, Ravindra 72*, Greaves 2-83) **by 194 runs**.

Popov becomes first French player to reach title match in World Tour Finals

Christo Popov became the first French player to reach the title match at the World Tour Finals where he faces world champion Shi Yuqi yesterday, while Paris Olympics gold medalist An Se-young set up a women's showpiece clash with holder Wang Zhiyi. Popov, making his tournament debut as a singles player, overwhelmed Japan's Kodai Naraoka with his speed and power to win 21-19 21-8 in the semi-finals in Hangzhou. "The first game was very important, being very long and winning that made me confident for the second game, and I got more aggressive," Popov said. "One thought was getting out of the group stage, which would be a huge thing for me. Now I'm into the final, so I'm happy."

Popov is trying to become the third European to clinch the men's singles title after Danes Anders Antonsen and Viktor Axelsen, with the latter winning a record three times. China's Shi, who is looking to equal Axelsen with a third straight World

Tour Finals title, beat Thai world number one Kunlavut Vitidsarn 21-16 21-13 in the second semi-final. In the women's semis, South Korean An took just 38 minutes to beat Japan's Akane Yamaguchi 21-15 21-12. Bidding for a second title at the season-ending championships, An came at the world champion with power and pace but Yamaguchi repelled the attacks with pinpoint accuracy from the front court. An's pressure eventually told, however, and she kept Yamaguchi off balance to take the match with quick rallies. In the second women's semi-final, Wang, 25, dropped the first game to Ratchanok Intanon, who caused the Chinese player all sorts of problems with the variety of her shots. The Thai defended well on the back court but Wang ticked up the aggression to take the second game. Wang's superior fitness began to tell in the third as the 30-year-old Ratchanok tired and the Chinese player emerged with a 15-21 21-17 21-11 victory to reach the final.

BOXING

Joshua delivers reality check to Paul with sixth-round KO

The controversial fight in Miami saw both men reportedly splitting a mammoth purse of \$184mn

AFP
Miami

Former world heavyweight champion Anthony Joshua knocked out YouTuber-turned-boxer Jake Paul in their controversial Netflix-backed bout in Miami on Friday.

The fight at the Kaseya Center, which saw both men reportedly splitting a mammoth purse of \$184mn, had triggered alarm across boxing due to the gulf in physical size and class between Britain's two-time former world champion Joshua and Paul, an Internet personality who has forged a lucrative career through a handful of novelty boxing contests.

In the event, however, Joshua made hard work of defeating his vastly less accomplished opponent, before his superior size and power eventually told in the later stages of the eight-round fight, with a sixth-round knockout. A lacklustre contest descended into farce at times, with Paul repeatedly dropping to the canvas and grappling at Joshua's legs.

At one stage even referee Christopher Young appeared to be losing patience, warning the fighters in the fourth round: "The fans did not pay to see this crap." As Paul tired, the 6ft 6in (1.98m) tall Joshua began to land punches with more regularity, and after knocking down the 6ft 1in American twice in the fifth round, the end came swiftly in the sixth.

Joshua backed the 28-year-old into a corner and, after teeing up Paul with a crunching left, delivered the knockout blow with a right to the chin that sent his opponent crashing to the canvas. "It wasn't the best performance," Joshua, 36, admitted afterwards.



British boxer Anthony Joshua (right) delivered a savage sixth-round knockout that left the YouTuber-turned-boxer Jake Paul nursing a broken jaw in two places at the Kaseya Centre in Miami on Friday. (AFP)

"But the end goal was to get Jake Paul, pin him down and hurt him. That was the request leading up, and that was on my mind. It took a bit longer than expected but the right hand finally found its destination."

Joshua meanwhile praised Paul for lasting into the later rounds. "I want to give him his props – he got up time and time again," Joshua said. "It was difficult in there for him, but he kept on trying to find a way. It takes a real man to do that."

Paul, meanwhile, his mouth bloodied from Joshua's final assault, said he believed his jaw had been broken – but was satisfied with his performance.

"That was fun. I gave it my all," Paul said. "I had a blast. I think my jaw is broken by the way. But Anthony's one of the best to ever do it so. I'm gonna come back and get a world championship. I just got tired to be honest – like it was so much handling his weight. I think with better cardio I could have kept it up and kept on fighting. But he hits really hard."

The American later confirmed in a post on social media, accompanied by an image of a radiograph, that he had suffered a "double broken jaw".

Friday's made-for-streaming contest, which came just over a year after Paul had fought a 58-year-old Mike Tyson in a much-derided Netflix fight, had been widely panned throughout boxing, with many warning that Paul risked serious injury.

Yet the devastating first or second round knockout by Joshua that most had predicted failed to materialise as Paul scrambled desperately to stay outside of the 2012 Olympic champion Joshua's range.

Joshua, fighting for the first time in 15 months, always looked the more threatening fighter, landing 48 of 146 punches thrown compared to Paul's meagre total of 16 punches landed.

The Briton is now turning his attention towards a money-spinning bout against compatriot and fellow former world champion Tyson Fury next year. "We shook off the cobwebs and I can't wait to roll into 2026," Joshua said.

"And if Tyson Fury is as serious as he thinks he is, let's put on some gloves and fight."

FOOTBALL

Africa Cup of Nations to be held every four years after 2028 edition

AFP
Rabat

The Africa Cup of Nations will be staged every four years following an edition planned for 2028 in a major change to what is currently a biennial showpiece, African football chief Patrice Motsepe announced.

The Confederation of African Football (CAF) president revealed the change as part of a significant restructuring of the international game on the continent to help it fit better into a packed global calendar.

An AFCON every two years was a vital source of revenue for African national associations, but Motsepe said the introduction of an annual African Nations League competition – similar to the UEFA Nations League – would now help boost coffers instead.

"Our focus now is on this AFCON but in 2027 we will be going to Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda, and the AFCON after that will be in 2028," Motsepe told reporters in Rabat, on the eve of the opening game of this year's Morocco-hosted Cup of Nations.

He said a bidding process would be opened up for nations interested in hosting the 2028 Cup of Nations. "Then after the FIFA Club World Cup in 2029 we will have the first African Nations League... with more prize money, more resources, more competition. "As part of this arrangement, the AFCON now will take place once every four years."

The Cup of Nations has usually been held at two-year intervals since the very first edition in 1957, but over the last 15 years it has struggled to find a convenient place in the global calendar. This year's tournament in Morocco will be the eighth to be held going back to the 2012 edition in Equatorial Guinea and Gabon.

The 2019 edition in Egypt took place in June and July, a move away from the traditional slot at the beginning of the year seen as a way of appeasing major European clubs by avoiding playing in the middle of their season.

But the last two AFCONs, in Cameroon in 2022 and Ivory Coast in 2024, reverted to January-February to avoid coinciding with the



Hosts Morocco will face Comoros in the opening match of the Africa Cup of Nations at the Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat today. (Reuters)

rainy season in those regions. The latest Cup of Nations was initially due to take place in June and July this year but was forced to move because of the first edition of FIFA's expanded Club World Cup in the United States.

However, CAF could not wait until next June because of the 2026 World Cup, and they can no longer stage the Cup of Nations in January and February because of the new UEFA Champions League format. The solution is to start in December and continue into the New Year, at a time when some European leagues – where so many African stars play – take a break, but the Premier League has a packed schedule.

Motsepe said the change, along with the introduction of the Nations League, was made "to make sure the football calendar worldwide is more in harmony". "Of course our primary

duty is to African football but we also have a duty to the players from Africa playing for the best clubs in Europe," he added. "We want to make sure that there is more synchronisation and that the global calendar allows the best African players every year to be in Africa."

He said the new annual Nations League would start off by being regionalised, with 16 teams each in the east, west and central-southern zones, and six in the northern zone. Matches will be played in September and October, with the top teams from each zone coming together for the finals to take place in one location in November.

Meanwhile he said prize money for the Cup of Nations in Morocco would be increased so that the winners receive \$10mn, up from \$7mn for the winners in Ivory Coast in 2024.

TENNIS

Wawrinka to retire in 2026 after 24-year career

Reuters
Zurich

Stanislas Wawrinka will hang up his racquet at the end of 2026, the three-times Grand Slam champion announced on Friday, bringing down the curtain on a 24-year professional career that saw him gatecrash tennis's elite during the sport's golden era.

Switzerland's Wawrinka, who turned professional in 2002, will turn 41 in March, capping a journey that transformed him from perennial underdog to giant-killer. Capable of playing ferocious tennis across all surfaces during his peak, the late bloomer's greatest triumphs came when it mattered most, stunning the tennis world by defeating the sport's biggest names on the grandest stages.

Nicknamed 'Stanimal', Wawrinka conquered Rafa Nadal to claim the 2014 Australian Open before he toppled Novak Djokovic twice – at the 2015 French Open and 2016 US Open – each time beating the world number one in the final.

"Every book needs an ending. It's time to write the final chap-

ter of my career as a professional tennis player. 2026 will be my last year on tour," Wawrinka wrote on Instagram. "I still want to push my limits and finish this journey on the best note possible. I still have dreams in this sport. I've enjoyed every part of what tennis has given me, especially the emotions I feel playing in front of you."

Wawrinka won 16 ATP titles and had a career-high world ranking of three. He also captured Olympic doubles gold alongside Roger Federer in 2008 and helped deliver Switzerland's maiden Davis Cup title in 2014. The announcement comes with Wawrinka currently 157th in the world after injuries and knee surgeries sent him tumbling down the rankings.

He has not reached a Grand Slam quarters since the 2020 Australian Open and will likely need wildcards to enter the majors in his farewell season. After a first-round exit at Roland Garros earlier this year, Wawrinka admitted defeats were getting tougher to accept in his career's twilight, though he remained passionate about competing. "I'm looking forward to seeing you one more time, all around the world. One last push," he concluded.



Stan Wawrinka beat Rafa Nadal to claim the 2014 Australian Open before he toppled Novak Djokovic twice – at the 2015 French Open and 2016 US Open – each time beating the world number one in the final. (Reuters)

FOCUS

Morocco captain Hakimi declared fit for hosts' AFCON title bid

AFP
Rabat

Morocco captain and star player Achraf Hakimi is fit and ready for the host nation's Africa Cup of Nations bid but may not start in the tournament's opening game, coach Walid Regragui said.

"Tomorrow will be my decision but he has more than done his job. His injury was not an easy one," Regragui told reporters in Rabat where Morocco play minnows Co-

moros in the first match today. "I still have another night to sleep and decide whether he starts or whether we protect him and see how it goes for the remaining games. He is able to start, but he might not start."

Paris Saint-Germain right-back Hakimi, the African player of the year, has not played since coming off with a left ankle injury in a Champions League game against Bayern Munich on November 4. The 27-year-old left the field in tears that night, clearly fearing for his chances of featuring at the Cup of Nations.

The injury was later diagnosed as a se-

vere sprain. "I feel good. I am following the programme given to me by the medical staff and the coach," Hakimi, who also came sixth in this year's Ballon d'Or ranking, said.

Regragui added: "He has made sacrifices over the last four or five weeks that nobody else could have made, and has set an example to the other players and the staff. Today we can see that the protocol we put in place after his injury has been more than positive but now we have the whole competition to manage."

Morocco will also face Mali and Zambia

in Group A as they bid to win a first Cup of Nations since 1976.

IVORY COAST'S HALLER AND ALGERIA'S AOUAR OUT OF AFCON

A hamstring injury sustained in a Dutch league match has ruled Ivory Coast striker Sebastien Haller out of the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations. Haller scored the winning goal in last year's AFCON final as hosts Ivory Coast came from behind to beat Nigeria 2-1 in Abidjan.

The striker had recovered from testicular cancer just a few months before

the premier African football tournament kicked off. A national football federation announcement said Haller will be replaced by Evann Guessand from Aston Villa, increasing the number of Premier League players in the Elephants' squad to five.

The defending champions are in Group F with five-time winners Cameroon, Gabon and Mozambique and will play all their first round matches in Marrakesh. An undisclosed injury sustained while training has forced Saudi Arabia-based midfielder Houssein Aouar to withdraw from the Algeria squad, according to officials.

HORSE RACING

Aeon's Aegis storms to second straight Qatar Derby victory

Wathnan Racing's Lippo De Carrere won the Group 2 Purebred Arabian feature for four-year-olds

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Sheikh Abdul Rahman bin Rashid al-Thani's Aeon's Aegis confirmed his class with a second consecutive victory to claim the QA Gr 1 Qatar Derby at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC)'s Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday. The bay gelding, followed up his Derby Trial success with a dominant performance in the Derby itself. Produced from the rear of the field in the home straight, he unleashed a thundering turn of foot to surge past his rivals and draw clear for an impressive 3½-length victory for trainer Mohammed al-Ghazali and jockey Soufiane Saadi.

Abdulrahman bin Abdulla al-Malki, Assistant Undersecretary of the Ministry of Sports and Youth, in the presence of Bader bin Mohammed al-Darwish, QREC Acting CEO, presented the trophy.

Wathnan Racing's Lippo De Carrere delivered a brave, high-class performance to land the Gr 2 Purebred Arabian feature for four-year-olds, prevailing by a neck in a thrilling finish of the 2000m contest. Trained by Alban de Mieuille and ridden by James Doyle, the colt denied the gallant runner-up Shaihaan, his half-brother, completing a treble for his owner-trainer-jockey combination.

Earlier in the day, Zameer maintained his unbeaten record with a decisive victory in the 1,600m contest of the Local Purebred Arabian three-year-old Derby, delivering another title for owner Wathnan Racing, trainer Alban de Mieuille and jockey James Doyle, while also completing a quick-fire double for the winning trio. Racing prominently in second, the grey colt took charge in the home straight and, once past the 200m, never looked back, drawing clear to score by three lengths.

Wathnan Racing celebrated another top-level success yesterday, when Best Way maintained his unbeaten record, following up his Trial victory with a decisive success in the 1,850m Derby for three-year-olds.

The bay colt, trained by De Mieuille and ridden by Doyle, loomed up approaching the home turn before striking in the final 200m and finding another gear inside the last 100m to assert his authority and score by 1¼ lengths, preserving the title for the



Soufiane Saadi rides Aeon's Aegis to Qatar Derby victory. **PICTURES:** Juhaim

same owner-trainer-jockey combination for the third consecutive year.

Al Rayyan Stakes, as Godolphin celebrated success with Pacific Avenue. The grey colt delivered a polished performance in the 1,600m contest for two-year-old Thoroughbreds, making smooth, steady progress before quickening decisively in the home straight. Under William Buick, he surged to the front and drew clear to score by 2½ lengths for trainer Charlie Appleby.

Earlier in the day, Ahmed Amanalla al-Sheebani, QREC Deputy CEO, presented the trophy of the Qatar National Derby to Ahmed al-Kuwari, who received it on behalf of North Racing, owners of the unbeaten Zah'ran Al Shahania.

The dark bay gelding maintained his perfect record with a determined success in the 2,000m contest for four-year-old Local Purebred Arabians, following up his Trial victory by returning to overcome three familiar rivals in the Derby itself. Zah'ran Al Shahania was held up behind the leaders before unleashing a powerful late surge in the concluding stages, hitting the front and holding on bravely to clinch



Abdulrahman bin Abdulla al-Malki, Assistant Undersecretary of the Ministry of Sports and Youth, presents a trophy to Wathnan Racing's representative after Lippo De Carrere won the Purebred Arabian feature for four-year-olds.

victory by a head from Fatack Al Shahania, handing trainer Hamad al-Jehani a third win on the day under Pierre Charles Boudot.

Al Shaqab Racing's Amjaad won the Qa-



Abdulrahman bin Abdulla al-Malki, Assistant Undersecretary of the Ministry of Sports and Youth, presented the trophies to connections of Aeon's Aegis, which won the Group 1 Qatar Derby at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.



Wathnan Racing's Lippo De Carrere is led to victory by James Doyle.

tar three-year-old Purebred Arabian Derby (Gr 3 PA) yesterday. The bay filly confirmed her class by adding a Group success to her record after several placed efforts at Gr 1 PA level, producing a determined finish in the 1,600m contest. Launched in the home straight, she cut down the deficit on the long-time leader before reeling him in

inside the final 100m to land the spoils by a length for trainer Thomas Fourcy under jockey Faleh Bughenaim.

Mubarak bin Ali al-Nuaimi, President of the Qatar Swimming Federation, presented the trophy to Mohamed bin Abdulrahman al-Mansour, Chief Operating Officer of Al Shaqab Racing.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Haaland sends Man City top, Chelsea fightback frustrates Newcastle

AFP
Manchester

Erling Haaland fired Manchester City to the top of the Premier League by beating West Ham 3-0, while Chelsea fought back to salvage a 2-2 draw at Newcastle yesterday.

Arsenal can retake top spot for Christmas when they visit Everton later, but City ramped up the pressure on the Gunners with a seventh consecutive win in all competitions.

The Hammers feared a rout when Haaland smashed home after just five minutes.

Alphonse Areola saved the Norwegian's first effort before the ball broke kindly for Haaland to fire into the top corner.

Haaland turned provider for City's second just before half-time as Tijjani Reijnders scored his first goal at the Etihad.

West Ham missed a number of chances to halve the deficit early in the second period as they remain in the relegation zone.

Haaland, by contrast, was ruthless as he netted his 38th goal of the season already for club and country when the ball broke his way 21 minutes from time to move City one point ahead of Arsenal.

Chelsea remain in fourth as a second-half fightback rescued manager Enzo Maresca from more speculation over his future.

The Italian claimed after last weekend's win over Everton that he and his players had not received enough support during a difficult run of results.

Maresca was then linked with being Pep Guardiola's successor at City in recent days.

Chelsea have won just once in their last five league games to see ambitions of a title challenge wilt.

But it could have been even worse for Maresca as Nick Woltemade's double put Newcastle 2-0 up in a dominant first half from the Magpies.

A brilliant Reece James free-kick brought the Blues back into the game before Joao Pedro pounced on an error from Malick Thiaw to equalise.

Newcastle felt aggrieved as two late appeals for penalties and for James to be sent off were dismissed to leave Eddie Howe's men languishing in 11th. "My last week has not been complicated, it has been good. We beat Ever-



Manchester City's Erling Haaland celebrates scoring a goal against West Ham United in Manchester yesterday. (Reuters)

ton, we beat Cardiff (in the League Cup) and we drew with Newcastle away, so in terms of results, I'm happy," said Maresca.

"Again, there are things that for sure we can do better, but I think we're going in the right direction."

Wolves remain without a league win this season and on course to enter the record books as the worst side in Premier League history.

Keane Lewis-Potter scored both goals as Brentford won 2-0 at Molineux to move 10 points clear of the relegation zone.

Burnley ended their seven-game losing streak as Armando Broja's 90th-minute goal snatched a 1-1 draw at Bournemouth.

The in-demand Antoine Semenyo, who is attracting interest from City, Manchester United, Liverpool and Tottenham ahead of the January window, opened the scoring but the Cherries have now gone eight games without a win.

Sunderland edged up to fifth after a 0-0 draw at Brighton.

Liverpool sink nine-man Spurs but Isak limps off after rare goal

Alexander Isak endured a bittersweet evening as the Liverpool striker scored before limping off injured in a chaotic 2-1 win over nine-man Tottenham yesterday.

Isak put Liverpool ahead in the second half in north London after Tottenham's Xavi Simons was sent off before the interval for a nasty lunge on Virgil van Dijk. It was only Isak's third goal in 16 games in all competitions since his British record £125mn (\$166mn) move from Newcastle on transfer deadline day.

Yet in keeping with Isak's troubled start to life with the Premier League champions, the 26-year-old was unable to fully enjoy his goal as he was forced to come off after being injured by Micky van de Ven's failed attempt to stop him scoring. Hugo Ekitike's fifth goal in his last four appearances put Liverpool in command before Richarlison's reply set up a tense finale that came to a head with Tottenham defender Romero's dismissal in stoppage time.

Stuttgart miss top four chance after draw against Hoffenheim

Berlin: Stuttgart were held to a goalless draw at home by Hoffenheim yesterday, missing a chance to move into the top four. The stalemate means this season's surprise packages Hoffenheim, who only just beat relegation last season, stay fourth, with Stuttgart a point behind in sixth.

Bayer Leverkusen can leapfrog Hoffenheim into the top four by avoiding defeat at RB Leipzig in a late match. Stuttgart had a chance to take the lead just before half-time when Tiago Tomas' close-range effort was saved by Hoffenheim's Germany goalkeeper Oliver Baumann.

Deniz Undav headed in a free-kick in stoppage time, but his goal was ruled out for a narrow offside.

Eintracht Frankfurt's struggles continued with a 1-1 draw away against Hamburg. Frankfurt equalised through Hugo Larsson after Albert Sambi Lokonga had given the hosts an early lead. Arsenal loanee Fabio Vieira's late winner for Hamburg was ruled

out by VAR for offside.

Frankfurt, third last season, sit seventh, having struggled defensively this term. No team has conceded more than Frankfurt's 30 goals in the Bundesliga this season. Promoted after seven seasons in the second division in summer, Hamburg have been strong at home, with 14 of their 16 points coming at their 57,000-strong Volksparkstadion.

A stoppage-time goal from Andras Schaefer took Union Berlin to a 1-0 win away against 10-man Cologne, helping the eighth-placed side keep pace with the European spots.

Elsewhere, Freiburg came from behind twice to beat Wolfsburg 4-3, despite home striker Dzenan Pejcinovic scoring a hat-trick, while Augsburg and Werder Bremen played out a scoreless draw. Today, Bayern Munich need a win away at Heidenheim to restore their nine-point lead atop the table over second-placed Borussia Dortmund.

FIFA Best XI 'a joke', rages Barca coach Flick over Raphinha snub

Barcelona: Barcelona coach Hansi Flick raged against Raphinha's omission from FIFA's team of the year, labelling the world football governing body's 'The Best Men's XI' a joke.

The Brazilian was essential on the left wing for the Catalan giants as they won a domestic treble last season. However the 29-year-old was not chosen as part of the dream line-up, voted for by national team coaches, captains, journalists and fans, behind players including Chelsea's Cole Palmer and Real Madrid's Jude Bellingham.

"This FIFA Best XI plays is a joke, really a joke," Flick said, after the award ceremony earlier this week. "When I see there is no Raphinha in the side, it's unbelievable."

Barcelona were knocked out of the Champions League in the semi-finals by Inter Milan, with Raphinha finishing as the competition's joint-top scorer with 13, and the top assist provider with seven. Flick said Raphinha had "the best (goal contributions) in the Champions League".

"When you see the matches he played, how many goals he scored, assists he has, it's unbelievable. More, it's influence (he had on) the team. This is really not fair to him," continued the German coach. "For me it's a joke, I cannot believe he's not in the best XI because after this season he deserved it, it's unbelievable."

Raphinha's return from injury has helped Barcelona return to form in recent weeks after a shaky start to the campaign.