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CHESS

Gukesh eyes reset at Rapid and Blitz Worlds in Doha

Legendary Anand believes the teenager's struggles are a natural part of a champion's journey



India's D Gukesh defeated Ding Liren to win the World Championship in 2024 and become the youngest-ever male champion.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

World champion Gukesh Domaraju heads into the FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Championships in Doha from tomorrow seeking a fresh start, as the 19-year-old Indian looks to rediscover momentum after a challenging phase.

Competing against a star-studded field that includes five-time world champion Magnus Carlsen, Gukesh will be aiming to reassert himself in the faster formats as the next World Championship cycle looms.

Hosted at the Sports and Events Complex of Qatar University, the tournament brings together the elite of world chess, including Americans Fabiano Caruana and Wesley So, Russian GM Ian Nepomniachtchi, and India's rising stars R Praggnanandhaa, Arjun Erigaisi and Nihal Sarin.

Gukesh, who stunned the chess world by defeating Ding Liren to win the World Championship in 2024 and become the youngest-ever male world champion, has endured a difficult period since. He began 2025 with a loss to Praggnanandhaa at

the Tata Steel Chess Tournament and has struggled to find consistency across formats. Ahead of the Global Chess League season in Mumbai last week, Gukesh played a demanding 170 matches, winning 42, drawing 67 and losing 61.

Over the next five days in Doha, it will be a crucial opportunity for the reigning champion to rebuild confidence against the very best. India's chess icon Viswanathan Anand believes the teenager's struggles are a natural part of a champion's journey. Speaking to *Hindustan Times*, the five-time world champion described Gukesh's situation as "part of the rough and tumble of life."

"Every time you show something, your peers are all reacting. They're all trying to change something and come back and confront you with new problems," Anand explained. "Setbacks are just inevitable in that sense. And I think Gukesh's crisis probably has more to do with the demands of social media than with his chess. His chess is fine. He would want better results in some of the formats, but this is not a crisis as such. It's the nature of the game."

Anand, now FIDE's Deputy President and is semi-retired from chess, also

backed Arjun Erigaisi, India No 1 and world No 5, despite his failure to qualify for the Candidates for a second straight time. Erigaisi has shown he is among the leading challengers to the supremacy of Norway's Carlsen and Caruana, and the 22-year-old Indian will be highly motivated after missing a Candidates berth at the recent FIDE World Cup in Goa.

"He's good enough to make the Candidates. Nobody will be surprised if he gets there. But it's not like it's an easy path," Anand said. "(Erigaisi's) rivals are also very, very strong. One of the problems is, there are far too many players who belong in the Candidates, but it can't be a tournament of 16 or 32. So, the elimination process is by definition a little bit cruel."

India's growing dominance is reflected in the numbers, with a record 29 Indian players competing in the Open rapid and blitz events and 13 in the women's section, led by reigning women's world rapid champion Humpy Koneru and women's World Cup winner Divya Deshmukh.

Humpy is seeded eighth in Doha. In New York last year, she rebounded from a first-round loss to score 8.5 points from 11 games and claim the title for the sec-

FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Championships
Qatar 2025

Rapid
Start: 14:00

December 26

Open. Rounds 1-5
Women. Rounds 1-4

December 27

Open. Rounds 6-9
Women. Rounds 5-8

December 28

Open. Rounds 10-13
Women. Rounds 9-11

Blitz
Start: 14:00

December 29

Open. Rounds 1-13
Women. Rounds 1-10

December 30

Open. Rounds 14-19
Women. Rounds 11-15

Open. Semifinals / 17:30
Women. Semifinals / 17:15

Open. Finals / 19:15
Women. Finals / 19:00

11-year-old Charvi in India's contingent

Doha: An 11-year-old prodigy will be among India's 41-player contingent competing at the FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Championships in Qatar this week, with Charvi Anilkumar set to make her debut at the season-ending event.

Charvi, who is from India's southern city Bengaluru, is the youngest Indian in the field and the joint youngest participant in both the women's Rapid & Blitz events, sharing that distinction with Kazakhstan's Alanna Berikkyzy.

For Charvi, the tournament marks a

rare appearance in the women's section. Over the past year, she has largely competed in open events against older boys and men, choosing a tougher competitive path instead of age-group women's tournaments. The approach has delivered results, with Charvi currently ranked 44th among the world's top juniors, despite being at least three years younger than every player above her on the list. In 2025 alone, Charvi has gained nearly 200 rating points following a demanding international schedule.

ond time in her career, five years after her maiden rapid crown in 2019.

Her rapid triumph and strong blitz showing placed her second in the overall FIDE women's series standings behind Ju Wenjun. In 2025, Humpy reached the final of the Women's World Cup in Batumi after a dramatic semi-final victory over top seed Lei Tingjie, decided in rapid and blitz tie-breaks. She then lost a closely fought all-Indian final to Divya but secured qualification for the next Candidates Tournament.

The demanding schedule in Doha will see the Rapid event played over 13 rounds in the Open category and 11 rounds in the women's section, with a time control of 15 minutes plus a 10-second increment per move.

The Blitz event will be divided into a

Swiss tournament – 19 rounds in the Open and 15 in the women's section – with the top four advancing to four-game knockout matches.

With a top prize purse of €700,000 each for the Open Rapid & Blitz and €400,000 for the women's events, the 400-player field has plenty at stake. A total of 233 players have registered for the Blitz Open and 230 for the Rapid.

After missing the Rapid crown and sharing gold in the Blitz in last year's New York edition, Carlsen, who became a father this year, returns to the World Rapid & Blitz Championships. He will aim to dethrone 2024 World Rapid champion Volodar Murzin, who has enjoyed a strong run of results throughout the year.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

Al Ahli beat Andijon to top group and qualify for last 16



Al Ahli players celebrate after their win over PFC Andijon 2-0 at Al Thumama Stadium.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Ahli defeated PFC Andijon 2-0 at Al Thumama Stadium to book their AFC Champions League Two round of 16 berth yesterday. The win meant the Qatari side topped Group B with 10 points while their beaten opponents from Uzbekistan were eliminated. Al Ahli had the better start with Erik Exposito testing Eldor Adkhamov with a curling low shot from distance before the Andijon custodian saved Sekou Yansane's effort after he had been teed up by Julian Draxler.

The home side opened the scoring in the 26th minute when midfielder Michel Vlap stretched his right leg to guide home Draxler's enticing free-kick past a stranded Adkhamov. Al Ahli had opportunities to take an even bigger lead into the break but efforts from Draxler and Exposito - with Adkhamov already beaten - struck the post before Abdurakhmon Komilov produced an excellent last-ditch challenge to stop

Exposito. The second half saw no change in the pattern of play with Al Ahli searching for the second goal with Driss Fettouhi firing a shot from distance which Adkhamov saved. Affording Al Ahli shooting chances from range led to Andijon's downfall in the 65th minute when Vlap had time and space to unleash a swerving shot that fizzed past Adkhamov.

Vlap had the opportunity to seal his hat-trick late on after being put through by Exposito, only to steer his attempt wide but the miss mattered little as Al Ahli earned a deserved victory.

AL SADD NEVER STOPPED BELIEVING, SAYS MUJICA

Hat-trick hero Rafa Mujica attributed self-belief as the key factor for Al Sadd SC's dramatic 4-2 comeback win over Shabab Al Ahli in their AFC Champions League Elite tie at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium on Tuesday.

Trailing 2-0 following goals from Federico Cartabia and Yahya al-Ghassani, Al Sadd appeared on the brink of elimina-

tion before Mujica turned the match on its head with a superb treble, with Tarek Salman adding a fourth as the Qatari side registered their first win of the campaign to keep their hopes alive.

"We played a great match and it was truly very difficult," said Mujica. "We were down by two goals, but the coach gave me confidence and I was able to score three goals. I'm happy that I could help the team and I thank the coach for believing in me."

Head coach Roberto Mancini praised his side's resilience and determination after the setback, saying the result could provide a turning point for his team. "The match wasn't easy," said Mancini.

"We were down by two goals, but we came back strong and showed determination until the final minutes. We deserved this important victory. We made a mistake and conceded a penalty, but that's football, the most important thing is that we kept working. This victory is a good opportunity for us to get back on track - both domestically and continentally. We must continue to work hard."

SPOTLIGHT

Oman’s al-Khanjari thrills with three gold medals

EGYPTIAN WEIGHTLIFTER MUSTAFA MAHMOUD BAKRI IMPRESSES BY WINNING 2 SILVER MEDALS



Podium winners from one of the competitions at the combined Qatar International Cup, the Arab Championships and the West Asian Championships, in Doha yesterday. **Right:** Mohammed bin Yousef al-Mana, Vice-President of the International Weightlifting Federation, President of the Qatar Weightlifting Federation, President of the Asian Weightlifting Federation, and President of the Afro-Asian Weightlifting Council of Weightlifting, with a visiting dignitary at the event yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Omani weightlifter Amer al-Khanjari yesterday bagged three gold medals in the snatch, clean and jerk, lifting a total weight of 351kg to corner glory on day five of the Qatar International Cup, a three-way series that also includes Arab Championships and the West Asian Championships.

Egyptian weightlifter Mustafa Mahmoud Bakri finished second winning two silver medals in the snatch and total, in addition to a bronze in the clean and jerk with a total weight of 324kg. Syrian lifter Mohammed al-Khattab won silver in the clean and jerk and bronze in the total, while Lebanon’s Ali al-Khalil clinched bronze in the snatch.

In the youth category, Mustafa Bakri yesterday won two gold medals in the snatch and total, while Mohammed al-Khattab won gold in the clean and jerk, along with two silver medals and a bronze medal.

Saudi weightlifter Yousef Fakhri

al-Madham won silver in the snatch and bronze in the total, while Algerian weightlifter Qassoum Abdelrahman took bronze in the clean and jerk.

In the junior competitions, Morocco’s Zahid Abdelrahim shone, winning three gold medals, while Yemeni weightlifter Mohammed Adel earned three silver medals, and Saudi weightlifter Ali Hassan al-Sada secured three bronze medals.

In the women’s 69kg category, the competition was fierce. Tunisian weightlifter Jawhar Jasmi won two gold medals in the clean and jerk and the total, and a silver medal in the snatch. Egypt’s Abeer Mohamed won gold in the snatch along with silver and bronze in the clean and jerk, while Moroccan Shadia Shaashoui won silver in the clean and jerk and two bronze medals in the snatch and the total.

In the junior women’s category, Abeer Mohammed won two gold medals in the snatch and total, and a silver medal in the clean and jerk, while Shadia Shaashoui won gold in the clean and jerk and two silver medals. Saudi weightlifter Nahed

Mohammed earned three bronze medals.

In the youth women’s category, Abeer Mohammed repeated her achievements by winning three gold medals, while Syrian Lujain Zarqa won three silver medals, and Nahed Mohammed won three bronze medals.

In the men’s category, Oman’s al-Khanjari won three gold medals in the snatch, clean and jerk, and total, after lifting a total weight of 351 kg. Syrian weightlifter Mohammad al-Khattab won two silver medals in the clean and jerk and the total, in addition to a bronze medal in the snatch, with a total weight of 315kg.

Saudi Arabia’s Youssef Fakhri al-Madrahem came in third place, achieving a silver medal in the snatch and two bronze medals in the clean and jerk and the total, with a weight of 299kg.

In the women’s 69kg weight class, Saudi Arabia’s Al-Anoud Muath al-Shehri topped the medal table with three gold medals, while Iraq’s Iman Mohammad Jaafar won three silver medals, and Kuwait’s Al-Zahraa Kamshad won three bronze medals.

QATAR’S SARAH MAKES NOTABLE DOHA DEBUT AS ARAB LIFTERS SPARKLE

DOHA: Qatari weightlifter Sarah al-Qubaisi yesterday made a notable debut at the combined Qatar International Cup, Arab Championships and the West Asian Championships.

Competing in the women’s 77kg category, Sarah lifted 60kg in the snatch and 75kg in the clean and jerk, achieving a total of 135kg in what was her maiden outing under the Qatar flag.

The championships has brought together over 250 male and female athletes from more than 25 countries, with Qatar participating with a six-member squad including Tokyo Olympic champion Fares Ibrahim, Fares Ahmed Jaber, Nader Mohammed Bakr, Abdullah al-Hashemi, Ouisal Ikhlef and Sarah, competing across six weight categories.

In the same women’s 77kg competition, Kuwaiti Abrar al-Fahad claimed three bronze medals in the snatch (78kg), clean and jerk (98kg), and total (176kg).



Qatar’s weightlifter Ouisal Ikhlef during a training session at the Ezzan Palace Hotel in Doha yesterday.

fiercely contested, with Qatari athletes Nader Mohammed Bakr and Fares Ahmed Jaber taking on top competitors in the 94kg and over 94kg categories from

countries including Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Lebanon.

Notable performances across the championships included Omani weightlifter Amer al-Khanjari, who claimed three golds in the men’s 88kg category, and Moroccan junior Zahid Abdelrahim, who also achieved triple gold.

In the women’s 69kg category, Tunisian Jawhar Jasmi, Egyptian Abeer Mohamed, and Moroccan Shadia Shaashoui shared the podium across different lifts, with Saudi and Syrian athletes winning medals in youth and junior divisions.

The championships continue to provide a platform for emerging talent, regional rivals, and international champions to compete at the highest level, highlighting Qatar’s growing role in hosting world-class weightlifting events.

CRICKET

Archer ruled out of Ashes as England drop Pope

AFP/Reuters
Melbourne

Aside strain ended England fast bowler Jofra Archer’s Ashes campaign yesterday while the beleaguered tourists dropped batter Ollie Pope for the fourth Test against Australia.

Surrey seamer Gus Atkinson will replace Archer in an England side down 3-0 in the five-Test series and will be playing for pride in Melbourne and Sydney.

“Warwickshire’s Jacob Bethell comes into the side and will bat at number three,” the touring side said in a statement ahead of the Boxing Day Test.

Archer has been arguably England’s best player on this tour, taking nine wickets, including a five-wicket haul in Adelaide, and scoring valuable lower-order runs including a maiden fifty in the same match.

The injury casts doubts over Archer’s availability for the Twenty20 World Cup in February-March.

“The effort that he’s put in over these three games has been exceptional,” captain Ben Stokes said of the speedster on Tuesday.

“There were a lot of question marks around his ability or whatever it may be coming out to Australia, and he’s put in a great effort for the team.”

Pope, whose 46 in Perth remains his highest score in six Ashes innings on this tour, paid the price for his poor run of form, but opener Ben Duckett managed to retain his place for the fourth Test despite faring worse. Duckett has tallied 97 runs in six innings with a highest score of 29.

As if another botched Ashes campaign was not bad enough for them, England team director Rob Key said they would look into



England’s captain Ben Stokes bats in the nets during a training session at the Melbourne Cricket Ground ahead of the fourth Ashes Test against Australia yesterday. (AFP)

reports that players drank excessively during a break between the second and third Ashes Tests this month.

An emotional Stokes yesterday said the mental well-being of his players was his main priority amid the media scrutiny of their performance and behaviour on the tour.

Stokes said protecting England players’ welfare was his top concern amid claims of excessive drinking on a mid-Ashes beach break, without directly addressing the allegations.

Stokes was peppered with questions ahead of the fourth Test in Melbourne about the team’s behaviour at Noosa between the second and third Tests after British media reports compared it to a “stag-do”.

Unverified social media footage appeared to show opener Duckett drunk and disoriented.

Stokes, whose team have already lost the Ashes, said his main concern was the players’

mental welfare and to ensure they were ready for the Melbourne Test starting tomorrow.

“I’m obviously aware of the reports and everything circulating around right now,” Stokes said.

“My main concern right now is my players, and how I handle this moment right now is the most important thing to me.

“The welfare of everyone in there, and probably some certain individuals as well, is the most important thing to me right now as England captain.

“It’s never a nice place to be in when not only the media world, but also the social media world, is piling on top of you,” he added.

“It’s a very tough place to be in as an individual. As an individual, when you know you’ve got the support of the people who are sort of leaders, in a sense, it’s very good to know that you’ve got that support”

Asked directly whether his teammates had “done anything wrong in Noosa”, Stokes replied:

“I’ve just answered everything there.”

NO LEG TO STAND ON

England went to Queensland tourist resort Noosa after losing the first two Tests in Perth and Brisbane heavily.

They spent several days on the sand and around restaurants and bars before travelling to Adelaide, where they lost the third Test as Australia retained 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 the microscope after their limited preparations.

Stokes conceded that when a side was losing there would be scrutiny, and “rightly so”.

“When you are 3-0 down you don’t really have a leg to stand on but we’ve got two games of cricket to play. That’s what we have to focus on,” he said.

“We haven’t won a game in Australia for a long, long time.”

England have gone 18 Tests since winning a match in Australia, dating back to their last series victory there in 2010-11.

Their capitulation in this series in 11 days of play is the joint second quickest in more than a century, since the 1921 Ashes was completed in eight days.

ENGLAND XI FOR FOURTH TEST AT MCG

Zak Crawley, Ben Duckett, Jacob Bethell, Joe Root, Harry Brook, Ben Stokes (captain), Jamie Smith (wicketkeeper), Will Jacks, Gus Atkinson, Brydon Carse, Josh Tongue

Carey’s masterclass standing up to the stumps wins Boland’s trust



MELBOURNE: Bowling with the wicketkeeper standing up to the stumps can bruise a fast bowler’s ego, but Australia paceman Scott Boland said **Alex Carey’s** stellar glove work in the ongoing Ashes series has helped him grow comfortable with it.

Carey’s wicketkeeping masterclass has been a key factor in Australia’s unassailable 3-0 lead in the five-match series and the 34-year-old was particularly impressive in the second Test at the Gabba, where he stood up to Boland and Michael Neser.

With the wicketkeeper breathing down their necks, English batters were pretty much confined to the crease, which meant the home bowlers did not really need to vary their length.

“I’ve just never really bowled to the keeper up to the stumps before,” Boland told reporters ahead of the Boxing Day test.

“Everyone wants to be a fast bowler, and you don’t really like the keeper up to the stumps. “But I’ve seen over the last month how effective it is and how still I can keep their batters by Alex being up to the stumps.”

Wicketkeepers typically stand further back from the stumps when facing fast bowlers to give themselves more time to react to the high speed and bounce of the ball, reducing the risk of missed catches. Even from close range, Carey showed tremendous re-

flexes to pouch a thick edge from Ben Stokes after the England captain had nicked a Neser delivery in the second innings.

Dismissals like that gave confidence to Boland that he could continue bowling his edge-inducing length balls regardless of where Carey stood.

“I just need to trust that the length balls I bowl to try and nick guys off is the same length I bowl when he’s up to the stumps or back,” the 36-year-old said.

“The Gabba was pretty bouncy and he was up to the stumps for a bit of it and catching balls above waist-high and I bowled a bouncer and he caught that, so I have full trust in him up there.”

Former Australia wicketkeeper Ian Healy called Carey “clearly the best in the world”, while teammate Steve Smith termed him a “freak”.

Carey revealed that standing up to pace bowling is something he doesn’t replicate with bowlers in training but backs his skill to take over when needed.

“I don’t practice up to the stumps against fast bowling, think that probably could be a little bit dangerous at times,” he said. “You work on the fundamentals of the game, and for me that’s keeping up to the stumps to Nathan Lyon a lot but doing my drills in the nets with a nick bat, getting throws, trying to get in good positions.”

HORSE RACING

Sun Amer digs deep to land Muaither Cup

Thunder Valley returned to winning ways with a determined late effort

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Khalid Mohammed al-Harami-owned Sun Amer showed grit and determination to claim the Muaither Cup at the Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.

The six-year-old grey horse overcame the widest draw in the process to win the Purebred Arabian Handicap over 1,700m race. The grey horse was settled towards the rear before making smooth, steady progress, then hitting top gear in the home straight.

Under Soufiane Saadi, he edged out the brave Salwa in a fierce battle to snatch victory by a head for owner Khalid Mohammed al-Harami and trainer Bader al-Balushi. Rashid Saed Adiba, Head of QREC Racing Operations Section, crowned the winners.

In the card opener, Thunder Valley returned to winning ways with a determined late effort in the Thoroughbred Handicap (45-65) for three-year-old+ over 2,500m, Class 6, edging clear by one and a quarter lengths in a field of 12 runners.

The six-year-old chestnut gelding, owned by Maryam Abdulrahman al-Jaber, trained by Hadi al-Ramzani and ridden by Arnaud de Lepine, scored for the second time from four starts this season with a performance full of resolve.

Nahar also showed determination and patience to open his account in the Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate for 3-7-year-olds over 1,200m, Class 6, prevailing by a neck in a contest featuring eight runners. The five-year-old bay gelding, owned by Al Hajaj Farm, trained by Hamad al-Jehani and ridden by Pierre-Charles Boudot, built on a runner-up effort last time out to shed his maiden status at the 10th start of his career.

Earlier, Kafalat produced a dominant performance to land the Purebred Arabian Handicap (55-75) for three-year-old+ over 1,900m, Class 5, asserting his authority by four lengths in a competitive field of 14 runners.

Carrying the highest weight, the four-year-old grey colt confirmed his progressive profile with a second straight victory, racing in the colours of Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik, prepared by Ahmed Kobeissi and partnered by Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik.

Za'eer Al Shahania capped the meeting with a commanding performance in the Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (75-95) for four-year-old+ over 1,900m, Class 3, drawing clear by three and



Connections of Sun Amer celebrate after the six-year-old grey horse won the Muaither Cup at the Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday. **PICTURES:** Juhaim



Jockey Soufiane Saadi rides Sun Amer to the Muaither Cup win yesterday.

three-quarter lengths from nine runners. The four-year-old grey colt, representing and prepared by Osama Omer al-Dafea and ridden by Faleh Bughenaim, continued his consistent campaign with a third win of the season to go with two placed efforts.

RESULTS
27th Al Rayyan Race Meeting - Muaither Cup
WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1 - Muaither Cup - Purebred Arabian Handicap 80-100 (Class

2)
Sun Amer, Bader al-Balushi, Soufiane Saadi
2 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (0-65)
Suheal Qatar, Abdulaziz Hamad al-Marri, Saleh Salem al-Marri
3 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (75-95)
Za'eer Al Shahania, Eng. Osama Omer al-Dafea, Faleh Bughenaim
4 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (55-75)
Kafalat, Ahmed Kobeissi, Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik

5 - Thoroughbred Handicap 0-75, 3YO+, 1900m
Loaded Gun, Jassim al-Ghazali, Saleh Salem al-Marri
6 - Local Purebred Arabian Premium Maiden Plate
Fathi, Fahad Rashid al-Khayarin, Saleh Salem al-Marri
7 - Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate
Nahar, Hamad al-Jehani, Pierre Charles Boudot
8 - Thoroughbred Handicap (45-65)
Thunder Valley, Hadi al-Ramzani, Arnaud De Lepine

SPOTLIGHT

Sports minister visits elite referees' camp



HE the Minister of Sports and Youth Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani addressing the participants of the elite referees winter camp as Deputy Chairman of the FIFA Referees Committee Hani Taleb Balan looks on.

HE the Minister of Sports and Youth Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani visited the winter camp for elite referees currently underway in Doha, in the presence of Deputy Chairman of the FIFA Referees Committee Hani Taleb Balan.

During the visit, HE Sheikh Hamad closely followed the latest developments in referees' work, ensuring their physical and technical readiness ahead of the resumption of local tournaments. He also reviewed the camp program and its objectives.

Meeting with the referees, Sheikh Hamad emphasised the importance of their role on the field, expressing his happiness when referees reflect the true image of Qatari football and deliver high standards in both local and international competitions.

He assured full support for referees, appreciating their work and urging them to continue striving for excellence in all tournaments, without being affected by external pressures.

He highlighted the referees' resilience, citing the performance of the Qatari crew at the recently-concluded FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2025, which managed

matches under high technical standards and large audiences, a result of the entire refereeing system's efforts. Sheikh Hamad also noted that the Qatari refereeing project is among the most successful in Qatari football. Until around 2003, Qatari referees managed only 5% of local matches; today, they cover 100%, with foreign referees participating solely for experience exchange.

HE Sheikh Hamad expressed his gratitude to all involved in the refereeing system, including Hani Taleb Balan, technical expert Valentin Ivanov, committee members, lecturers, and trainers for their efforts in preparing referees and improving the arbitration system.

For his part, Hani Talib Balan praised the minister's visit, noting that HE Sheikh Hamad is the biggest supporter of referees and recognises the importance of the system. He added that the minister recently allocated additional training fields for referees, reflecting continuous support for Qatari refereeing.

Balan said the visit provides moral encouragement and motivates referees to maintain high standards.

Scottish rider Onley signs for Ineos Grenadiers

Scottish cyclist Oscar Onley, who came fourth in the last Tour de France with Picnic PostNL, has signed with Ineos Grenadiers starting from the 2026 season, the two teams announced on Tuesday. The 23-year-old, who has been a professional since 2019, has two career victories - a stage of the Tour Down Under in 2024 and a stage of the Tour of Switzerland this year - but has chiefly made his name as a general classification rider. Besides his fourth place in Paris this summer, he also finished third in the Tour of Switzerland and fourth in the Tour of Britain this season. "Oscar's performance in 2025 has been incredible really. I rode my first Tour when I was 21, so to see what he achieved at this year's Tour at just 22 was really impressive," said recently-retired Geraint Thomas who was appointed director of racing at Ineos last month. "The way he rides and understands a race is mature beyond his years - he's a proper racer. "I can't wait to work with him - at his age there's still loads of headroom." Thomas, the 2018 Tour winner, said Onley fits perfectly with Ineos's renewed ambitions. Long dominant, the former Team Sky has ceded ground to the powerhouses built by UAE around Tadej Pogacar and by Visma around Jonas Vingegaard. "I grew up watching Geraint, Dave (Brailsford, the head of Ineos) and the team dominate the sport and put cycling on the map in the UK, so I am really proud to be joining the Grenadiers on a long-term deal, which will also mean racing for a British team when the Tour de France departs from Scotland in 2027," said Onley. His arrival - following the signing of Frenchman Kevin Vauquelin, seventh in the last Tour de France - is part of the team's drive to relaunch. "The strongest teams I ever rode with had multiple, talented GC riders, and that's what I feel we have now - super strong options for any stage of the race," said Thomas.

TRAGEDY

Japanese golf star 'Jumbo' Ozaki dies

AFP
Tokyo

Japanese star **Masashi "Jumbo" Ozaki**, inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame, has died of colon cancer, his son announced yesterday. He was 78.

Ozaki won 94 times on the Japan Tour - his first title coming in 1973 - and won the Order of Merit a record 12 times.

Nicknamed "Jumbo" because of his length off the tee, he was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 2011 after being named on 50 percent of international ballots.

Ozaki died "due to stage 4 sigmoid colon cancer" on Tuesday, his son, Tomoharu, said yesterday in a statement obtained by AFP.

After being diagnosed with cancer about a year ago, the golfer has been undergoing treatment at home, Tomoharu said, adding his father's funeral will be attended by close family.

Ozaki "explosively elevated the popularity of golf (in Japan) with his overwhelming driving distance and colourful personality", the *Yomiuri* daily said in an obituary yesterday.



Ozaki was a member of a successful golf family, with younger brothers Naomichi (Joe) and Tateo (Jet) both among the Japan Golf Tour's top 20 all-time money winners. In 2013, when he was 66 years old, Ozaki struck a nine-under-par 62 to to shoot his age in a domestic tour event.

"Shooting my age is not something I try to do," Ozaki said after taking the first-round lead at the Tsuruya Open.

"But if you can't shoot 6-un-

der or 7-under par when you play good golf, you don't belong on the tour," he told reporters, according to Kyodo News.

Yutaka Morohoshi, chairman of the Japan Golf Tour Organisation, said the golf world had lost a "great".

"He long steered the men's professional golf world and overwhelmed others with his unparalleled strength," he said in a statement on the organisation's website.

FOCUS

Koepka leaves LIV Golf: official

AFP
Los Angeles

Five-time major winner **Brooks Koepka** has left LIV Golf for family reasons, the Saudi-backed circuit announced on Tuesday.

Koepka, who was one of the highest profile players to join LIV when the renegade tour launched in 2022, could now be in line for a return to the PGA Tour, according to US reports.

"We have amicably and mutually agreed that Brooks Koepka will no longer compete in the LIV Golf League, following the 2025 season," LIV Golf chief executive Scott O'Neil said in a statement.

"Brooks is prioritising the needs of his family and staying closer to home. We appreciate the significant impact he has had on the game and wish him continued success, both on and off the course."

Koepka's decision comes after his wife, Jena Sims, revealed in October she had suffered a miscarriage 16 weeks into pregnancy. His representatives said the 35-year-old American, who won back-to-back US Opens in 2017



and 2018, had decided to spend more time with his family.

"Family has always guided Brooks's decisions, and he feels this is the right moment to spend more time at home," Koepka's representatives said in a statement.

"Brooks will continue to be a huge supporter of LIV Golf and wishes the league and its players continued success."

Under current rules, LIV Golf players must serve a one-year suspension before being allowed

to return to the PGA Tour.

The PGA Tour was non-committal Tuesday about a possible timeline for Koepka's return to the tour.

"Brooks Koepka is a highly accomplished professional, and we wish him and his family continued success," it said in a statement to ESPN.

"The PGA Tour continues to offer the best professional golfers the most competitive, challenging and lucrative environment in which to pursue greatness."

AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

Mahrez leads Algeria to easy win against Sudan

France legend Zinedine Zidane was in the stands as son Luca started in goal

AFP
Rabat

Captain Riyad Mahrez scored in each half as 2019 champions Algeria eased to a 3-0 win over 10-man Sudan in their opening game at the Africa Cup of Nations yesterday.

Mahrez got the opener after just 82 seconds to the delight of the Algerian fans who made up the vast majority of the 16,115 crowd at the Moulay El Hassan Stadium in Rabat. The former Manchester City winger, now with Al Ahli of Saudi Arabia, got his and his team's second goal just after the hour mark and Ibrahim Maza wrapped up the win late on as Algeria started in the best possible fashion in Group E.

Among the spectators in the Moroccan capital was France legend Zinedine Zidane, whose parents came from Algeria and whose son Luca was starting in goal for the Desert Foxes.

His appearance on big screens in the ground drew huge cheers from Algerian supporters who will have been delighted to see their team produce a convincing performance. "I am happy to have got the three points. It is a long time since we did that at the AFCON so the main thing for us was to win today," said Mahrez. "As a team we want to get to the final. We have not come here to make up the numbers."

He added: "I have enough experience to know that this is just one match and we need to keep our feet on the ground."

Algeria were eliminated in the first round without a win at each of the last two AFCON tournaments but wasted no time in breaking the deadlock against the group outsiders. The match was little over a minute old when Mohamed Amoura's ball across the penalty box was met by a back-heel from Hicham Boudaoui to tee up Mahrez. He took a touch before firing in.

Zidane then did well to save at the feet of Sudan's Yaser Awad Boshara but Algeria were by far the better side. Sudan's chances of getting back into the game were then severely dented when Salaheldin Adil was sent off six minutes before the interval for a second booking for chopping down Rayan



Algeria's Riyad Mahrez (left) celebrates with Hicham Boudaoui after scoring against Sudan at Moulay Hassan Stadium in Rabat. (AFP)

Ait-Nouri. Ramy Bensebaini had a goal disallowed for offside moments later but Mahrez made it 2-0 on 61 minutes as he connected with a lovely outside-of-the-boot assist from Amoura.

Mahrez, appearing at his sixth AFCON, now has eight goals at the tournament, an Algerian record. He came off to an ovation from fans late on.

Substitute Maza, of Bayer Leverkusen, finished from Baghdad Bounedjah's knock-down with five minutes left to score Algeria's 100th AFCON goal and make it 3-0. Sudan have now won just once in 17 Cup of Nations matches since lifting the trophy in 1970.

Earlier in the same group, Burkina Faso came from behind to beat 10-man Equatorial Guinea 2-1 thanks to two goals deep in injury time in Casablanca.

Basilio Ndong was sent off just after half-time for Equatorial Guinea but they looked set to win the game when substitute Marvin Anieboh headed in on 85 minutes. However, Georgi Minoungou equalised in the fifth added minute before Leverkusen defender Edmond Tapsoba grabbed a dramatic 98th-minute winner.

IVORY COAST BEGIN TITLE DEFENCE WITH WIN OVER MOZAMBIQUE

Holders Ivory Coast squandered a number

of chances but Amad Diallo's goal early in the second half was enough to beat Mozambique 1-0 and give them a winning start to their Africa Cup of Nations title defence.

In the opening Group F game in Morocco, the Ivorians battled to break down their opponents in a competitive first half but took firm control after the break without converting the many chances they created.

Diallo side-footed the ball into the net in the 49th minute to ensure the three-point haul in rainy conditions but the scoreline would have been a lot more emphatic had the Ivorians been sharper in front of goal. Cameroon and Gabon meet later in the other Group F clash in Agadir.

Spurs captain Romero facing increased ban

London: Cristian Romero could be hit with an extended suspension after he was charged by England's ruling Football Association with failing to leave the field and acting in an "aggressive" manner when he was sent off against Liverpool last Saturday. The Tottenham Hotspur captain received a second yellow card for kicking out at Liverpool defender Ibrahima Konate before being ordered off the field by referee John Brooks during a 2-1 defeat. Romero's dismissal left Spurs down to nine men as Xavi Simons had already been shown a red card for serious foul play in the first half.

Argentina centre-back Romero had first been booked for dissent after complaining he had been pushed by Hugo Ekitike when the forward scored Liverpool's second goal. Romero's red card means he will serve a one-match ban, missing Sunday's match away to London rivals Crystal Palace. But he now faces additional punishment, and a longer ban if found guilty. He has until January 2 to respond to Wednesday's charge. Spurs travel to Brentford on New Year's Day before hosting Sunderland on January 4 and visiting Bournemouth three days later.

Romero went into the game on seven bookings in the Premier League this season and Tottenham head coach Thomas Frank accused Brooks of failing in his duties by sending the defender off the field.

"There is a massive mistake by John on the pitch," said Frank. "Two hands on the back by Ekitike. I don't understand how he didn't see it. OK, luckily we have VAR so they will bail you out when you need it, which they didn't. That was the second mistake."

The Danish boss added: "I think if you go back to that (second Liverpool goal) and the referee did his job, then it would not have been a first yellow (for Romero). Is that fair to say? I have a player that is extremely passionate, and if you have a passionate player then you need to go to the line sometimes."

Defeat left Spurs a lowly 14th in the table and added to the growing pressure on Frank.

LEAGUE CUP

Arsenal's Kepa eager for more heroics against old club Chelsea



Arsenal's Kepa Arrizabalaga saves a penalty from Crystal Palace's Maxence Lacroix during the shootout in the League Cup quarter-final at the Emirates Stadium in London. (Reuters)

AFP
London

Arsenal goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga is relishing the prospect of knocking former club Chelsea out of the League Cup following his key role in a penalty shootout win over Crystal Palace.

The Gunners went through to the semi-finals on Tuesday after Kepa saved Maxence Lacroix's spot-kick in a dramatic 8-7 shootout success following a 1-1 draw with Palace at the Emirates Stadium.

Kepa spent seven years with the Blues before moving to north London in pre-season and he could now deny his old side a spot in the first major final of the current campaign. It was a cathartic moment for the Spanish goalkeeper, who famously refused to be substituted before Chelsea's League Cup final penalty shoot-out defeat against Manchester City in 2019. Kepa also missed a spot-kick in the Blues' 2022 League Cup final shoot-out loss to Liverpool.

Kepa, who has made all four of his Arsenal appearances so far in the League Cup, said: "Right now, if you want a trophy, and that's something that we want, we have to fight against good teams. Both semi-finals are big games, and it's going to be tough, but we'll prepare well for the game, and we'll be ready and we'll go for it."

Arsenal will take on Chelsea for a place at Wembley with the first of two legs to be played at Stamford Bridge on January 14 before the return match at the Emirates on February 3.

The Gunners were on course to reach the semi-finals in regulation time before Marc Guehi's late

equaliser – the third time in Arsenal's last five fixtures the Premier League leaders' defence has been breached in or beyond the 90th minute.

"We've conceded in a couple of games in the last minute so it's something that we have to look at," said Kepa, deputising for Arsenal first-choice keeper David Raya. The 31-year-old Spaniard added: "But we are in the next round and we're happy. We made a huge effort. We should have scored a couple in the first half. We played so well. Then the second half was more like 50-50."

"Credit to the guys, they took amazing penalties. They kept us in the game, and they gave me an opportunity to make a save. Emotionally, you have to be focused, be strong, because obviously when you concede in the last minute and then you have to go to penalties, you need to 100 percent be focused on your penalty takers, you need to save. So it was a change of mindset, and it worked."

Arsenal are into the League Cup semi-finals for a second successive year as they chase their first trophy since winning the FA Cup in 2020.

The north Londoners have only won the League Cup twice, with their last triumph coming in 1992-93, before any of their current squad were born.

After celebrating Christmas on Thursday, Arteta's men will turn their attention back to the title race with home games against Brighton and third-placed Aston Villa to close out 2025.

Winning their first English title since 2004 is clearly Arsenal's main aim this season, but lifting the League Cup in March would be a significant boost to a club starved of silverware in recent years.

Arteta made eight changes to the side that won at Everton on Saturday.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Amorim wants Man United players to cover 'irreplaceable' Fernandes

AFP
London

Manchester United manager Ruben Amorim has urged his players to "step up" in the absence of "impossible to replace" skipper Bruno Fernandes.

The Portugal international suffered a soft tissue injury sustained in Sunday's 2-1 loss at Aston Villa and, although Amorim believes the midfielder will be back soon, he is acutely aware of the need to fill the gap in United's attack.

Fernandes, who has started every Premier League match this season, is the English top-flight's most creative player, creating 51 chances and while he is sidelined, United will also be without Kobbie Mainoo for tomorrow's Boxing Day clash at home to Newcastle.

"It is impossible to replace Bruno but I said that this morning to the team," Amorim told a pre-match press conference.

"We need to take the good thing – if there is a good thing on that – that a lot of people need to step up and understand we cannot rely on one player for everything. Sometimes we rely on Bruno for organisation and the creation. We have lost Bruno on set-pieces, Bryan (Mbeumo) and Amad (Diallo) on set-pieces, so this is massive for the team. But it is an opportunity for other players to step up and show the leadership that we need in the team."

The Portuguese boss, asked what United would miss most when deprived of Fernandes's leadership qualities, replied: "Everything. He understands every position on the field, he pays attention to every detail; every set-piece when you have a substitution he is always the guy telling the other guys where they should be.

"But that is a very good opportunity for guys like Licha (Lisandro Martinez), Luke Shaw, all these guys. We need to step up to have more leaders in the group because this can happen to Bruno. It is not usual but this can happen, so it is a big opportunity for the other guys. We have other players we need to



Manchester United skipper Bruno Fernandes suffered a soft tissue injury sustained in 2-1 loss at Aston Villa and manager Ruben Amorim is acutely aware of the need to fill the gap in attack.

maybe try to see different ways of playing. I think Jack Fletcher did a very good job (when he came on against Villa) and that is why when we have this opportunity we have to give space to Jack and the other ones. We will find solutions to play."

United are currently seventh in the table, three points adrift of the Champions League places. After Newcastle, United face basement club Wolves, Leeds, Burnley and Brighton. They will look to pile up the points ahead of what are sure to be sterner challenges in back-to-back games against title contenders Manchester City and Arsenal. United have won just two of their last eight league fixtures

Meanwhile, Newcastle manager Eddie Howe said the Magpies' recent good run against Manchester United will count for little at Old Trafford. Howe's men will arrive at the 'Theatre of Dreams' having

won five of their last six games in all competitions against United and four of the last five Premier League encounters since they lost 2-0 to the Red Devils in the 2023 League Cup final.

But asked if that Wembley reverse had proved a catalyst for his team, Howe replied: "I don't know. That was a painful moment, but I think you just go against every opponent in an honest way. My process is to see the strengths and weaknesses of the team that we're playing against. You don't particularly look at the name or who you're playing as such, you just attack the game, then try to highlight those weaknesses and try to protect yours, so it doesn't really change, the process is the same."

The former Bournemouth manager added: "Our record has been good against Manchester United in recent games, but that counts for nothing in this game."