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**AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE**

# Mujica hat-trick inspires stunning Al Sadd comeback

Qatar side came back from two goals down to beat Shabab Al Ahli and register their first victory



Rafa Mujica celebrates with daughter after his hat-trick helped Al Sadd complete a dramatic win. **PICTURE:** Noushad Thekkayil

**By Sports Reporter**  
Doha

**A**l Sadd staged a stunning fightback as they came from two goals down to beat Shabab Al Ahli 4-2 in their AFC Champions League Elite tie at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha yesterday.

Goals from Federico Cartabia and Yahya al-Ghassani looked to have secured Shabab Al Ahli their round of 16 spot but Rafa Mujica struck a hat-trick with Tarek Salman contributing the fourth as Qatari champions Al Sadd registered their first win of the season to their hopes alive.

Mujica credited coach Roberto Mancini for showing faith in him. "It was a very difficult match. We were two goals down, but the coach gave me confidence and that helped me a lot," the Spaniard winger said.

"I was able to score a hat-trick and help the team. We played well and gave our best. I thank the coach for his confidence and I'm happy I could contribute to this victory."

Mancini, meanwhile, said the comeback victory could be a turning point in restoring the team's confidence in both domestic and continental competitions. "The match was not easy. We conceded two goals, but the team reacted strongly and showed determination until the final minutes," the Italian coach said. "We deserved this important win. We made a mistake, a penalty was awarded against us, but the players continued to work hard on the pitch."

Al Sadd made four changes from their last match with Boualem Khoukhi and Pedro Miguel coming into the lineup with Tarek Salman starting from the bench, while Breno Lemos and Gaston Alvarez returned to Shabab Al Ahli's midfield with Mateus Lima up front. UAE's Shabab Al Ahli almost went ahead in the opening minute when Alvarez squared the ball nicely for Cartabia, who could not get to the end of the cross from inside the six-yard-box.

The home side went close in the 12th minute



Al Sadd players celebrate after their win over Shabab Al Ahli in their AFC Champions League Elite tie at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha yesterday.

when Akram Afif played the ball to Giovani, who weaved his way into the box but fired his effort wide of the left post, while Yuri Cesar forced Al Sadd keeper Meshaal Barsham into a low save moments later.

Roberto Mancini's side stayed calm just before the half-hour mark with Cartabia, Lima and Guilherme Bala all piling on the pressure from inside the area, while a careless backpass from Salman was almost intercepted by Lima but Bersham was quick to clear the danger.

Al Sadd were also wasteful upfront with Giovani pulling his effort over the bar after a fine team move in the 42nd minute while at the other end, Barsham was on top of his game again when he deflected Lima's stinging shot after Bala's set-up in first half stoppage time.

Cesar then came close to finding the opener when he played a neat exchange with Bala at the edge of the area before falling to connect to the midfielder's cutback.

Al Sadd were left stunned two minutes after the break when Mersad Seifi delivered a pin-

point cross to the far post, allowing Cartabia to power home the opener past a rooted Bersham. Shabab Al Ahli almost doubled their tally in the 53rd minute after Cesar played a well-timed through ball for Lima, who struck his shot past Bersham only for the ball to bounce off the bar.

The pressure finally told on Al Sadd as they conceded a penalty following Miguel's foul on Cartabia, with Al Ghassani converting from the spot in the 70th minute. Al Sadd responded five minutes later after a quick throw-in left Afif with space on the left and the forward set-up Mujica to strike past Hamad Al Meqbali.

Boosted by the goal, Al Sadd pushed forward and drew level in the fifth minute of time added on with Salman finishing off Roberto Firmino's layoff. There was more to come as a lapse in concentration by Shabab Al Ahli saw Mujica weave his way through before slotting past Al Meqbali six minutes later with Afif then setting up the Spaniard for his hat-trick in the 13th minute of added time to complete the amazing victory.

**CHESS**

# Carlsen leads elite field at Rapid & Blitz Worlds in Doha

**By Sports Reporter**  
Doha

**M**agnus Carlsen will once again be the central attraction when the FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Championships takes place in Doha from December 26-30. The former world champion arrives as the top seed in both the Rapid and Open events, boasting ratings of 2824 and 2881 respectively, and is widely regarded as the favourite to claim at least one title in the Qatari capital. Carlsen shared the Blitz gold at last year's championships in New York and will be eager to reclaim outright honours.

The tournament, which will hosted at the Sports and Events Complex at Qatar University, marks Doha's return as venue after nine years and features a prize pool exceeding €1mn, attracting the world's elite. Here is a look at the top-rated 10 players in the Open section.

**MAGNUS CARLSEN**

Magnus Carlsen won the world rapid crown five times (2014, 2015, 2019, 2022, 2023) and the world blitz as many as eight times (2014, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2022, 2023, 2024; albeit, the 2024 title is shared with Nepomniachtchi). With 12 total crowns, he is by far the most successful player in blitz and rapid formats.

By his own confession, Carlsen is more interested in faster formats than classical chess. He continues to show that in 2025 - winning the SuperUnited Rapid & Blitz in Croatia and taking the overall title in the "Freestyle Chess Grand Slam Tour" and the inaugural Chess Sports World Cup.

However, this year's appearance is different to previous ones at the WRB: Carlsen recently become a father which for most new parents usually means lack of sleep. Whether that will have an impact on his performance remains to be seen.



**IAN NEPOMNIACHTCHI**

Ian Nepomniachtchi is the second seed in both rapid and blitz in Doha, with ratings of 2762 and 2801 respectively. The two-time challenger for the title of world champion in classical chess has a collection of "almost victories" at the World Rapid and Blitz, with three silver and two bronze medals from in rapid (including from Warsaw 2021, where he finished second on tiebreak, behind Abdusattorov). He also has a silver medal from the 2014 World Blitz in Dubai. Nepomniachtchi's biggest success so far is sharing first place in the Blitz in New York. Alongside Carlsen, Nepomniachtchi has for years been one of the central figures of the chess world, winning or placing near the top of the biggest events. In Doha he will be one of the main candidates for the crown in both formats.

**LEVON ARONIAN**

Levon Aronian is seeded third in rapid (2756) and fifth in blitz (2774). The last time he won the World Rapid was in 2009, and the World Blitz in 2010. At 43, he continues to hold his own against the hungry young lions coming up in chess.

In 2025 he showed that he can still win the biggest events by defeating Carlsen in the final of the "Freestyle Chess Grand Slam" event in South Africa. With a long record of success in mixed rapid and blitz formats, Aronian is one of the toughest and most experienced competitors in Doha.

**FABIANO CARUANA**

Fabiano Caruana is the fourth seed in rapid seventh in blitz, both with a rating of 2751. The former candidate for the world crown and five-time US champion, Caruana is a long-time member of the absolute elite of chess. He was among the top scorers in the 2024 WRB, and - when in form - he is extremely difficult to stop. In 2025 he continued to fight for top places in super-tournaments and will be one of the most formidable players in Doha.

**MAXIME VACHIER-LAGRAVE**

Seeded fifth in the rapid (2730), and 11th in blitz (2745), Maxime Vachier-Lagrave is one of the most established stars in fast chess formats. In 2021 he won the World Blitz crown, edging out Jan-Krzysztof Duda in his native Warsaw.

With a long list of rapid and blitz titles, France's long-time number player, MVL has maintained high consistency throughout the years. He will arrive in Doha straight from the Global Chess League in Mumbai, where he leads the team of up-Grad Mumbai Masters fighting in season three of the event.

**VLADISLAV ARTEMIEV**

Although only 27, Vladislav Artemiev has long been a fixture in elite chess events. The Russian GM has won multiple blitz and rapid titles from Russian championships and strong online events such as the Champions Chess Tour and the Speed Chess Championship. Rapid and blitz formats are Artemiev's forte. In Samarkand, in 2023, he finished third in the World Blitz - behind Carlsen and Dubov. This is his only World Rapid/Blitz medal so far (having narrowly missed on a medal in blitz in Warsaw). In Doha, he will be looking to change this and secure a medal in either or both formats.

**NODIRBEK ABDUSATTOROV**

Nodirbek Abdusattorov first attracted global attention at the 2019 World Rapid and Blitz in Moscow, where he started the blitz tournament with 5/5 and then held Carlsen to a draw in round six in a very tense game. Since then, he rapidly rose to prominence, as a stellar exponent of Uzbekistan's growing chess influence. The young Uzbek star has a World Rapid crown, which he won in 2021. He was the youngest ever World Rapid Champion at 17 years and three months. Now Uzbekistan's biggest chess hope, he is on the rise, willing to take on anyone, hungry and strong, performing strongly wherever he appears. Abdusattorov's main challenge will be to handle his ambition and steady the nerves as he fights with the old guard.

**RICHARD RAPPORT**

The Hungarian GM is recognised as one

of the most original players at top-level; his games are among the most entertaining. In 2024 at the WRB Teams, he defeated Carlsen in just 23 moves. His best individual finish was eighth in Rapid and ninth in Blitz Championships in 2022. In 2025 Rapport has remained a regular in top invitational and rapid series, consistently delivering exciting games and strong results.

**JAN-KRZYSZTOF DUDA**

Jan-Krzysztof Duda is the ninth seed in rapid (2711) and eighth in blitz (2750). The Polish grandmaster is a former World Cup winner and European Blitz Champion long regarded as one of the most dangerous players in fast controls. In 2025 he has been very active in the Grand Chess Tour rapid and blitz events, finishing high in the standings at both SuperUnited Croatia and the Superbet Poland legs.

**ARJUN ERIGAISI**

India's top-rated player in classical chess arrives in Doha as the number eighth seed on the rapid list (2714) and ninth blitz (2749). In 2025 Erigaisi had a strong showing in several events with fast-paced time controls, including winning all three Chess.com "Freestyle Friday" events. Erigaisi was also part of the gold-medal-winning squad that at the World Rapid Team Chess Championship in London, earlier this year. Coming into Doha, he is seen as one of the leading representatives of India's new wave in fast chess.

**DANIIL DUBOV**

Daniil Dubov is third on the blitz seeding list with 2795 points and just outside the top ten in rapid. A former World Rapid Champion, Dubov claimed the title in 2018 in Saint Petersburg, finishing unbeaten with 11 points out of 15. Known as a sharp thinker both on and off the board Dubov is very popular among chess fans - his games and comments on chess are widely watched.



WEIGHTLIFTING

# Ri Chong-song produces commanding show in Doha

A MEMORABLE DAY FOR THE NORTH KOREAN WEIGHTLIFTER AS HE BEEFS UP IMPRESSIVE RESUME

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

In a commanding performance, North Korea's Ri Chong-song yesterday lifted 366kg in the 79kg weight class, surpassing the previous record held by Indonesia's Rizki Juniansyah by one kilogram on day four of the Qatar International Cup - part of the combined 10th Qatar International Cup, the Arab Championship and the West Asian Championships.

With this new record, Chung-song solidified his status as one of the greatest weightlifters in the world. Ri Chong-song won all three gold medals in the snatch (162kg), clean and jerk (204kg) for a total of 366kg, setting a new world record. This achievement aligns him with fellow North Korean, Oh Kwang-ok, who holds a women's record in the 58kg weight class.

Despite his strong performance, he was unable to break the individual snatch and clean and jerk records, which remain with Egypt's Abdelrahman Younes (166kg, snatch) and Indonesia's Rizki Junyansah (205kg in the clean and jerk).

The silver medals in the snatch and total went to Tunisian weightlifter Karim Ben Hnia (151kg and 336kg, respectively), while he also secured the bronze medal in the clean and jerk (185kg). Turkmen Gaygysyz Torayev won a silver medal in the clean and jerk (190kg) and a bronze medal in the total (330kg), while Saudi weightlifter Mohammed Bassam al-Marzouq won a bronze medal in the snatch (150kg).

In the men's competitions at the Arab Weightlifting Championships, which saw fierce competition as Tunisian weightlifter Karim Ben Hnia won three gold medals in the snatch (151kg), clean and jerk (185kg), for a of total (363kg).

Saudi lifter al-Marzouq finished in second place, winning three silver medals in the snatch (150kg), clean and jerk (178kg), and total (328kg). Algerian lifter Farajallah Samir won two bronze medals in the snatch (140kg) and total (310kg), while Egyptian weightlifter Ali Abdel-Radi won a bronze medal in the clean and jerk with a lift of 175kg.

The West Asian Weightlifting Championships were marked by strong participation, with Saudi weightlifter al-Marzouq winning three gold medals in the snatch (150kg), clean and jerk (178kg), and total (328kg).

Bahraini weightlifter Abdullah Yahya al-Majdami came in second place, winning two silver medals in the clean and jerk (156kg) and total (286kg), and a bronze medal in the snatch (130kg). Emirati weightlifter Issa Rajab al-Balushi won a silver medal in the snatch (131kg), and Omani weightlifter Mahmoud al-Batashi won two bronze medals in the clean and jerk (155kg) and total (274kg).

In the women's competitions at the Arab Championship witnessed fierce competition in the 63kg weight class. Tunisian weightlifter Chaima Rahoumi won three gold medals in the snatch (89kg), clean and jerk (110kg), and total (199kg).

Egyptian Hagar Rashdi came in second with



Gold medal winning weightlifter North Korea's Ri Chong-song is seen with fellow podium winners in Doha yesterday.



Secretary-General of Qatar Weightlifting Federation Jassim Ibrahim al-Mansouri during a medal ceremony for women's lifters on day four of the Qatar International Cup.

three silver medals in the snatch (79kg), clean and jerk (98kg), and total (177kg), while Emirati Mai Madani won three bronze medals in the snatch (76kg), clean and jerk (97kg), and total (173kg).

Also yesterday. UAE's Mai al-Madani won three gold medals in the snatch (76 kg), clean and jerk (97 kg), and total (173 kg) at the West Asian Championships in the women's 63 kg category. Saudi Arabia's Jana Mohammed al-Ammari won three silver medals, while Iraq's Lujain Hazem earned two bronze medals. Saudi Arabia's Rafif Mutlaq Jair and Jordan's Rahima Ammar Ibrahim also won multiple gold and silver medals in the junior and youth categories.



CRICKET

## Captain Cummins out of remaining 2 Ashes Tests

AFP  
Melbourne

Australia skipper Pat Cummins and Nathan Lyon were yesterday ruled out of the final two Ashes Tests against England with the veteran spinner facing surgery and an extended period on the sidelines.

Quick bowler Jhye Richardson and spinner Todd Murphy were named as cover in a 15-man squad for the fourth Test starting on Friday at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

Australia have already retained the famous urn with eight-wicket wins in Perth and Brisbane and an 82-run victory in Adelaide.

Cummins "won't play any part in the rest of the series", coach Andrew McDonald told *cricket.com.au*. He returned from a lower back injury to lead Australia to victory in Adelaide in his first Test since July, taking six wickets in the match.

"That was a discussion that we had a long time out around his return. Yeah, we were taking on some risk. We've now won the series, and that was the goal," said McDonald.

Cummins will now target full fitness for the month-long Twenty20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka, starting in early February.

"To position him for further risk and jeopardise him long term



Australia's fast bowlers Mitchell Starc (left) and Pat Cummins chat on the final day of the third Ashes Test against England at the Adelaide Oval in Adelaide on Sunday. (AFP)

is not something that we want to do," said McDonald. "Pat's really comfortable with that. If he had any setback in the build-in as well, we would have shut him down straight away."

Steve Smith, who captained the team in Cummins' absence during the first two Tests, will lead the side again in Melbourne after missing Adelaide with vertigo symptoms.

His return means there will be at least three changes.

Usman Khawaja replaced Smith at four in Adelaide scoring 82 and 40 and should be retained then Josh Inglis is shaping as the fall guy.

Lyon, 38, damaged his right

hamstring saving a boundary on day five in Adelaide fielding and hobbled off.

He claimed his 564th wicket in the match to move clear of fellow Australian great Glenn McGrath and into sixth on the all-time Test bowling list.

"Nathan Lyon will have surgery on a torn right hamstring which will sideline him for an extended period," Cricket Australia said.

Lyon's replacement, Murphy, is in line to play his first home Test later this week.

His seven previous appearances for Australia all came overseas. His last was in Sri Lanka earlier this year.

Richardson was included after

a four-year Test absence, during which he underwent three shoulder surgeries.

Scott Boland and Mitchell Starc are likely to lead the seam attack after recovering well from Adelaide, with Michael Naser, Brendan Doggett and Richardson battling to join them.

McDonald paid tribute to 35-year-old Starc, who has sent down close to 100 overs in the series so far and remains in good shape.

"Starc's amazing. He's pulled up fine," McDonald said of the leading bowler in the series.

Starc has taken 22 wickets in the three Ashes Tests so far at an average of 17.04, including a career best innings return of 7-58 in Perth.

He has also contributed 150 valuable runs with the bat down the order.

"He keeps running in and presenting the pace that he does," said McDonald.

"There's a lot to be learned around preparing yourself and targeting the right matches at the right time."

### AUSTRALIA SQUAD

Steve Smith (capt), Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Brendan Doggett, Cameron Green, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Usman Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne, Todd Murphy, Michael Naser, Jhye Richardson, Mitchell Starc, Jake Weatherald, Beau Webster

## IWF President Hails Qatar's Excellence in Hosting Top Tier Weightlifting Events



President of the International Weightlifting Federation, Mohammed Hassan Jalood



Mohammed Yousef al-Mana, IWF Vice President and president of Qatar, Arab and Asian federations.

**DOHA:** President of the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF), Mohammed Hassan Jalood, has lauded Qatar for its exceptional contribution to the growth and promotion of weightlifting at the international, continental and Arab levels. Jalood praised the Qatar Weightlifting Federation (QWF) and its president, Mohammed Yousef al-Mana, for the continuous efforts to advance the sport locally, regionally and globally. Jalood highlighted the outstanding organisation of the 10th Qatar International Cup, held alongside the Arab Championships for youth, junior and senior categories, as well as the ongoing West Asian Championships in Doha.

"The successful staging of three major tournaments simultaneously reflects Qatar's extensive experience and its ability to meet the highest international standards," Jalood said.

"I commend the positive atmosphere surrounding the competitions, the quality of venues, accommodation, and the high level of security and comfort provided to athletes and delegations," he added. According to the IWF president, the events' success is the result of Qatar's strong technical and organisational expertise, coupled with its

readiness to provide all necessary resources.

The championships have attracted more than 320 athletes from 28 countries, including 18 Arab nations, and have already produced intense competition and new records across several weight categories.

Echoing these sentiments, Mohamed Abdelmaksoud, president of the Egyptian Weightlifting Federation and a member of the IWF Executive Committee, described Qatar's organisation as exceptional.

Meanwhile Egyptian referee Gouda Abdel-Sadek, supervisor of the weightlifting competitions in the combined Qatar Cup, Arab Championship, and West Asian Championships, yesterday said that the atmosphere at the competitions was of high intensity for senior and junior lifters. Abdel-Sadek added that the athletes demonstrated high technical levels, evident in their outstanding performance and strong adherence to the rules, which contributed to fair and exciting competitions throughout the championships.

He said 'such events represent a golden opportunity for exchanging experiences between the participating teams and raising the level of weightlifting in the region'.

FOCUS

## Key to probe England's off-field activities on Ashes beach break

AFP  
Melbourne

England managing director **Rob Key** pledged yesterday to investigate whether players' drinking on a mid-Ashes beach break went too far, after reports said it had been like a "stag-do". The England team headed to Queensland tourist playground Noosa after heavily losing the first two Tests in Perth and Brisbane.

They spent several days on the sand and around restaurants and bars, followed by TV crews, photographers and reporters before travelling to Adelaide where they lost the third Test and the Ashes.

Britain's *Daily Telegraph* reported that "after drowning their sorrows after the Brisbane Test, it is no exaggeration to say some, certainly not all, players drank for five or six days".

It added that players "did nothing outrageous in Noosa" but there was concern over the level of drinking, with England's professionalism already under question after their limited preparations.

"If there's things where people are saying that our players went out and drank excessively, then of course we'll be looking into that," Key told English media in Melbourne ahead of the Boxing Day Test.

"Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol for an international cricket team is not something that I'd expect to see at any stage.



"It would be a fault not to look into what happened there," added Key, who did not travel with the team to Noosa.

"From everything that I've heard so far, they actually were pretty well behaved. Very well behaved."

He admitted that he did not mind players having the occasional drink, but "if it goes past that, then that's an issue as far as I'm concerned. "I have no issue with the Noosa trip if it was to get away and just throw your phone away, down tools, go on the beach, all of that stuff."

"If it goes into where they're drinking lots and it's a stag-do, all of that type of stuff, that's completely unacceptable."

Key also revealed he had previously looked into reports that players had been spotted drinking the night before a limited-overs match in New Zealand, just before the Ashes tour. "I didn't feel like that was worthy of formal warnings, but it was probably worthy of informal ones," he said.



CYCLING

# Belgian Evenepoel seeking to ‘break through ceiling’

OLYMPIC CHAMPION ‘WANTS TO BE BETTER’ THAN POGACAR



Belgium's Remco Evenepoel in action during the Elite Road Race World Championships 2025 in Kigali, Rwanda, on September 28, 2025. (Reuters)

Reuters  
London

Belgium's Remco Evenepoel believes he can mount a serious challenge at next year's Tour de France, though he knows dethroning champion Tadej Pogacar will be no easy task.

The 25-year-old former Vuelta a Espana winner, who won Olympic gold in the road race and time trial at last year's Paris Games, will spearhead Red Bull-BORA-hansgrohe's campaign alongside German Florian Lipowitz at cycling's

biggest race.

The pair will have their work cut out for them as they look to win a first Tour de France for the German team, however, with Pogacar by far the favourite to win a record-equalling fifth title.

"I want to be better than him (Pogacar). That's very difficult, we all know that. But that's why I came here. To take those steps. To go for it, on it and over it," Evenepoel told Belgium's state-funded sports website Sporza in an interview published on Monday.

"That will take a lot of effort, but I'm very motivated, and I really needed this new step (joining

Red Bull-BORA-hansgrohe) to completely break through a ceiling. I hope to be able to boom this year."

Evenepoel beat Pogacar to win the individual time trial title at the Cycling Road World Championships in September, but finished well behind the Slovenian when the pair crossed paths at the Giro di Lombardia just a few weeks later. Asked if he could win the Tour de France, Evenepoel, who begins his season in Spain next month, said: "Yes."

"If everything continues to go well and if I can have a really good winter, good training camps and

the points I'm looking for in the races in the spring," he added.

"If I can show in Catalonia that I am there to win, like I was in 2023 heading into the Giro d'Italia, then I definitely think I will be able to reach that level. Your foundation needs to be there before you can work on those high-intensity workouts, the real VO2 max workouts."

"That's where I can improve the most. It also makes sense: if Tadej attacks, I can keep up for a while, but not for too long. That's what I have to work on now."

Next year's Tour de France will begin in Barcelona on July 4.

TRAGEDY

## Norwegian biathlete Guttorm Bakken found dead in hotel

AFP  
Oslo

Norwegian biathlete Sivert Guttorm Bakken, 27, has been found dead in his hotel room in Lavaze, Italy, the Norwegian Biathlon Association said yesterday, adding that the cause of death was unknown.

The sports governing body said the athlete's death had been confirmed by Italian authorities.

"Our thoughts are first and foremost with Sivert's family and with everyone close to him, both in Norway and abroad. We are cooperating with the Italian authorities on site," acting secretary general Emilie Nordskar said in a statement.

The association said crisis teams would follow up with fellow athletes and next of kin. Bakken won his first World Cup race in the 15-kilometre mass start in Oslo Holmenkollen in 2022.

However, after his successful 2021-2022 season, his career was halted due to heart problems. Norwegian public broadcaster NRK reported that Bakken had previously been open about contracting heart

problems following his third dose of the Covid-19 vaccine in 2022. But after a long way back he has represented Norway in the Biathlon World Cup over the past few weekends.

Bakken competed in the World Cup event at Le Grand Bornand in France at the weekend and was 13th in this season's overall standings. NRK said Bakken had travelled to Lavaze for a high-altitude training camp. In a post to Instagram, teammate Sturla Holm Laegreid called Bakken "one of the toughest".

"You had the ability to work your way out of the worst situations. Where everyone else would have given up, you pushed on. Sivert, you were a role model, an inspiration, with a determination that the rest of us could only dream of," Laegreid said.

In an interview published by the Norwegian Biathlon Association earlier in December, Bakken said he was happy he had "stuck with it" and put in the work to come back.

"For me, quitting before I had given it a real try was never an option. This, combined with the fact that I really enjoy my daily training routine as a biathlete, has meant that I have always been motivated."

## Salma wins gold as Qatar shooters shine at Arab Championship



Qatari shooters continued their strong performances at the Arab Pistol and Rifle Championship in Muscat yesterday, winning four medals. Salma Almas claimed gold in the women's 10m air pistol event and also teamed up with Duaa Rahmatullah and Aisha al-Abdullah to secure silver in the team competition. Rahmatullah added a bronze medal in the individual event. The mixed doubles pair of Al Maha al-Ali and Abdullah al-Sunaidi captured bronze in the 10m air rifle. With these results, Qatar's medal tally rose to eight medals - one gold, three silver and four bronze.

FOOTBALL

## No jacket required for Emery as Villa dream of title glory

AFP  
Birmingham

Unai Emery insists Aston Villa will not win the Premier League, but the Spaniard's ecstatic celebration of Morgan Rogers' decisive strike against Manchester United revealed his true feelings about their surprise title charge.

Usually a composed figure on the touchline, Emery put his emotions on display for all to see after Rogers produced his second fine finish of the afternoon to clinch a pulsating 2-1 win at Villa Park on Sunday. The England midfielder's 57th-minute goal prompted Emery to roar in delight before ripping off his jacket and hurling it into the air.

It was a fascinating insight into Emery's mindset in the midst of Villa's remarkable 10-match winning run in all competitions.

Villa sit third in the Premier League, just three points adrift of leaders Arsenal and one behind second-placed Manchester City as they chase a first English title since 1981.

As he has in the past when Villa have flirted with title contention, Emery preferred to play the underdog, claiming his team cannot overhaul clubs of Arsenal and City's experience and quality despite beating them both at home already this season.

"We are not contender," Emery said. "Of course we beat Arsenal and Manchester City here, but they have massive things tactically with players on a high level.

"We have as well but to be a contender in front of them is not our reality"

But Emery's coy approach to



Villa's growing title momentum can't obscure the facts. Villa are on their best winning run in all competitions since 1914, when they secured 11 successive victories.

They have won seven consecutive top-flight matches for the first time since finishing second under Graham Taylor in 1989-90.

Emery has turned Villa Park into a fortress, with just one home league defeat in 2025, fewer than any other team.

Villa's rise into the title race is even more impressive as it comes after their worst start to a league campaign for 28 years, featuring just two points and one goal scored in their opening five matches.

"Of course we are being consistent in more or less three years, and getting into European positions, but we must continue to be humble," Emery said.

"Understanding how we can get points like we did. We want to keep the same level by being in-

telligent, competitive, consistent and demanding."

**'A PERFECT COMBINATION'**

When Villa return to action after Christmas Day, they face two trips to London that will serve as defining moments in their season.

They meet fourth-placed Chelsea at Stamford Bridge on December 27 before a seismic clash with Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium three days later.

If Villa are to maintain their title bid, Emery will have to coax more eye-catching performances from Rogers, whose first-half opener was a sublime curler into the top corner from just inside the area.

"The manager's a genius. He knows what he is doing and knows how to get out of situations," Rogers said. "The enthusiasm and the way he is gets through to us, then we have that belief and that buzz to our performances."

"That is what he tries to do and we try and take it on board. It's a perfect combination."

Emery returned the compliment, saying: "He's a fantastic guy. A fantastic player. Because he loves football. He loves work."

But Emery revealed he had given Rogers a reality check at the interval in a bid to raise his game to even greater heights.

"At half-time I was not happy with him because I am ambitious myself. He scored a good goal but he was not performing very well," he said. "We spoke about individually increasing our focus to get better and in the second half we did much better."

As Rogers knows better than most, Emery's relentless quest for perfection is the driving force behind Villa's bid for an incredible title triumph.

## Al Arabi retains handball Federation Cup



Al Arabi retained the handball Federation Cup after a commanding 36-26 victory over Al Duhail in the final at Al Duhail Sports Hall. The win secured Al Arabi a second straight title and a fifth crown in the competition's history, after leading 16-13 at half-time and pulling clear in the second-half. Al Wakrah claimed third place with a 33-28 win over Al Shamal. The tournament was held during the league break as Qatar's national team prepares for the 22nd Asian Men's Championship in January in Kuwait, a qualifier for the 2027 World Championship in Germany.

## Kim again shoots down LIV Golf rumours

Si Woo Kim has denied a rumoured move to LIV Golf for the second time this month. Kim, 30, committed to next month's Sony Open in Hawaii, but an official close to Kim did acknowledge that his client was one of "many" Korean players to be offered contracts by the Saudi-backed league. "It is true that Kim Si-woo, like many Korean players, has been offered a recruitment," the official told South Korea's Maeil Business Newspaper on Dec. 11. "However, Kim Si-woo finally expressed his intention to refuse and decided to remain on the PGA Tour."

Flushing It reported over the weekend that discussions had remained ongoing, prompting Kim to take to social media to address the rumours. "I will be playing on PGA Tour," he posted on his Instagram story. LIV Golf CEO Scott O'Neil told golf.com that South Korea is an important market for future growth, and the league has also filed a trademark for the team name "Becko East GC." Becko, formally spelled Baekho in Korean, means "white tiger," which is a popular symbol in Korean mythology.

Kim's countryman Sungjae Im also took to social media earlier this month to refute a potential move, while longtime PGA Tour veteran Byeong-hun An is also believed to have received interest. Kim is a former Players champion who also won the Sony Open in 2023 and is currently ranked 47th in the world. LIV Golf's first event of 2026 doesn't take place until three weeks after the Sony Open, so Kim's commitment to the event doesn't completely rule out a late switch. LIV must complete its rosters for the 2026 season by February. 4. So far this offseason, the league has added French journeyman Victory Perez and brought back England's Laurie Canter, while Scott Vincent of Zimbabwe and Yosuke Asaji of Japan earned spots via the International Series standings. Flushing It reported that American Max Greyserman has been offered a contract to replace Ben Campbell on Bubba Watson's RangeGoats team, although it is unknown if the world's No 32-ranked player will make the move.



PREMIER LEAGUE

Frank defends Van de Ven after Slot slams ‘reckless’ foul on Isak

AFP  
London

Tottenham manager Thomas Frank has hit back at Arne Slot after the Liverpool boss criticised Micky van de Ven for a “reckless” tackle that left Alexander Isak with a broken leg.

Defender Van de Ven crashed into Isak with a sliding tackle in a failed attempt to stop the Sweden striker scoring in Liverpool’s 2-1 win at Tottenham on Saturday. Isak, who limped off after Van de Ven’s challenge, underwent surgery on an ankle injury that included a fibula fracture.

The 26-year-old is expected to be sidelined for at least two months after the injury to his left leg. Slot launched a scathing attack on the centre-back when he faced the media, saying he was guilty of a “reckless challenge”. “If you make that tackle 10 times, I think 10 times there’s a serious chance that a player gets a serious injury,” he said.

But Frank defended his player in his own press conference. “I am obviously disagreeing in many ways,” he said. “We are talking about a defender that will do everything he can to avoid the goal. It is a transition, there is a ball down the side and he

is doing everything he can to block the shot so he is sliding. Unfortunately, Isak plants his foot so it makes it look worse than it is, but that is a natural action for a defender. Put it this way, if my defender does not do that, they are not true defenders.”

Frank said Van de Ven would not put an opponent’s health at risk with a dangerous foul. “Reckless challenge? I don’t think you see anything like that from Micky,” he said. “I see him as a very fair and competitive player. That’s one thing. I know the two players have sorted it out, so that’s a good sign.”

Isak’s injury is the latest setback for the 26-year-old after he signed from Newcastle for a British record fee of £125mn on transfer deadline day in September. He arrived at Anfield lacking match fitness after his protracted move and subsequently suffered a groin injury, which set him back further. Slot admitted it had been a “challenging and difficult period” for his new striker, who has scored just three goals in 16 appearances in all competitions. But he believes Isak could still play a valuable role later in the season.

Isak’s absence will be a major blow for Liverpool, with Mohamed Salah at the Africa Cup of Nations and Cody Gakpo a doubt for Saturday’s home match against

bottom club Wolves. Hugo Ekitike, who has scored five goals in his past four games, and the little-used Federico Chiesa are the only fit senior forwards. Isak’s injury means Liverpool could boost their attacking options in the January transfer window but Slot was tightlipped when asked about a potential move for Bournemouth winger Antoine Semenyo.

Tottenham’s defeat against Liverpool added to the mounting pressure on Frank. The former Brentford boss has struggled since arriving in north London in the close-season to replace the sacked Ange Postecoglou.

Postecoglou ended Tottenham’s 17-year trophy drought by winning the Europa League, but the poor domestic form that haunted the Australian has continued under Frank’s watch. Tottenham are languishing in 14th place in the Premier League ahead of this weekend’s trip to Crystal Palace, but Frank remains confident he can turn the tide.

“This is one of the biggest clubs in the world so it makes it a bigger and different challenge,” he said. “Where this makes it extra challenging is we also play Champions League and Premier League at the same time. We are trying to improve when at 100 miles per hour.”



Liverpool’s Alexander Isak underwent surgery on an ankle injury that included a fibula fracture and is expected to be sidelined for at least two months. (AFP)

AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

Jackson nets brace as Senegal cruise to victory

Congo edged out Benin 1-0 with Theo Bongonda scoring the only goal

AFP  
Tangiers, Morocco

Bayern Munich striker Nicolas Jackson grabbed a brace as Senegal eased to a 3-0 victory over Botswana in the Africa Cup of Nations yesterday. Jackson, on loan at the Bundesliga giants from Chelsea, struck either side of half-time in Tangier, with Cherif Ndiaye completing the scoring late on.

The victory took Senegal to the top of the table in Group D on goal difference, ahead of the Democratic Republic of Congo, who beat Benin 1-0 in Rabat earlier. It was a predictable outcome to the first match of the tournament for both teams as Senegal are 119 places above Botswana in the world rankings. Senegal and DR Congo, both former champions, are expected to fill the top two places and qualify for the round of 16.

Benin and Botswana will view their clash on Saturday as a must-win affair, giving potential victors a chance to fill one of four places in the knockout stage reserved for third-placed teams. Torrential rain greeted the teams as they walked on to the pitch at the 75,000-seat stadium, the biggest by capacity of the nine being used in Morocco for the tournament. Senegal had a great chance to take the lead within three minutes in a one-on-one situation, but goalkeeper Goitseone Phoko blocked a Jackson shot. Two-time African player of the year Sadio Mane, Iliman Ndiaye and Jackson all came close to breaking the deadlock as the Teranga Lions dominated possession, while the Zebras defended in depth.

While Senegal and former Chelsea goalkeeper Edouard Mendy was a mere spectator, Phoko was constantly in action, using his hands, feet and legs to keep the west Africans at bay. But endless Senegalese pres-



Senegal's Nicolas Jackson celebrates after scoring during the Africa Cup of Nations match against Botswana in Tangier, Morocco.

sure finally reaped a reward on 40 minutes when Germany-born Ismail Jakobs and Germany-based Jackson combined to put one of the title favourites ahead.

Jakobs cut in from the left and pulled the ball back to Jackson, who reacted instantly, using his left foot to steer the ball wide of Phoko and into the net. Botswana, who qualified at the expense of shock 2026

World Cup qualifiers Cape Verde, finally threatened to score in added time at the end of the opening half.

But they failed to take advantage of a free kick just outside the area. A weak shot was deflected for a corner that was overhit and went out of play beyond the far post without being touched. A flowing move from midfield with quick, crisp passing set up

Jackson to double the lead after 58 minutes.

When the ball was worked to him in the box, the 24-year-old rounded Moshu Gaolaolwe and tapped home. Cherif Ndiaye put the cherry on the cake for Senegal as he finished smartly at the end of another fine team move in the 90th minute.

Confident his team were cruising to victory, Senegal coach Pape Thiaw introduced 17-year-old Ibrahim Mbaye from European champions Paris Saint-Germain midway through the second half. The teenage striker last month became the youngest Senegalese scorer in an international when he netted in a 8-0 rout of Kenya in an AFCON warm-up match.

Earlier in Rabat, Congo edged out Benin 1-0, with Theo Bongonda scoring the only goal of the Group D clash. Bongonda, of Spartak Moscow, pounced to score on 16 minutes at the Al Medina Stadium in Rabat after the Benin defence left a long ball.

The Leopards thought they had doubled their lead just after half-time when Cedric Bakambu met a Nathanael Mbuku cross to head home from close range, but the goal was eventually ruled out for offside after a long VAR check.

One goal proved enough, however, for a DR Congo side backed by the majority of the crowd. DR Congo were semi-finalists at the last Cup of Nations in Ivory Coast early last year but have not gone further than that since winning the trophy as Zaire in 1974.

Sebastien Desabre’s team, featuring the likes of West Ham United full-back Aaron Wan-Bissaka and the promising Sunderland midfielder Noah Sadiki, are also hoping to qualify for the 2026 World Cup. They will play either New Caledonia or Jamaica in a play-off in Mexico in March, with the winner of that going into Group K at the World Cup alongside Portugal, Uzbekistan and Colombia.

SPOTLIGHT

Egypt’s Salah ties African greats with AFCON scoring streak

Reuters  
Cairo

Mohamed Salah became the first Egyptian player to score in five consecutive editions of the African Cup of Nations with his late strike in a 2-1 win over Zimbabwe on Monday.

Egypt’s captain, starting his first game after four successive matches on the bench at Liverpool, fired home a left-footed effort in the 91st minute to give the seven-time champions a late victory and Hossam Hassan’s side a comfortable start in Morocco, setting a new record for Egypt. “Our national team captain Mohamed Salah becomes the first Egyptian player to score in five consecutive editions of the Africa Cup of Nations” the Egyptian FA posted on X.

Liverpool’s talisman has scored in the 2017, 2019, 2021, 2023 and now 2025 editions, matching Ivory Coast’s trio Didier Drogba, Abdoulaye Traore and Yaya Toure as well as Tunisian winger Youssef Msakni.



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Salah now has the chance to increase his tally with two AFCON tournaments scheduled within the next three years in 2027 and 2028. A goal in each edition would allow the Egypt international to break the record held by Cameroon’s Samuel Eto’o, Zambia’s Kalusha Bwalya and the Ghanaian duo Andre Ayew and Asamoah Gyan.

The 33-year-old has scored eight goals in 20 AFCON games - four fewer than Hassan El-Shazly, Egypt’s all-time top scorer in the tournament and three fewer than his current coach Hassan. Egypt will face South Africa on Friday, then take on Angola on December 29, as Salah aims to finally lift the Africa Cup after losing the final in 2017 and 2021.

Mahrez hopes for strong showing from Algeria

**Rabat:** Algeria captain Riyad Mahrez is confident his side can make up for poor showings at the last two editions of the Africa Cup of Nations as the 2019 champions prepare to begin their campaign in Morocco today.

The Desert Foxes won their second AFCON title the last time it was played in North Africa, six years ago in Egypt. However, their title defence three years later in Cameroon ended in first-round elimination with just a single point, and they also failed to win a match in going out in the group stage in Ivory Coast in 2024.

“There is no doubt that we were not good at the last two AFCONs but that is in the past now. All that is behind us,” Mahrez said in Rabat, where Algeria play Sudan today. “Now we have the opportunity of a lifetime, the chance to make up for what has happened and do better. Tomorrow it is time for this generation.”

Algeria will be aiming to live up to their billing as the fourth-best side in Africa according to the FIFA rankings. A strong showing in Morocco will also set them up for the World Cup in North America in six months, after Algeria qualified for the first time since 2014.

Former Manchester City winger Mahrez, now playing for Al Ahli in the Saudi Pro League, turns 35 in February and so these tournaments may mark his swansong at international level. But he is excited about Algeria’s new generation, including VfL Wolfsburg forward Mohamed Amoura and the goalkeeper Luca Zidane.

Son of France legend Zinedine, Luca Zidane was born in Marseille and plays for Granada in the Spanish second division.

He made his Algeria debut in October and it is hoped he can be the solution to what has been a problem position for coach Vladimir Petkovic. “Luca has integrated well into the squad and is trying to give everything for the team,” said Mahrez, who was born in France to an Algerian father and a Moroccan mother.

“I know his name is a big weight to carry but he is not letting that get to him.”

After today’s game Algeria will also play Burkina Faso and Equatorial Guinea in a tricky Group E.

Napoli beat Bologna to lift Italian Super Cup

**Riyadh:** Napoli won the Italian Super Cup on Monday as David Neres scored twice to secure the reigning Serie A champions a 2-0 win over Bologna in the final in Jeddah.

Brazilian winger Neres curled in a brilliant shot from distance to give Napoli the lead before half-time against last season’s Italian Cup winners. He struck again in the second half after intercepting a weak pass from Bologna goalkeeper Federico Ravaglia as he tried to play out from the back. Neres finished with three goals in the Super Cup after also scoring in the 2-0 semi-final win over AC Milan last week. It is the third time Napoli have won the competition, after 1990 and 2014. “The lads deserve congratulations,” Napoli coach Antonio Conte said. “They showed how much they wanted this trophy for the fans, and we’ll also have a great Christmas celebration now with a new trophy in the cabinet.”

Traditionally featuring the Serie A and Italian Cup champions, since 2023 the Italian Super Cup has also included the runners-up from league and cup.

The four-team tournament is contracted to be held in Saudi Arabia until 2029. Napoli, who trail Serie A leaders Inter Milan by two points, return to league action on Sunday away to Cremonese. Bologna are at home to Sassuolo.

REAL MADRID’S ENDRICK JOINS LYON ON LOAN

Real Madrid’s Brazilian starlet Endrick has joined Lyon on loan, the Ligue 1 club announced. The 19-year-old joined the Spanish giants in 40 appearances for Real Madrid but has seen his playing time at the Bernabeu limited this season under new coach Xabi Alonso. In 14 appearances with the Brazil national team, the left-footed attacker has netted three times but his last strike for the Selecao came in June last year and he has only earned one cap in 2025. Endrick joins French side Lyon on loan until the end of the season, with a fee agreed between the clubs of one million euros (\$1.2mn).

NEYMAR GETS SURGERY DONE FOR MENISCUS INJURY

Neymar has undergone a successful operation on his left knee to repair a damaged meniscus, his club Santos said on Monday. The 33-year-old endured a difficult season with Santos as he played through the injury to help the club avoid relegation from Brazil’s top flight.

Brazil’s national team doctor performed the arthroscopic surgery, having previously operated on Neymar for a foot fracture as well as the ruptured anterior cruciate ligament he suffered against Uruguay in October 2023. Neymar is expected to require a recovery period of around a month. His Santos contract expires at the end of the year but he is in talks with the club over a new deal. The former Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain forward has not played for Brazil in over two years but is hoping to be fit and figure in coach Carlo Ancelotti’s plans for the 2026 World Cup.