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**WEIGHTLIFTING | Page 2**

**North Korea and Turkmenistan lifters sparkle at Qatar Cup**



**FORMULA 1 | Page 3**

**Red Bull CEO has 'no doubt' Verstappen will end career with team**

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# GULF TIMES SPORT

**FOOTBALL**

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Page 4



**AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE**

# Gharafa win after Sano's late strike

Victory against Wahda kept Qatar side's last 16 hopes alive

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Seydou Sano's late strike kept Al Gharafa on track for the AFC Champions League Elite round of 16 after the Qatari side defeated Al Wahda 1-0 at the Thani Bin Jassim Stadium in Al Rayyan. The last gasp win moved Gharafa to six points with two matches remaining while UAE's Al Wahda suffered their first defeat of the season.

Al Wahda, already assured of their Round of 16 berth, came into the tie seeking to maintain their momentum, while Al Gharafa needed victory to keep their hopes of advancing alive. Caio Canedo sounded the alarm in the 12th minute when he teased Al Gharafa keeper Khalifa Ababacar with a glancing header from inside the box off Ruben Canedo's cross.

Al Gharafa stayed firm a minute later to deny Lucas Pimenta's header at the far post after Dusan Tadic had set him up with a cross, which was dealt with by Aron Gunnarsson. The home side came close to taking the lead in the 39th minute but Florinel Coman's effort was denied by the bar, with Facundo Kruspzky then scrambling to clear the ball off the line.

Neither side was able to break the deadlock with Abdulla Hamad sending his shot from distance wide while Coman missed with his attempt from the edge of the six-yard-box. Yacine Brahimi almost caused problems for Al Wahda two minutes into the restart after the Algerian threaded a neat pass to Alvaro Djalo, whose heavy first touch sent his volley just over the bar.

Things then took a turn for the worse for Al Wahda in the 53rd minute after keeper Mohamed Al Shamsi was shown the red card for a foul on Coman, who had a clear path on goal but Brahimi wasted the chance to put Al Gharafa in front after striking the bar from the penalty spot.

Al Gharafa were themselves reduced to 10 men just before the hour mark after Dame Traore picked up his second yellow card for a wild tackle on Guga. Pedro Martins sent Joselu



Al Gharafa's Seydou Sano celebrates with teammates after scoring in the AFC Champions League Elite tie against Al Wahda at the Thani Bin Jassim Stadium in Al Rayyan.

into the mix and it almost paid off in the 77th minute when Alvaro Djalo cut the ball into the box for the Spaniard, who saw his close range effort cleared off the line by Sasa Ivkovic.

The goal finally arrived for the Qatari side 10 minutes later off a corner when Sano struck from inside the box after Joselu directed the ball to Gunnarsson, who set the Senegalese up nicely for the winner.

## DUHAIL GO DOWN IN IRAN

In Tabriz, Iran, hosts Tractor FC booked their spot in the Round of 16 of the AFC Champions League Elite after fighting back to defeat Qatar's Al Duhail 2-1. The win means that with 14

points, Dragan Skocic's side are guaranteed a top eight finish while Djamel Belmadi's Al Duhail still have much to do if they are to advance.

The visitors started brightly, with early chances for Krzysztof Piatek, while hosts Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh also rattled the crossbar midway through the first half.

Against the run of play, Al Duhail took the lead through Benjamin Bourigeaud's penalty. Tractor responded strongly after the break, equalising when Shojae Khalilzadeh converted the rebound from a Tibor Halilovic free-kick. Both sides threatened late on before Hosseinzadeh's deflected long-range effort snatched the win at the death for the hosts.

**PREVIEW**

# Mancini urges focus as Sadd face Shabab in crucial clash

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Al Sadd will be fighting to keep their AFC Champions League Elite hopes alive when they host Shabab Al Ahli today, with the Qatari side languishing on just two points from five matches. Victory for the UAE club would confirm their place in the round of 16.

Roberto Mancini's first continental outing as Al Sadd coach ended in a 3-1 defeat to fellow Emirati side Al Wahda, and the Italian will be demanding a far more resilient performance from his players at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

The two sides meet for the first time since 2014, with Al Sadd winless in the competition this season and having lost their last three matches in all competitions.

Ahead of the encounter, Mancini stressed the importance of the fixture to Sadd's qualification hopes. "We have a very important match ahead of us against a strong opponent. We will play to win so that we can climb the league standings," Mancini said. "We are suffering from a shortage of players due to some joining their national teams for the Africa Cup of Nations, as well as injuries. Their absence will certainly have an impact, but despite that we are ready for the match."

The former Italy coach acknowledged the challenge posed by Shabab Al Ahli but underlined his side's determination to remain in contention. "We know our position in the standings and we must do our best to maintain our hopes in the competition," he said. "We will approach the match with the ambition to win, even though the task is difficult against a strong competitor with many distinguished players. This requires us to play with great focus."

In contrast, Shabab Al Ahli arrive in Doha in confident mood,



having claimed three wins from five matches. Two more victories would see the Dubai club equal their best-ever run in continental competition, and with Al Sadd struggling for consistency, they will be confident of securing qualification.

Shabab Al Ahli head coach Paulo Sousa praised his opponents while stressing the need for focus. "We will face a tough competitor and a team that has dominated Qatari football titles in recent years, with many good players," said the Portuguese coach. "They are organised in all lines, and I am also happy to face Roberto Mancini, who is a capable coach with great experience."

Sousa added: "We want to continue delivering good performances and maintain our balanced progress in the standings. This match represents Al Sadd's last chance to keep their qualification hopes alive, which means they will have a strong desire to win, and that requires us to remain fully focused."

**SPOTLIGHT**

# Preliminary round fixtures for Amir Cup announced

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The Qatar Football Association (QFA) has announced the schedule for the preliminary round of the Amir Cup, with the matches taking place on January 10 across four venues.

The preliminary stage will be played in a knockout format, with four teams advancing to the Round of 16. Al Saliya will face Al Muaither at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium, Al Markhiya will take on Muaither at Thani Bin Jassim Stadium, Al Kharaitiyat will meet Al Bidda at Hamad Bin Khalifa Stadium, while Al Waab will play Lusail at the same venue.

All matches will be decided on a knockout basis. In the event of a draw at the end of regulation time, teams will contest 30 minutes of extra time, split into two 15-minute halves. If the tie remains unresolved, the winner will be determined by a penalty shootout.

Amir Cup is one of the oldest and most prestigious tournaments in Qatar football, which continues to attract strong interest from the sporting community and fans ahead of the latter stages of the competition.

The match-ups are based on

the final standings of the Second Division at the conclusion of the 2024-2025 season, with the first-placed team facing the eighth, the second playing the seventh, the third meeting the sixth, and the fourth taking on the fifth. The format was confirmed following the completion of the 14th and final round of the Second Division league.

Al Saliya finished top of the standings with 28 points, followed by Al Markhiya (25), Al Kharaitiyat (23), Al Waab (19), Lusail (18), Al Bidda (15), Muaither (12) and Al Muaither (11).



**ANNOUNCEMENT**

# FIFA, QSL and QFA renew partnership aimed at developing domestic football

As part of its efforts to make football truly global and enable more clubs, leagues and players from all around the world to compete at the highest level, FIFA has renewed its partnership with the Qatar Stars League (QSL) and the Qatar Football Association (QFA).

FIFA President Gianni Infantino has signed a new memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Jassim bin Rashid al-Buainain, President of the QSL and QFA, to continue their drive to raise standards of professional club management and administration across all first- and second-division clubs in the QSL.

Infantino said: "I was delighted to sign a renewed Memorandum of Understanding with the Qatar Stars League and the Qatar Football Association, further strengthening a strategic partnership that continues to raise professional standards in club football. My sincere thanks to Jassim bin Rashid al-Buainain and his teams for their outstanding support, organisation and hosting of major FIFA events this year, including the FIFA Arab Cup, the FIFA Intercontinental Cup and, most recently, the FIFA Under-17 World Cup."

The FIFA President continued: "Through education programmes, knowledge exchange and enhanced support for player well-being, we are working together to help talented individuals and ambitious clubs thrive in a more competitive and sustainable global football ecosystem."

Qatar's leadership in hosting major tournaments and its commitment to innovation continue to make it a key contributor to the golden new era of global club football. Al-Buainain said: "We are pleased with the extension of the agreement between FIFA and the Qatar Stars League, as it represents an important step that reflects the strength of cooperation between both sides. This partnership covers several areas,



FIFA President Gianni Infantino signed a memorandum of understanding with Jassim bin Rashid al-Buainain, President of the QSL and QFA.

including the strategic development of football across its technical and administrative aspects, as well as leveraging the region's passion for the game to promote peace and highlight the noble values of football worldwide."

The next stage of the collaboration between FIFA, the QFA and the QSL will focus on the Educational Programmes Project.

Through this agreement, FIFA will provide bespoke support in a wide range of fields, including exchange and educational programmes for club managers and agents, as well as mental health and overall well-being support systems for players. These will focus not only on theoretical aspects, but also on their application from a practical perspective.

The signing, which extends an MoU first signed in 2022, took place on Qatar National

Day at the Lusail Stadium ahead of the final of the FIFA Arab Cup between Jordan and Morocco. It also marked three years to the day since Argentina won their third FIFA World Cup title after their enthralling win over France in the final of the 2022 tournament at the same venue.

The QFA has consistently driven the growth and popularity of football in the region, from the establishment of the QSL to the successful hosting of major tournaments, including the 2011 and 2023 editions of the AFC Asian Cup and the FIFA World Cup 2022.

As well as hosting the FIFA Intercontinental Cup and the FIFA Arab Cup in December 2025, Qatar also hosted the expanded FIFA U-17 World Cup in November 2025 with 48 teams, and it will also stage the next four editions of the annual tournament.

SPOTLIGHT

# North Korea and Turkmenistan lifters sparkle

DOHA PLAYING HOST TO THREE WEIGHTLIFTING COMPETITIONS

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

North Korea's Oh Kwang-ok set a new record in the West Asian competitions, part of the combined weightlifting championships (10th Qatar Cup, Arab Championship, and West Asian Championship) currently being held at the Ezdan Palace Hotel.

The event, which runs through December 27, 2025, has attracted over 250 athletes from more than 25 countries.

In the Women's 58kg category, the North Korean star secured three gold medals. She took gold in the Snatch (105kg), the Clean & Jerk with a record 133kg, and the Total with a record 238kg.

Uzbekistan's Nigora Abdulaeva claimed three silvers (90kg Snatch, 114kg Clean & Jerk, 204kg Total).

Tunisia's Aya al-Awadi won two bronzes (100kg Clean & Jerk, 117kg Total), while Turkmenistan's Zebagul Soyunshova took the Snatch bronze (78kg).

In the men's 71kg category (Qatar Cup), Turkmenistan's Bunyad Rashidov won gold in the Snatch (145kg) and Total (314kg), plus silver in the Clean & Jerk (169kg). South Korea's Lee Sang-yeon took the Clean & Jerk gold (177kg) and Total silver (305kg).

Thailand's Teerawat Ratwit secured the Snatch silver (137kg) and two bronzes, while South Korea's Bak Joo-hyo took the Snatch bronze (132kg).



The medal winners in the women's 58kg category at the combined 10th Qatar Cup, Arab Championships, and the West Asian Weightlifting Championships currently being staged in Doha.

## Egyptian and Saudi lifters shine in Arab Championship

The Arab Weightlifting Championship saw a strong showing from Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the 71kg category across Senior, Junior, and Youth levels.

**Seniors:** Egypt's Mohamed Metwally won gold in the Clean & Jerk (159kg) and Total (288kg), plus a Snatch silver (129kg). Saudi Arabia's Ali Hussein took Snatch gold (130kg) and Total silver (283kg). Egypt's Eyad Tantawy won three bronzes.

**Juniors/Youth:** Mohamed

Metwally maintained his dominance in the Youth category. In the Juniors, Saudi Ali Hussein swept all three golds (Snatch, Clean & Jerk and Total).

## Abdullah Diab: 'Happy with my Qatar Cup debut'

Young Qatari weightlifter Abdullah Ali Diab posted a 7th-place finish in the 73kg category during his debut with the "Al-Ad'am" (Qatar national team).

Ali Diab lifted 95kg in the Snatch and 124kg in the Clean & Jerk (Total: 219kg).

Diab said that competing against elite international schools "provides vital experience" for his future development.

## Zahra al-Hashimi wins first medals for UAE

Zahra al-Hashimi, representing the Abu Dhabi Club and the UAE national team, won two bronze medals in the 53kg category (67kg Clean & Jerk, 115kg Total) during her debut West Asian Championship appearance.

She credited the support of the Abu Dhabi Club for her success.

ANNOUNCEMENT

## West Asian Weightlifting Federation General Assembly elects new board for 2025-2029

QNA  
Doha

The General Assembly of the West Asian Weightlifting Federation in Doha elected yesterday a new board of directors for the upcoming term 2025-2029. The election took place on the sidelines of the combined weightlifting championships: the 10th Qatar Cup, the Arab Championship, and the West Asian Championship, currently held in Doha. Representatives from Arab national federations and West Asian federations were in attendance.

President of the Iraqi Federation Mohammed Kazim Mazal was elected as President of the West Asian Weightlifting Federation, while Mustafa Saleh, also from Iraq, was elected Secretary-General. It also elected Ibrahim al-Amyan from Jordan as First Vice-President and Dr Basel Ibrahim

from Syria as Second Vice-President. The Federation's Executive Committee consists of Saudi Arabia's Ahmed al-Ahmadi, Oman's Aidh al-Mandhari, Bahrain's Khalid al-Doy, UAE's Mohammed al-Naqbi, and Yemen's Mohammed al-Khamisi. Raed al-Saqqa from Palestine was also appointed to the Executive Committee, a move that reinforces the principle of partnership and integration among national federations and underscores the Federation's commitment to representing the various countries of the region.

The members of the General Assembly of the West Asian Weightlifting Federation stressed that the next stage requires concerted efforts to advance this sport by expanding the base of practice, intensifying training and qualification programs, and supporting regional championships in order to contribute to preparing new generations capable of competing continentally and internationally.



Young Qatari weightlifter Abdullah Ali Diab achieved a 7th-place finish in the 73kg category during his debut with the "Al-Ad'am" (Qatar national team) competition.

THIRD TEST

# New Zealand seal series victory over West Indies

Reuters  
Mount Maunganui

Fast bowler Jacob Duffy and spinner Ajaz Patel routed West Indies as New Zealand won the third and final Test by 323 runs to complete a 2-0 series victory in Mount Maunganui yesterday.

The hosts were in the box seat since taking a first-innings lead of 155, and few expected West Indies to succeed in their pursuit of a record victory target of 462.

Duffy claimed 5-42 and Patel returned figures of 3-23 as New Zealand bundled out West Indies for 138 in the final session of the Test match at Bay Oval.

Opener Brandon King made 67, but once he fell after his opening stand of 87 with John Campbell, it was a relentless procession of West Indies batsmen returning to the pavilion at Bay Oval. Campbell's laboured 16 was the next best score in a sorry-looking West Indies scorecard.

New Zealand jumped to second place, behind Australia, in the



New Zealand's Tom Latham, Ajaz Patel and Rachin Ravindra celebrate a wicket during day five of the third Test against West Indies at Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui, Tauranga, New Zealand yesterday. (AFP)

World Test Championship (WTC) standings following their victory.

"It was a clinical performance, really," New Zealand captain Tom Latham said at the presentation ceremony. "Take away maybe 20-odd overs with the ball in that first innings and I thought throughout the rest of the game, we were exactly where we wanted to be.

"And obviously being on the

right side is really pleasing." It was a memorable match for the New Zealand captain, who followed his 137 in the first innings with 101 in the second.

His opening partner Devon Conway's scores of 227 and 100 earned him the player-of-the-match award.

It was the first time in a Test match that a team's opening bat-

ters each hit centuries in both innings.

Duffy walked away with the player-of-the-series award for his tally of 23 wickets.

West Indies showed some resistance in the first innings when Kavem Hodge's hundred powered them to a respectable 420.

"It has been a tough series. We played good in patches but not through long phases and it showed in the results," touring captain Roston Chase said. "I think we need to firstly know when those moments are up for grabs, and then obviously, to nail those moments, to win those key moments in the game. I just think that's something that we have to learn to do."

## BRIEF SCORES

**New Zealand 575 for 8 dec** (Conway 227, Latham 137, Ravindra 72\*, Greaves 2-83) **and 306 for 2 dec** (Latham 101, Conway 100, Hodge 2-80) **beat West Indies 420** (Hodge 123\*, King 63, Duffy 4-86) **and 138** (King 67, Duffy 5-42, Ajaz 3-23) **by 323 runs**

COMMENT

## Experience the key for Ashes win, says Starc



Australian fast bowler Mitchell Starc (right) celebrates dismissing England batsman Jamie Smith (left) on the final day of the third Ashes Test at the Adelaide Oval on Sunday. (AFP)

Reuters  
Melbourne

The wealth of experience in Australia's ranks helped them remain calm in a difficult lead-up to the Ashes, fast bowler Mitchell Starc said after they defeated England on Sunday to win the series with two matches to spare.

Australia wrapped up an 82-run win on day five of the third test in Adelaide to take an unassailable 3-0 lead in the series and retain the urn, putting an end to the criticism of the team's age profile that dominated the pre-Ashes discussion.

Starc said it was Australia's know-how that proved crucial when injuries to captain Pat Cummins and paceman Josh Hazlewood left them in a precarious position ahead of the first test in Perth.

"(Injuries) certainly didn't change the way that the group approached things heading into Perth. A lot was made about how old the group is and how experienced they are," he told reporters.

"Perhaps that's played into our hands, with having been through some good times, and some not so good times over the course of our careers together. Things have never gotten too high or low. If we

haven't had a good day, it's pretty easy to move on from and learn from.

"For guys that have come in, less experienced or younger, I think that the freedom to express themselves as players but also learn from that experience has been beneficial in the way we've played our cricket."

Starc led Australia's bowling attack in the absence of Cummins and Hazlewood, bowling 95.5 overs and taking a series-leading 22 wickets across the first three matches.

The 35-year-old said his decision to retire from Twenty20 international and focus on Test cricket had allowed him to perform at his best, adding: "I've made decisions with my body in mind, Test cricket has always been the priority..."

"It's all very individual, and I've had some good people around me in strength and conditioning trainers and the sports science guys. I've got them to thank a lot for that and it's been a lot of time that I've put into my body myself.

"I'm glad that it's going the way it is at the moment. It's probably not always going to be that way, so just enjoying it at the moment."

The fourth Test of the series begins on December 26 in Melbourne.

FOCUS

## Injury raises doubts over 'irreplaceable' Lyon



Reuters  
Melbourne

Australia captain Pat Cummins cast doubt on Nathan Lyon's ability to recover in time for the fourth Ashes Test in Melbourne after his side celebrated retaining the urn with two matches to spare against England in Adelaide on Sunday.

The spinner injured his right hamstring on the final day of the third Test, which the Australians won by 82 runs to go 3-0 up in the five Test series, and left the Adelaide Oval on crutches just five

days before the next meeting on Dec 26. "It doesn't look great," said Cummins. "Don't know yet, but seeing someone on crutches doesn't really bode well for a Test match a week away.

"(The) guy is pretty close to irreplaceable. The ability to make breakthroughs, but also control an innings, is really important, so he's going to be hard to replace.

"But we've got some guys who have already had a taste of international cricket around the traps, other guys have done really well in domestic cricket.

"It's been one of the benefits of the Sri Lankan tours, the West Indies where we take a couple of

spinners. There's guys that can step in and you feel like it's not going to be too overwhelming."

Todd Murphy, Corey Rocchiccioli and Matthew Kuhnemann would be options to replace Lyon if the 38-year-old does not recover in time while Cummins is also likely to miss the Boxing Day test in Melbourne as he manages his own return from injury.

Steve Smith would be expected to return to the batting line-up after missing the Adelaide test due to vertigo and would take over from Cummins as captain again should the fast bowler decide not to risk his fitness ahead of the fifth test in Sydney.

**SWIMMING**

# ISL targets 2026 relaunch after Covid, war disruptions

Reuters  
London

The International Swimming League (ISL) plans to relaunch as soon as 2026 after a three-year hiatus, betting that a reshaped commercial model, stable backing and momentum from the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics can sustain a global, team-based competition in one of the Games' marquee sports.

ISL was first launched in 2019 with the goal of keeping swimming fans engaged beyond the Olympics by creating a season-long league with regular meets. It previously featured some of the sport's biggest stars including Caeleb Dressel, Adam Peaty and Katinka Hosszu.

2021 and shut down after being hit by the Covid-19 pandemic and the ripple effects of the war in Ukraine on its principal backer, Ukrainian businessman Konstantin Grigorishin. "ISL is coming back," Commissioner Ben Allen told Reuters.

"And we're really excited about the prospect of a relaunch."

Allen said the "ideal scenario" would see ISL return in the autumn of 2026, with 2027 a firm target if that slips. The new model is designed to reduce reliance on a single investor and lean more heavily on sponsorship and media partnerships.

**SPLASHY RETURN**

The planned comeback season will feature seven matches split across North America and Europe with at least one stop in Asia and possibly in the Middle East, Allen said.



The United States, which he described as ISL's biggest market, is expected to host events after previous stops, including the 2019 final at Las Vegas' Mandalay Bay, where a temporary pool was built inside an arena.

He said the league has used the break to tweak the format after feedback from athletes, coaches, broadcasters and fans to make it even better for TV.

As part of its relaunch planning, ISL is considering changes to its event schedule. The league previously ran sessions across two days, and Allen said the league was now weighing a one-day format that could make events easier for travelling fans and broadcasters.

"We're going to be doing a couple of experiments and trials across the next couple of months to figure that out," Allen said.

**OLYMPIC MOMENTUM**

The league's planned return would come as swimming builds toward the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics, which Allen said creates an opportunity to broaden the sport's appeal beyond the Olympic window and give athletes a more consistent professional platform to grow their public profiles.

He said ISL aims to keep swimmers visible throughout the Olympic cycle, arguing that many athletes fade from public attention within months of the Games, and that the league's emphasis on entertainment will remain central.

He described an ISL meet as a fast-paced production featuring poolside staging, graphics, lasers and a DJ, with minimal downtime between races.

He cited the 2019 and 2021 seasons in which the overall title

was decided in the final race, underscoring ISL's efforts to create close, narrative-driven competition. Asked about legal disputes involving swimming's governing body World Aquatics, Allen said the league was preparing to return regardless of the outcome.

"Simply put, no," Allen said when asked if the legal battles would be an impediment. World Aquatics agreed to a \$4.6mn settlement in September with pro swimmers that allowed them to participate in ISL without losing their right to compete in the Olympics.

World Aquatics denied any wrongdoing in agreeing to settle the lawsuit, filed in 2018.

The deal did not affect a related lawsuit ISL filed the same year against World Aquatics, which is ongoing.

**TENNIS**

# Tien defeats Blockx to win Next Gen ATP Finals title

'I'M REALLY HAPPY. I KNEW IT WAS GOING TO BE A TOUGH MATCH'

Reuters  
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

American Learner Tien overpowered Belgian opponent Alexander Blockx 4-3(4) 4-2 4-1 to win the Next Gen ATP Finals on Sunday, the year-ending exhibition tournament between the eight highest-ranked players on the tour aged 20 and under.

The tournament uses a modified format, where a player needs to win four games to clinch a set, and winning one point at deuce is enough to take the game.

Tien, who won his first trophy on the tour at the Moselle Open last month, held his nerve and made only 12 unforced errors while Blockx had 23, as the American won the match in just under an hour.

"I'm really happy. I knew it was going to be a tough match. I don't think (Blockx) missed a serve for the first set-and-a-half. He's been playing great in these conditions all week," said Tien, who lost last year's final to Joao Fonseca.

Blockx, who served seven aces while his opponent had only one, made his intentions clear from the start, attacking the left-handed Tien's backhand with a fast serve and running up to the net to apply pressure.

Tien, ranked 28th in the world, pushed Blockx back with a well-placed lob before winning the point with a drive volley and although Blockx, ranked 116th, saved a break point and pushed



Learner Tien of the US celebrates with the trophy after winning the Next Gen ATP Finals against Belgium's Alexander Blockx in Jeddah. (Reuters)

the first set into a tiebreaker, top seed Tien outplayed his fellow 20-year-old.

Tien won the second set with a

decisive break, using his powerful forehand to push Blockx back until the under-pressure Belgian second seed hit over the baseline.

**MOTORSPORT**

# Red Bull CEO has 'no doubt' Verstappen finishes career with team

Reuters  
London

While there has been plenty of doubt about where Max Verstappen will end up before his Formula 1 career is done, Red Bulls CEO Oliver Mintzlaff is less speculative.

"I feel there is a huge mutual appreciation and loyalty," Mintzlaff said to Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* about Red Bull's top driver. "For me there is no doubt that Max Verstappen will end his career at Red Bull."

Verstappen, 28, was the four-time defending F1 drivers' champion heading into the 2025 season. He got off to an unexpected slow start and did not exactly squash rumours that he might leave his team through performance clauses in his contract.

At the end of July, though, Verstappen said he was staying with Red Bull through the 2026 season, ending speculation that he might depart to drive for Mercedes.

The commitment was most notable on the track, with Verstappen winning six of the final nine races after winning just twice over the first 15 races. The late push nearly ended up in a fifth consecutive drivers title,

before Lando Norris won his first title in his seventh season.

"What is important to say is that I am not afraid of any performance clause in his contract," Mintzlaff said. "What is most important for an athlete is to see that everyone in the team gives everything for him. And I think Max has been impressed by the way the results and the atmosphere in the team have turned this year."

Verstappen remains under contract with Red Bull through 2028 but said he will still walk away early pending F1's decision on new technical regulations with engines and car setups.

"I've hated this car at times, but I've also loved it at times," Verstappen said after he finished two points shy of the drivers' title. "And I always tried to extract the most from it, even in the difficult weekends that we've had."

In a moment that perhaps inspired Mintzlaff's confidence that his top driver will remain with the team for the long term, Verstappen had praise for everybody associated with Red Bull.

"I mean, I have no regrets about my season," Verstappen said. "Also, in the team, we have a great atmosphere at the moment. We're really on a roll - positive energy, belief, confidence - and that's exactly what you want heading into next year."



**GOLF**

# Team Kuchar scramble for 54, run away with title

Reuters  
Orlando

Matt and Cameron Kuchar shot a tournament-record 54 on the second and final day of the PNC Championship to land their first title in the father-son event on Sunday in Orlando.

Playing a scramble format, Team Kuchar carded 14 birdies, two eagles and just two pars for the 18-under-par round at Ritz-Carlton Golf Club. After starting the day with the lead, the Kuchars cruised to a seven-stroke victory at 33-under 111.

Matt Kuchar set up both of his team's eagles, first with a draw shot at the par-5 third that left Cameron an easy putt, then again at the par-5 18th when he stuck his shot inside 3 feet and could be seen fighting through tears. It led to an outpouring of emotion afterwards from the 47-year-old PGA Tour vet, whose father, Peter, died early this year.

"I don't know if you believe in karma, if you believe in fate, whatever you believe in, there's something - something magical

that does exist," Matt Kuchar said. "I'm a believer in God that Dad is up above looking down, and that - what happened on 18, I could hardly stand up and hit a shot. For me to hit it to a foot, makes me think there's something more out there. (I) just miss - miss Pops."

Cameron Kuchar explained just how fun it was to win the event with his dad and to play excellent golf along the way.

"That was amazing," he said. "I wasn't keeping as much track today as I was yesterday but I probably made five or six solo birdies. Every now and then, I would let him know, 'All right, I made that one myself.' But he also made a few solos and he'd come right back and he'd go, 'That was all me right there.' It was just fun just going back-and-forth like that."

Team Love (Davis Love III and Dru Love) shot a 58 to move to 26 under par and tie for second with Team Daly (John Daly, John Daly II), who carded a 59. Rounding out the top five, both Team Korrd (Nelly Korrd, Petr Korrd) and Team Stricker (Steve Stricker, Izzi Stricker) finished at 25 under. Both teams shot 59 in the final round.



Cameron Kuchar and Matt Kuchar pose with the Willie Park Belts after winning the PNC Championship 2025 at Ritz-Carlton Golf Club in Orlando, Florida. (AFP)

## NBA and FIBA to seek out teams for potential European league

The NBA and International Basketball Federation (FIBA) announced yesterday they would begin prospecting teams and owners as part of their project of creating a pan-European men's basketball league. The two bodies said in a statement they would "in January move forward in their joint exploration" of creating a new professional league in Europe by "engaging prospective teams and ownership groups in the process to join".

"Our conversations with various stakeholders in Europe have reinforced our belief that an enormous opportunity exists around the creation of a new league on the continent," NBA commissioner Adam Silver said.

"Together with FIBA, we look forward to engaging prospective clubs and ownership groups that share our vision for the game's potential in Europe."

The statement offered further details of the format the league would take.

In addition to permanent spots, the league "would offer every team in a FIBA-affiliated domestic league in Europe a merit-based pathway to qualify on an annual basis either through FIBA's Basketball Champions League (BCL) or an end-of-season qualifying tournament".

The season would also align with the current domestic league and national team schedules to allow players to represent both their clubs and national sides.

Furthermore, NBA and FIBA stated that as part of the new league they would "dedicate financial support and resources to the continued development of Europe's basketball ecosystem".

This funding would include domestic leagues, club team academies and programmes to develop players, coaches and referees.

(AFP)

## FOOTBALL

# Gabriel could start for Arsenal in League Cup: Arteta

Striker spent 11 months on the sidelines after injuring his left knee

AFP  
London

Mikel Arteta has hinted that he is ready to hand Gabriel Jesus his first start in nearly a year in Arsenal's League Cup quarter-final against Crystal Palace today.

The Premier League leaders host Oliver Glasner's side at the Emirates, desperate to end the club's six-year trophy drought. Jesus scored a hat-trick in Arsenal's last-eight win against Palace last season before they fell to Newcastle in the semi-finals.

The Brazil international then spent 11 months on the sidelines after he ruptured the anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee. But, following three substitute appearances, Jesus could be unleashed from the start against Palace, with Arteta set to rotate a side that faces six matches in 20 days. Chelsea await the winners.

Arteta said former Manchester City forward Jesus, 28, was ready to start. "You can see now, not only in games but every day in training how much he wants it so he's going to deserve a chance soon," he said.

"It has been a real intense journey. When he joined us he lifted the belief, the spirit and the energy of the team and he gave something very different to what we already had and was very impressive. Then he had some very bad injuries and that hasn't allowed him to have the consistency we need from a very important player. He is back and his fighting spirit, his desire to always prepare in the best way is unbelievable. The team is together now and we need to use it."

Jesus could take the place of Viktor Gyokeres, who, despite scoring from the penalty spot in Arsenal's 1-0 win at Everton on Saturday, has not found the back of the net from open play in his past six appearances.

## MAN CITY PLAYERS FACE CHRISTMAS WEIGH-IN AS GUARDIOLA ISSUES 'FATTY' WARNING

Manchester City's players face a Christmas Day weigh-in to check they have not over-indulged over the festive period - with Pep Guardiola warning they will be dropped if they have piled



Arsenal's Gabriel Jesus (right) battles for the ball during the Premier League match at Hill Dickinson Stadium in Liverpool. (AFP)

on the pounds. City enjoyed a comfortable 3-0 win over Premier League strugglers West Ham on Saturday to keep the pressure on leaders Arsenal. But Guardiola, who has won six league titles during his spell at the Etihad, is famously demanding, revealing his men had been weighed before their short break.

"Every player makes a weight," said the City boss. "They come back on the 25th and I will be there controlling how many kilos come up, (to see if) they come fatty. The moment they arrive after three days I want to see how they come back. They can eat but I want to control them."

The Spaniard said players who returned to the club overweight would not play against Forest on December 27. "Imagine one player and now he's perfect but he will arrive with three kilos more. He will (stay) in Manchester," he said.

"He will not travel to Nottingham Forest."

Guardiola said it was important his men relaxed during a packed calendar as he heads to Barcelona for a brief rest. "The schedule is so tight and the players have to forget," he said. "The more they arrive in the right moment (the better). The moment of the game they will be fresh in the legs. The players have to go with the families and forget football. It's good. For them to see the manager every day - that's so tough."

The famously exacting City boss refused his players a day off after their win on Saturday, unhappy with the level of performance despite a fifth straight league victory.

"The players asked me to take a day off. I said, 'No because you didn't play good enough,' he said. "So Sunday recovery, train the guys that didn't play, and after three days off they have two days to prepare for Nottingham Forest."

## PREMIER LEAGUE

## Liverpool fear Isak has broken leg: reports

AFP  
Liverpool

Liverpool are awaiting scan results they fear will confirm record signing Alexander Isak has suffered a broken leg after he was injured in their win against Tottenham, reports said.

The Sweden forward was hurt in the act of scoring the opening goal in Saturday's 2-1 victory in London after a sliding challenge from Spurs defender Micky van der Ven. Isak, 26, who had come on as a second-half substitute, was unable to celebrate with his teammates and left the pitch in considerable distress. Immediately after the game Liverpool boss Arne Slot admitted the injury was "not a good thing".

"If a player doesn't even try to come back, that is usually not a good thing but I cannot say anything more than that," he said. "That is just gut feeling and nothing medical... let's not be too negative yet. We don't know yet. Let's hope he is back with us soon."

Reports said that Liverpool

fear Isak has broken his leg, which would mean a lengthy period on the sidelines. Isak has had a disrupted start to his life at Anfield, making just 16 appearances and scoring three goals since his £125m (\$168m) British record move from Newcastle on transfer deadline day.

A dispute with Newcastle meant he did not have a proper pre-season programme and arrived at Anfield well behind his team-mates in terms of fitness. His season was then interrupted by a groin injury.

Any absence would be a major blow for Slot, with Mohamed Salah at the Africa Cup of Nations and Cody Gakpo not ready to return from a muscle injury until early in the new year.

It leaves the Liverpool manager with Hugo Ekitike, who has five goals in his past four games, and the little-used Federico Chiesa as his only senior forwards. Liverpool, whose Premier League title defence collapsed after a shocking run of results, have climbed to fifth in the table after extending their unbeaten league run to five games.



Liverpool's striker Alexander Isak was hurt in the act of scoring the opening goal in Saturday's 2-1 victory in London after a sliding challenge from Spurs defender Micky van der Ven. (AFP)

## Amorim fears United captain Fernandes will be out 'a while'

**Birmingham:** Ruben Amorim fears Bruno Fernandes will be out for "a while" after the Manchester United captain was injured during Sunday's 2-1 defeat against Aston Villa. Fernandes has started every Premier League game this season, but the Portugal midfielder is unlikely to extend that run any further following his injury setback at Villa Park.

The 31-year-old initially played on after pulling up with what appeared to be a hamstring issue just before the break, but he did not return for the second half.

Amorim ruled his influential star out of the Boxing Day clash against Newcastle, with severe doubts about his availability for the rest of the Christmas and New Year schedule.

"It's a soft tissue. I think he's going to lose some games. I don't know for sure, so let's see," Amorim said. "You never control these things, so we'll see. He is a guy who is always fit so he can recover quite well, but I don't know."

Fernandes' fitness blow compounded Amorim's injury problems, with England midfielder Kobbie Mainoo missing the Villa game due to a calf issue. The 20-year-old had dominated the build-up to Sunday's game after his half-brother wore a 'Free Kobbie Mainoo' T-shirt to Monday's 4-4 draw with Bournemouth at Old Trafford. Mainoo would have been in contention to make his

first Premier League start of the season against Newcastle, but instead he is set to miss out. While Casemiro will return from suspension against Newcastle, Bryan Mbeumo, Amad Diallo and Noussair Mazraoui are at the Africa Cup of Nations and Matthijs de Ligt and Harry Maguire are also sidelined.

## PLANS FOR SERIE A MATCH IN AUSTRALIA SCRAPPED

The plan to relocate the Italian league match between AC Milan and Como to Perth, Australia, in early February has been cancelled, organisers announced, following criticism of the project. The match was due to be held in Perth on February 8. Milan's San Siro stadium is out of commission on that date because it is hosting the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics two days earlier.

Serie A boss Ezio Simonelli blamed requests made by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) for leading to the cancellation of the match, which was set to be the first in Serie A played outside Italy.

The proposed relocation, involving a round trip of over 13,000 kilometres had come under attack from Milan's Adrien Rabiot and Mike Maignan. The decision comes two months after Spain's La Liga shelved plans to hold a Barcelona match in Miami in the United States due to "uncertainty" about the game within Spain.

## AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

## Zambia equalise late to share spoils with Mali

Reuters  
Casablanca

Zambia's Patson Daka scored with a spectacular diving header in stoppage time to see his side come from behind and force a 1-1 draw with Mali in their opening Group A clash at the Africa Cup of Nations finals yesterday.

Mali looked in control for most of the encounter but paid the price for sitting back in the closing stages as Zambia staged a late recovery, with Daka leaping through the air to force home Mathews Banda's curling cross two minutes into stoppage time at the end of the game.

Lassine Sinayoko had taken advantage of sloppy defending to give Mali a 62nd-minute lead after his strike partner El Bilal Toure had a first-half penalty saved.

The penalty had been awarded after a VAR check as defender Banda caught the heel of Dorgeles Nene as he attempted to clear the ball away from Mali's dangerous winger. But Toure's 42nd-minute spot kick was well saved by Zambia's goalkeeper Willard Mwanza.

Mali next meet hosts Morocco in Rabat on Friday while Zambia take on Comoros in Casablanca the same day. Morocco are at the head of the standings after the host nation opened the tournament on Sunday with a 2-0 victory over Comoros in Rabat.



Zambia's forward Patson Daka celebrates after scoring during the Africa Cup of Nations Group A match against Mali at Mohammed V Stadium in Casablanca, Morocco. (AFP)

## FOSTER GRABS WINNER FOR SOUTH AFRICA AGAINST ANGOLA

Later, Burnley striker Lyle Foster scored on 79 minutes as South Africa edged Angola 2-1 in Marrakesh to win their opening match of an Africa Cup of Nations campaign for the first time in 21 years.

Since beating Benin in the 2004 tournament, Bafana Bafana have drawn twice and lost four times when they debuted in different editions of the premier African football tournament.

The opening Group B match had three distinct phases. South Africa started impressively and Oswin Appollis scored on 21 minutes before a small crowd in the near-42,000-seat stadium. Angola controlled the rest of the opening half and Show levelled. South Africa then recovered to be the stronger side in the second half and Foster struck to secure maximum points.

Egypt, captained by Mohamed Salah, was playing Zimbabwe in a late match in southern coastal city Agadir in the same section.

## Ash'al Al E'zz, D Thariah champion stallion and mare at Doha International Arabian Horse Show

**Doha:** Ash'al Al E'zz of Al Thamer Stud emerged as the Gold champion in the Senior Stallions Championship while Admiraal of Al Amer Stud won Silver and Arraab AlJassimya of AlJassimya Farm got Bronze in the 5th Doha International Arabian Horse Show hosted by Qatar Racing & Equestrian Club (QREC) at the main arena of the Qatar Equestrian Federation from December 19-22.

The concluding day saw the championship finale of six classes. The show featured a total of 222 horses from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain.

In the Senior Mares Championship class, D Thariah of Al Wajba Stud won gold, D Razeenah, owned by Mohammed Abdulaziz al-Rusaini and bred by Dubai Arabian Horse Stud, clinched silver, and Baynona Al Hawajer, owned by Ghanem al-Shammari and bred by Dr Ghanem Mohamed Obaid al-Hajri, the bronze.



The following were the other championship winners: **Junior Colts C'ship:** Ammar Al Faris (gold); AJ Tayam (silver); Shaheen Al Juman (bronze); **Junior Fillies C'ship:** Royal Futurista (gold); Rose Goldea HDC (silver); Asma AlJassimya (bronze); **Yearling Colts**

**C'ship:** Thayir Al Thamer (gold); Dstoor Al Sraiya (silver); Shalesh Al Shaqab (bronze); **Yearling Fillies C'ship:** Athbah (gold); Sama Al Jazeel (silver); Salma AlWajba (bronze). The gold winner was awarded QR120,000 in top prize, silver winner QR90,000



and bronze winner QR70,000. The total prize fund for the show was QR3.915m

across various class competitions and championship finals.