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CHESS

Heavyweights collide as FIDE World Rapid kicks off

QATAR IS PEARL OF THE CHESS WORLD, SAYS FIDE PRESIDENT ARKADY DVORKOVICH

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The opening day of the FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Championships delivered high-stakes drama, ending in a five-way deadlock at the summit being hosted at Qatar University.

Grandmasters Magnus Carlsen, Gukesh Dommaraju, Arjun Erigaisi, Maxime Vachier-Lagrave and Vladislav Artemiev all share the lead with 4.5 points after five rounds of rapid chess yesterday.

However, the leaders can't afford to blink; a hungry pack of 15 players - including underdog International Masters Goutham Krishna and Eldiar Orozbaev - sit just a half-point behind.

World No. 1 Carlsen enjoyed a perfect start to the tournament, securing three consecutive victories, defeating Lodici Lorenzo in the opening round, Russia's David Paravyan in round two, and Spain's Eduardo Iturrizaga in round three. In round four, Carlsen got the better of David Anton Guijarro before a battling draw against India's Erigaisi.

In the Women's section, China's Zhu Jiner yesterday emerged as the player to beat. She stands alone at the top with a flawless 4/4 score, though a formidable group of seven chasers remains within striking distance as the hugely popular tournament heads into day two.

Nino Batsiashvili of Georgia, Aleksandra Goryyachkina of Russia, Mariya Muzychuk of Ukraine, Harika Dronavalli of India, Antoaneta Stefanova of Bulgaria, Yuxin Song of China and Sarasadat Khademalsharieh of Spain are part of the seven-way group in second spot.

Earlier the air inside the Sports and Events Complex at Qatar University hummed with a specific kind of electricity - the kind only found when three hundred of the world's finest minds gathered in a single room.

The 2025 FIDE World Rapid and Blitz Championships didn't just begin with a handshake; they began with a heartbeat.

In his speech, FIDE President Arkady Dvorkovich reminisced about the last time this event graced Doha in 2016.

He spoke of the deep roots chess has taken in the region, fuelled by prestigious tournaments like the Qatar Masters.

"Chess has a home in Qatar," Dvorkovich said, calling the nation the "pearl of the chess world." His message to the players was simple: let the spirit of chess flourish through fair play and brilliance.

Mohammed al-Mudahka, the President of the Qatar Chess As-



Arkady Dvorkovich, FIDE President, and Mohammed al-Mudahka, President of Qatar Chess Association, are seen during the opening ceremony of the FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Championships 2025 at Sports and Events Complex, Qatar University, in Doha yesterday. **Pictures: Noushad Thekkayil**



A view of the Sports and Events Complex at Qatar University where the 2025 FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Championships started yesterday.

sociation (QCA), stood before the crowd with a unique perspective. As the country's first-ever Grandmaster, he wasn't just an official; he was a peer to the competitors. He welcomed the world to a nation that has branded itself the "global capital of sport," promising that Doha would provide a world-class stage for the drama ahead.

The tension reached its peak during the ceremonial first move. Dvorkovich and al-Mudahka ap-

proached the top boards, their symbolic gestures officially releasing the clocks.

The silence of the arena was broken by the rhythmic thunder of drums as the traditional Qatari group, Farkah, took the stage.

Dressed in flowing national attire, they performed "Today is the happiest day." It was a fitting choice; for the grandmasters and fans watching, the start of this year-end festival is indeed the peak of the chess calendar.

The atmosphere shifted from festive to formal as the anthems of Qatar and FIDE echoed through the hall. Soon after, the stage was transformed by an artistic performance where dancers mirrored the tactical struggle of black and white pieces, a physical manifestation of the mental warfare about to unfold on the boards.

The marathon began immediately with the World Rapid Championship. Across the Open and Women's sections, 300 players leaned over their boards, the silence returning as the first of 13 gruelling rounds commenced.

On this first day, five rounds in the Open and four in the Women's would set the pace. In the "pearl of the chess world," the hunt for



Gukesh Dommaraju (right) of India ponders his next move against Shawn Rodrigue-Lemieux of Canada.

the crown had finally begun. Doha is once again playing host to the World Rapid & Blitz Championships, marking the event's first return to the city since 2016. That year, the titles went to Vasyil Ivanchuk (Rapid) and Sergey Karjakin

(Blitz). Now 56, the indefatigable Ivanchuk has returned to the site of his former victory, kicking off this year's campaign with a solid 3/5 score.

The total prize fund for the championship exceeds €1mn,

distributed across the open and women's competitions. FIDE has allocated €700,000 for the open category-divided equally between the rapid and blitz events-and €300,000 for the women's competitions, also distributed equally.



Mohamed al-Mudahka, President of Qatar Chess Association greets China's Ju Wenjun (right) and Govhar Beydullayeva (left) of Azerbaijan before the start of the first round.

CRICKET

Australia slightly ahead after day of batting carnage at MCG

A record 94,199 fans packed the Melbourne Cricket Ground, surpassing the 2015 World Cup final crowd



Australia's Michael Neser (left) celebrates taking the wicket of England's Brydon Carse during the fourth Ashes Test in Melbourne. (Reuters)

AFP
Melbourne

An astounding 20 wickets fell on a frantic day one of the fourth Ashes Test yesterday with Australia all out for 152 before storming back to dismiss England for 110 and leave the clash on a knife-edge.

England skipper Ben Stokes won a key toss on a green track and his quicks feasted after sending in the hosts under overcast skies in front of 94,199 fans at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. It was the biggest cricket crowd ever at the cavernous arena, exceeding the 93,013 who watched the 2015 World Cup final, and they witnessed the home side collapse with Josh Tongue grabbing 5-45.

But England fared even worse, slumping to 16-4 and never recovering, leaving Australia to face one over before stumps, which night-watchman Scott Boland safely negotiated with Travis Head at the other end. Australia were 4-0 at the close with Boland on four, 46 ahead, with Head yet to face a ball.

"I feel like anyone could have taken a 'five-fer' today," said Tongue, who became the first Englishman to take five wickets in an innings in a Test at the MCG since Dean Headley and Darren Gough in 1998. "When I'm at my best I'm bowling at that fuller length.

Stokes has spoken to us quite a bit about it, going a touch fuller but hitting the pitch hard. If we get the ball in the same areas tomorrow we can get them three of four wickets down in the first hour."

Australia bowler Michael Neser, who took 4-45, was not making any predictions for the second innings after a day when the ball dominated the bat. "We saw how tough it was when we batted. The ball was nipping around and we needed to bowl in the right areas," Neser said. "You need to put pressure back on their bowlers. You need to find the perfect balance between defence and attack."

Tongue said the match was far from over. "No, not at all. They lead by 50," said Tongue. "We will come back refreshed tomorrow morning. We have got to make sure to stick to what we did today and come out tomorrow."

Beleaguered England opener Ben Duckett's week went from bad to worse, out for two just days after unverified video surfaced showing him drunk during a mid-series beach break. It was another shocking dismissal for the 31-year-old, lobbing a simple catch to Neser at mid-on off the irrepressible Mitchell Starc.

Neser in the next over removed Jacob Bethell, playing in place of the under-performing Ollie Pope, when he edged to Alex Carey behind the stumps. Zak Crawley was



England's Josh Tongue (centre), who grabbed 5-45, celebrates after taking the wicket of Australia's Scott Boland on the first day of the fourth Ashes Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. (AFP)

taken in the slips by Steve Smith off Starc four balls later, then Joe Root edged Neser to Carey to put England into freefall.

Harry Brook decided attack was the best form of defence, smashing sixes off Starc and Neser, and with Stokes temporarily halted the car-

nage. They put on 50 before Scott Boland trapped Brook lbw for 41.

Boland then bowled Jamie Smith for two and had Will Jacks caught behind, all within the space of 10 deliveries from the 36-year-old. When Stokes edged Neser to Smith in the slips for 16 it was all but over.

Australia have already retained the Ashes after crushing eight-wicket victories in Perth and Brisbane and an 82-run win in Adelaide. The tourists lost the famous urn in just 11 days of play with a drinking scandal by players during a beach break piling on the

Former players slam 'unfair' MCG pitch

Melbourne: As 20 wickets fell on the first day of the fourth Ashes Test, the carnage prompted sharp criticism from former England cricketers who questioned whether the pitch at the Melbourne Cricket Ground offered a fair contest.

Ex-England skipper Michael Vaughan said the record crowd of 94,199 at the MCG were "royally entertained" as they watched the most wickets to fall on the first day of an Ashes Test since 1909 but slammed the pitch after both line-ups crumbled in spectacular fashion.

England won the toss and elected to field, bowling out Australia for 152 before the visitors were dismissed for 110. Australia were 4-0 at stumps, leading by 46 runs heading into day two. "We're always looking for a fair balance between bat and ball. I thought that was unfair for the batters," Vaughan told *BBC*.

"The pitch has done plenty. There's been plenty of movement out there. It's not been easy for both sides but I don't like seeing a pitch do so much."

Another ex-captain and opening batter Alastair Cook was equally unimpressed and said it was "not a great Test match wicket" as England were dismissed in just

29.5 overs. "Unless this flattens on days two, three, four - if we get there - that was too heavily weighed in the bowlers' favour," Cook told *TNT Sports*. "I think it was an unfair contest. Could both sides have battled slightly better? Yes, but I was watching some of that bowling and I don't know how you face that."

Former England fast bowler Stuart Broad said the pitch was "doing too much" and that Test bowlers "don't need this amount of movement to look threatening" while ex-Australian pacer Glenn McGrath said it had too much grass.

"That pitch has too much life in it for test cricket. It was 10mm of grass when I think 7mm would have been better, but I think he (the groundsman) was more concerned with what was happening on days three, four and five," McGrath said.

However, he also said the conditions could favour England later on when they bat for a second time.

"The weather is getting warmer, which will have an impact on top of the rollers," he added. "So it could get to the stage where England are batting in the fourth innings in the best batting conditions of the match."

pressure. They responded well after Stokes won a crucial toss. Head drove consecutive boundaries off a wayward Brydon Carse, but he only lasted 22 balls, chopping on Atkinson for 12. Jake Weatherald tickled down the leg side to wicketkeeper Smith on 10 in Tongue's first over.

Tongue then enticed an edge from Marnus Labuschagne on six that was well taken by Root at slip. Steve Smith and Usman Khawaja began to stabilise the innings before Tongue struck again to bowl the Australia captain for nine.

Khawaja on 29 got the faintest of edges to Smith off Atkinson before Adelaide century-maker Alex Carey, on 20, flicked Stokes to Crawley who had just moved to leg gully. Cameron Green, who has had a lean series, crunched back-to-back fours off Tongue. Neser, in his fourth Test but first red-ball affair, went one better, cracking three in succession off the same bowler.

But Green ran himself out for 17 going for a risky single then Starc hoisted Carse to a back-peddalling Stokes at mid-off before Tongue removed Neser and Boland.

BRIEF SCORES

Australia 1 Innings 152 (Neser 35; Tongue 5-45) & Innings 4/0 (Boland 4 not out) lead England 110 (Brook 41; Neser 4-45, Boland 3-30) by 46 runs

HORSE RACING

Magna Grecia Star clinches Distaff Cup with late surge

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Magna Grecia Star won the Distaff Cup with a powerful late finish at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik-owned and Debbie Mountain-trained three-year-old bay filly continued her upward trajectory this season, doubling her tally with a determined success in the Thoroughbred Fillies and Mares Graduation run over 1,400m to win the cup.

The filly was patiently ridden before unleashing a powerful late sweep in the home straight, edging out the gallant September Leaves by a neck to secure the victory.

The race was run at a solid and even tempo as Flashy Dark Angel dictated proceedings for much of the journey, tracked closely by Kaliysta, September Leaves and Ripple Effect, the leading quartet maintaining their positions through the early and middle stages with little change in the order.

As they straightened, several runners began to close, but it was Magna Grecia Star and September Leaves who emerged as the principal dangers. Produced from the rear of the field, Magna Grecia Star unleashed a strong sweeping run from the outside, drawing alongside September Leaves and locking horns in a fierce duel all the way to the line.

The pair flashed past the post almost together in a blanket finish, with the result only confirmed after a photo. Magna Grecia Star was eventually declared the winner by a very narrow margin. September Leaves, representing Al Eida Racing, trained by Gassim al-Ghazali and ridden by Marco Casamento, was gallant in de-



Magna Grecia Star sprints to Distaff Cup win. PICTURES: Juhaim

feat in second while Ripple Effect, racing for Abdulrahman Fahad al-Attayah, from the Hamad al-Jehani yard and partnered by Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi, finished a further one and a quarter lengths back in third.

In the penultimate race of the day, jockey Ivan Rossi completed a double as he rode Winston's Tipple, in the silks of Al Jasra Stud, to victory in the Thoroughbred Handicap (65-85) race for three-year-olds+.

Settled just behind the early leaders, Winston's Tipple watched a steadily run contest unfold as Lucentio dictated the tempo, tracked closely by See All Match and Cambria Legend.

The trio maintained their positions

through the early and middle stages with the pace remaining moderate while Winston's Tipple was momentarily shuffled further back as the field bunched approaching the home turn. Passing the bend, Lucentio and See All Match appeared set to fight out the finish as they continued to control the race. Winston's Tipple, however, emerged from the outside with perfect timing in the final 200m, unleashing a sharp turn of foot that saw him sweep past his rivals and strike the front in a matter of strides to land the spoils. Corpus Juris, representing Al Ghazali Stud, trained by Jassim al-Ghazali and partnered by Marco Casamento, stayed on well to secure second while Tamborrada, rac-



The connections of Magna Grecia Star celebrate with the trophies at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

ing for Fahad Salem al-Hajri, prepared by Mohammed Hassan al-Matwi and ridden by Arnaud De Lepine, finished a further three-quarters of a length back in third.

Earlier in the eight-race card opener, Rossi guided Dawod to the Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate race for three-year-olds.

Dawod put a modest debut behind him to open his account in the over 1,400m, Class 6, race, prevailing by one and a half lengths from 14 runners. The bay gelding, racing for Al Wasmayah Farm, trained by Hamad al-Jehani, under Rossi, showed marked improvement at just his second career start to get off the mark, with the progeny of Mister Ginoux dominating the first three places.

Breaking well from barrier six, Dawod quickly moved to the front after Lzaz showed early speed from the gates. Once in control, Dawod travelled comfortably

and set his own rhythm, never looking in danger as he maintained the advantage throughout. Lzaz, carrying the same colours, remained in close attendance and applied pressure along the way, with HM Al Jadwal tracking the leading pair.

Turning for home, the order remained unchanged and Lzaz closed the gap inside the final 200m, briefly threatening to challenge. Dawod; however, responded willingly, keeping his rival at bay and holding on gamely to seal a deserved victory. Lzaz, representing the same ownership and handled by Mohammed al-Ghazali with Soufiane Saadi aboard, secured second to complete a one-two for Al Wasmayah Farm. HM Al Jadwal, racing for Al Majd Stud, trained by Yousef al-Jumaily and ridden by Louis Nomis, finished a further three and a half length back in third, completing a clean sweep for the Mister Ginoux progeny.

WEIGHTLIFTING

Fares turns ‘Superman’ with a tally of 15 medals for Qatar

‘We will continue to support and develop Qatar weightlifters and work on preparing future champions’

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar’s Fares Ahmed Jaber yesterday stunned weightlifting fans by winning a staggering tally of 15 medals - 12 gold and 3 silver - on the final day of the 10th Qatar International Cup, an event that also included the Arab and the West Asian Championships.

Overall the Qatari weightlifting team concluded its memorable participation in the combined championships, which included the 10th Qatar International Cup, the Arab Championship for Youth, Junior, and Senior categories, and the West Asian Championship, held at the Ezdan Palace Hotel.

The event saw wide participation from over 25 countries and more than 250 athletes.

The Qatari weightlifting team achieved a remarkable feat by winning 24 medals, including 21 gold and 3 silver medals, distributed between the team’s stars Fares and Ouissal Ikhlef.

Fares yesterday excelled in various age categories, cementing his status as one of the most promising rising talents regionally and internationally.

In the Qatar International Cup, the 110kg weight class witnessed fierce competition, with Fares securing the silver medal in the clean and jerk by lifting 201kg in a thrilling battle against a field of elite international weightlifters.

Uzbek weightlifter Hasanbayev Davranbek won gold in both the snatch and total, while Saudi Arabia’s Ali Ahmed Alkhazal claimed gold in the clean and jerk.

Fares continued his impressive performance in the Arab Championships, winning silver in the men’s clean and jerk, in addition to three gold medals in the youth and junior categories, dominating the snatch, clean and jerk, and total, achieving remarkable results.

In the West Asian Championships, Fares won three gold medals in the youth category, in addition to new gold medals in the junior category, making him one of the most decorated weightlifters and leading Qatar’s participation successfully.

Earlier on Thursday, Qatar’s Ikhlef achieved a historic feat by winning nine gold medals in the same combined championships.

Ikhlef delivered an outstanding performance, lifting 116kg in the snatch, 161kg in the clean and jerk, and a total weight of 277kg, reflecting her development and technical prowess.

Fares said yesterday: “I look forward to winning more laurels for the country in the coming months, raising Qatar’s name high in regional and international arenas. I will continue to work hard to achieve my ambitions and the ambitions of the sport in the future.”

Mohammed bin Yousef al-Mana, President of the Qatar Weightlifting Federation (QWF), praised the support of HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC).

Al-Mana told reporters the QOC president is the main driving force



Qatar’s Fares Ahmed Jaber poses with the 15 medals - 12 gold and 3 silver - he won on the final day of the 10th Qatar International Cup, an event that also included the Arab and the West Asian Championships.



Mohammed bin Yousef al-Mana, President of the Qatar Weightlifting Federation, during the closing ceremony in Doha yesterday.

behind Qatar achieving the ‘amazing results!’

Al-Mana said: “We dedicate this great achievement to our wise leadership, in appreciation of their continuous support and keen interest in developing Qatari sports, which has enabled our champions to achieve the best results. This achievement reflects the development of weightlifting in Qatar and the success of our training programs and the technical and administrative support we provide.”

Al-Mana added: “We will continue to support and develop Qatari weightlifters and work on preparing future champions. Doing this will enhance Qatar’s position on the international sports map.”

WE ARE DELIGHTED WITH THE PERFORMANCES OF QATARI LIFTERS: AL-MANSOURI
Jassim Ibrahim al-Mansouri, Sec-

retary-General of QWF, praised the achievement of weightlifter Fares and Ikhlef, emphasising that their success reflects the systematic approach adopted by the Federation.

Al-Mansouri said: “Fares Jaber’s achievement of winning 15 medals in the combined championships is a great accomplishment for Qatari weightlifting and shows we possess promising talent capable of competing internationally.”

He added: “The results achieved by our athletes in the Qatar International Cup, the Arab Championship, and the West Asian Championship are the fruit of sound planning and comprehensive preparation programs of the Federation, with the support and follow-up of the Board of Directors, chaired by His Excellency Mohammed bin Yousef al-Mana.”

He continued: “At the Federa-



Mohammed bin Yousef al-Mana, President of the Qatar Weightlifting Federation with Jassim Ibrahim al-Mansouri, Secretary-General of QWF.



Qatar’s Fares Ahmed Jaber is seen with fellow lifters on the podium.



Mohammed bin Yousef al-Mana, President of the Qatar Weightlifting Federation, is seen with the Arab Weightlifting Federation officials and West Asian Championship dignitaries in Doha yesterday.

tion, we place great importance on developing youth categories as they are the foundation for building fu-

ture champions for Qatar.Fares is a shining example of a disciplined and ambitious player, capable of repre-

senting Qatar in the best possible way in upcoming competitions, in the region and internationally.”

Turkish authorities make further arrests in football betting scandal

Istanbul: The betting scandal in Turkish football deepened yesterday as 29 people, including 14 footballers, were arrested, the Istanbul public prosecutor’s office announced. Their arrests follow the incarceration of six referees and the president of top tier club Eyupspor at the beginning of November. ‘Arrest warrants have been issued against 29 people, including 14 footballers, and 24 have been placed in police custody,’ read the prosecutor’s statement. Amongst those arrested were a former president of Turkish giants Galatasaray, Erden Timur, the vice-president of Eyupspor, Fatih Kulaksiz, a director of the Turkish Football Federation (TFF), businessmen and a former policeman.

Six of the suspects are accused of “influencing the result of the match Kasimpasa-Samsunspor” on October 26, 2024, and the 14 players had “placed bets in a manner that could affect the result of the match” in betting on the victory of the opposing team in the match against their own club.

According to the prosecutor’s office, suspect transactions were identified on bank accounts, notably “money going in and out considered to be linked to bets, suspicions that the origins of funds were



Amongst those arrested was a former president of Turkish giants Galatasaray Erden Timur.

being concealed and unusual financial transactions”. This is the third wave of operations linked to sports betting. The TFF, who has said it wants to “clean up” Turkish football, suspended 150 referees last month found guilty of betting on matches. They also suspended 25 first division players and around 1,000 others from the second, third and fourth tiers.

FORMER MONTPELLIER COACH GASSET DIES AT 72
French football coach and “emblematic” figure Jean-Louis Gasset died at the age

of 72, his former club Montpellier announced. Gasset was linked with the club, co-founded by his father, Bernard Gasset, with Louis Nicollin, for most of his football life. Born in Montpellier, he played 10 years for the club as a midfielder, racking up 231 appearances between 1975 and 1985, before three spells as coach, most recently last year. ‘A child of the club, he left a mark on everyone he met with his professionalism, kindness, and passion for passing on knowledge,’ the club said in a statement, adding that it has “lost one of its emblematic figures”.

“Our sorrow is immense when we remember his smile, his unmistakable voice, and his sharp turn of phrase,” the club said. Gasset’s only managerial success with Montpellier was the 1999 Intertoto Cup, he was also a long-time assistant to Laurent Blanc.

Together they worked at Bordeaux and Paris St-Germain as well as with the France team between 2010 and 2012. Gasset also coached other French teams, including Saint-Etienne, Bordeaux, and more recently Marseille. He also managed the Ivory Coast, at the last Africa Cup of Nations in 2023, resigning midway through a tournament the Elephants ultimately won on home soil.

‘PERSONALITY’ THE KEY FOR CELTIC BOSS WHEN IT COMES TO NEW SIGNINGS
Celtic manager Wilfried Nancy insists personality will be a central consideration when he contemplates bringing fresh recruits to the Scottish champions. The Frenchman took over at the Glasgow giants earlier this month and has been looking at his squad ahead of the January transfer window.

Celtic are currently second in the Scottish Premiership table, six points behind

leaders Hearts but with a game in hand over the Edinburgh club. “We have a lot of ability in terms of the way we play,” said Nancy ahead of today’s match away to bottom-of-the-table Livingston.

“It is important that when you sign players, they need to have personality,” the former Columbus Crew boss added. “This (Celtic) is a big club. To play here is not always easy. It is so, so important to have players who can play here at a club like this.”

Nancy added defender Kieran Tierney was an example of the type of player he admired. “Everybody knows Kieran,” he said. “I knew him before I came here. He’s an important player for us. There are different kinds of personalities. Kieran is not a vocal leader but shows on the pitch.”

“Callum (Celtic captain Callum McGregor) also shows on the pitch but he’s a vocal leader too. We have other players like this. When I talk about personalities, it’s not only to be vocal, it’s to have the right attitude when it is difficult. This means when we attack, can we keep showing ourselves for each other, can we still press, or can we defend like crazy in the moment? It’s more about the attitude for me. This is what I am looking for.”

AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

Salah helps 10-man Egypt beat South Africa, enter last 16

‘I’m happy with the result. It was a tough game as they dominated’



Egypt's Mohamed Salah stretches for the ball during the Africa Cup of Nations match against South Africa in Agadir. (AFP)

AFP

Agadir, Morocco

Mohamed Salah scored as 10-man Egypt beat South Africa 1-0 in Agadir to become the first qualifiers for the knockout stage of the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations.

The Liverpool star converted a penalty on 45 minutes, and South Africa were denied a spot-kick late in the second half when Yasser Ibrahim appeared to handle the ball inside the box. Salah came to Morocco after not starting in five Liverpool matches – his omission leading to an outburst against manager Arne Slot.

Egypt were reduced to 10 men in first-half added time when right-back Mohamed Hany was shown a second yellow card for a stamp, followed by a red. After two rounds in Group B, record seven-time champions Egypt have six points and are guaranteed a top-two finish and a place in the round of 16.

South Africa have three points, and Angola and Zimbabwe one each after they drew 1-1 in Marrakesh earlier. “I’m very happy for the result, for sure. It was a tough game, they dominated most of the time. It’s a team that can keep the ball for a long time so I think we had a good gameplan, it worked,” said Salah. “We walked away with the three points, it’s the most important thing. The atmosphere is incredible. Hopefully we can carry on like this.”

South Africa coach Hugo Broos said: “The penalty awarded to Egypt was ridiculous, really ridiculous. Hossam Hassan (Egypt coach) said to me after game that he was surprised it was a penalty. Regarding us not being awarded a penalty near the end, the arm of the Egyptian was extended and the ball touched it. It was a penalty.”

The first chance fell to Salah after 11 minutes, but he could not move forward quickly enough to connect with a low cross from Hany. That the majority of the crowd were supporting the Pharaohs became obvious soon after when the Burundi referee ignored Zizo appeals for a free-kick, and loud whistling enveloped the stadium.

When Salah delivered a free-kick into the heart of the South African area, three Egyptians darted forward, but none could connect with the ball. Midway through the opening half a pattern had developed – Egypt were pushing forward regularly while South Africa defended with calmness and solid tackling.

When Teboho Mokoena fouled Omar Marmoush just outside the D, he was yellow carded. However, the Manchester City striker fired the resultant free-kick wide. As the first half progressed the sun broke out in the southern coastal city – a welcome sight for players and spectators with many earlier group matches staged in torrential rain.

A rare South Africa attack ended disappointingly as Lyle Foster struck a weak shot that was comfortably saved by 37-year-old Mohamed El Shenawy. Awarded a free-kick close to the touchline, South Africa performed an intricate, multi-pass move that ended tamely as El Shenawy clutched a cross.

Salah was being closely policed by Aubrey Modiba and as half-time drew near the Liverpool star retreated into the Egyptian half in order to retain possession.

Then, as the Egypt captain chased a loose ball with Khuliso Mudau, the South African right-back raised his left arm, striking an eye of Salah.

Amid Egyptian protests, the Burundian referee viewed the incident on a VAR monitor and pointed to the penalty spot. A lengthy delay

before the kick was taken could not have eased the nerves of Salah, but he comfortably converted the penalty as Ronwen Williams dived in the wrong direction.

More drama erupted in added time when Hany stamped on Mokoena, leading to a second yellow card for the defender.

South Africa, with a numerical advantage, attacked more as the second half progressed, but Egypt came close to a second goal with Williams foiling substitute Emam Ashour after a quick free-kick. El Shenawy displayed his agility with 15 minutes remaining, using his right hand to tip to safety a low shot from Foster. It was one of several saves that kept Egypt ahead.

GOALLESS DRAW LEAVES COMOROS, ZAMBIA IN PERIL

Comoros played out a goalless draw with Zambia in the Africa Cup of Nations finals, but the small Indian Ocean island nation came close to an upset win in their Group A clash. Comoros had the ball in the net in the 19th minute, but Myziane Maolida’s attempt was ruled out after a VAR review for a foul in the build-up to the goal.

The draw at Stade Mohammed V left Comoros, the smallest nation in the tournament’s 24-team field, with a single point from their opening two matches, after they were beaten by hosts Morocco in last Sunday’s opening match. Zambia have now drawn both their opening fixtures.

Both countries will have a tough last group match on Monday, which, if they lose, will almost certainly see them eliminated. Comoros must beat Mali in Casablanca on Monday to stand any chance of progress, while Zambia are up against Morocco and in need of at least a draw.

PREVIEW

Leaders Gharafa take on Shahania as QSL resumes today

By Sports Reporter

Doha

The Qatar Stars League returns to action today with a series of compelling fixtures spread over three days, as clubs resume domestic competition following the FIFA Arab Cup break, which Qatar hosted from December 1-18. The restart features several high-stakes encounters that could have a significant impact on the title race and the battle at the bottom of the table.

League leaders Al Gharafa, who top the table with 25 points, will be in action today against Al Shahania at Al Khor Stadium. Al Gharafa are targeting a sixth successive league win and approach the fixture in high spirits after their AFC Champions League Elite victory over UAE side Al Wahda earlier this week.

In contrast, Al Shahania are under mounting pressure as they look to arrest a worrying slump. Bottom of the standings with just four points, they have suffered six straight defeats and are desperate to correct course and move away from the relegation zone.

Al Gharafa head coach Pedro Martins stressed the importance of maintaining focus following the break, confirming that preparations centred on improving physical readiness and that the squad is fully prepared for the challenge. On the other side, Al Shahania assistant coach Bezman Montazeri highlighted the urgency facing his team, calling on players to approach every match as a final. He also revealed that several injured players have returned, strengthening the squad ahead of what he described as a tough test.

The headline fixture of the round will be the much-anticipated derby between Al Arabi and Al Rayyan, scheduled for tomorrow at Al Thumama Stadium. Al Rayyan, currently third with 19 points, head into the clash aiming to maintain their push towards the top of the standings and register

a second consecutive league victory under Portuguese coach Arthur Jorge, with a squad boasting experience and quality across all departments.

Al Arabi, meanwhile, are enjoying a strong resurgence under Romanian coach Cosmin Contra and will be seeking a fifth straight win. Since taking charge from the seventh round, Contra has overseen a turnaround in fortunes, guiding the team to four consecutive victories that have lifted them to sixth place on 16 points.

Another key match will see Al Saliya face Al Wakrah tomorrow. Al Saliya are seeking a return to winning ways after successive defeats to Al Sadd and Al Ahli, results that have left them tenth with seven points. Al Wakrah, seventh on 15 points, will also be keen to bounce back after their loss to Al Gharafa in the previous round.

Tomorrow, Al Duhail host Qatar SC at Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium, with both sides eager to respond following recent setbacks. Al Duhail, last season’s runners-up, are eighth with 12 points and will be looking to restore confidence after their AFC Champions League defeat to Iran’s Tractor. Qatar SC, fifth with 17 points, are aiming for redemption after suffering a heavy 5-1 loss to Al Arabi.

Monday’s fixtures include a standout encounter at Al Shamal Stadium, where second-placed Al Shamal welcome defending champions Al Sadd. Al Shamal, on 21 points, remain firmly in the title race and come into the match with confidence following consecutive league wins. Al Sadd, fourth with 17 points, know that victory is vital as they seek to close the gap on the leaders.

The round concludes with Al Ahli hosting Umm Salal at Al Thumama Stadium. Al Ahli, ninth with 12 points, are chasing a third straight victory in the first league match under new head coach Younes Ali. Umm Salal, second from bottom with six points, will be looking to halt their slide and recover from their recent defeat to Al Rayyan.



Al Gharafa coach Pedro Martins speaks at a press conference yesterday.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Return of Havertz will boost Arsenal's struggling attack, says coach Arteta

Reuters

London

Arsenal forward **Kai Havertz**, out since August with a knee injury, is close to playing again after returning to training this week, manager Mikel Arteta said.

The Premier League leaders, who host Brighton & Hove Albion today, posted a video of the German striker in training on Tuesday.

The return of Havertz is welcome news for Arteta at a time when Arsenal have failed to score a non-penalty goal in their last three matches. Arsenal’s primary striker Viktor Gyokeres has scored only once, from the spot, since returning from a muscle injury last month. “I think it will be a matter of days, if not weeks. Let’s see in the next step how (Havertz) responds to that. He’s a player that we missed a lot, a player that brings the team into a different dimension. So, I’m really happy to have him back very soon,” Arteta told reporters.

Centre-back Gabriel Magalhães, out since last month with a hamstring injury, has not returned to training yet, the manager said. Fellow centre-back Cristhian Mosquera and right-back Ben White are also out with injuries.

Arteta’s men, who have finished second in the



Premier League three times in a row, lost at Aston Villa earlier this month, before getting two scrappy wins over Wolverhampton Wanderers and Everton to remain two points ahead of Manchester City.

Arsenal will play Villa again on December 30. “Well, we need to obviously prepare for what is coming... and enjoy the pleasure and the opportunity that we have to be playing at this level, in this country, with the history that we have here,” Arteta said.

GUARDIOLA PROUD OF MAN CITY PLAYERS' RESPONSE TO WEIGHTY ISSUES

London: Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola is confident his squad have responded in ideal fashion after warning them against piling on the pounds during the festive period.

City enjoyed a comfortable 3-0 pre-Christmas win over Premier League strugglers West Ham to stay just two points behind leaders Arsenal.

But Guardiola, who has won six league titles during his spell at the Etihad, is famously demanding, revealing his men had been weighed before their short break and told not to over-indulge ahead of today’s early kick-off away to Nottingham Forest.

Victory will see Guardiola’s side back on top of the table before the Gunners host Brighton. And while the manager confessed to a degree of seasonal excess, he expects his players to have maintained their fitness standards. “I earn four or five kilos more for the amount of food and drinks that I have drunk, so it is really good,” said Guardiola.

But turning to his squad, he added: “They have been incredibly disciplined since 10 years ago. Last season for the injuries that we had was a little bit more difficult, but always they behaved unbelievably.

“All the players I had in the last decade and that is not an exception today. We have a standard as a club, like everybody knows exactly what they have to do.”

City are on a run of seven straight wins in all competitions, with the club in contention for several trophies. “I prefer to be 10 points ahead of everyone but it is what it is. Arsenal’s doing really well but we are there,” said Guardiola. “We are still in the end of December, in the Champions League we are up there, in the Premier League we are up there, we are in the semi-finals of the Carabao (League) Cup, the start of the FA Cup is soon. Some important players are coming back, so let’s go step by step, game by game and see what is going to happen.”

Today’s match will be the first since the death of Forest great John Robertson, aged 72, was announced on Christmas Day. Robertson was a key figure in Forest’s back-to-back European Cup final triumphs, the Scotland winger setting up Trevor Francis’ goal against Malmö in 1979 and scoring the lone goal himself the following year against Hamburg.

“Forest away has always been tough, especially in this period and especially with an important person in the history and the legacy like Mr Robertson that unfortunately passed away,” said Guardiola.

The hosts may only be five points clear of the relegation zone but Guardiola insisted a match at Forest’s City Ground was a tricky assignment. “It has always been a tough, tough place to go - for the crowd, especially for the quality they have,” he said. “The team invested a lot in the last years and was promoted in the Premier League and they are a really, really good side.”