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FIDE WORLD RAPID CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP

Artemiev stuns Carlsen, shares lead with Niemann

Carlsen loses cool, slaps the camera while being recorded following his shock defeat to Artemiev

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Grandmasters Vladislav Artemiev and Hans Niemann share the lead at the 2025 FIDE World Rapid Chess Championship after day two, each scoring 7.5 points from nine games at the Sports and Events Complex of Qatar University in Doha yesterday. Four rounds will be played today in the Open section before a champion is decided.

A half-point behind are four players: Magnus Carlsen, who bounced back after his first loss of the tournament to Artemiev in round seven; Alexey Sarana, undefeated so far; 14-year-old GM Yagiz Kaan Erdogmus; and Nodirbek Abdusattorov, who completed a hat-trick by defeating World Champion Gukesh Dommaraju in the last round yesterday.

Artemiev had a remarkable day, opening with a victory over Arjun Erigaisi before inflicting Carlsen's sole defeat in nine rounds — a tactical masterpiece that saw the World No 1 blunder.

Carlsen initially refused a draw offer from Artemiev but looked increasingly frustrated as his position looked worse and he eventually resigned.

As he walked off Carlsen lost his cool as the Norwegian was seen showing aside a cameraperson pursuing him to record his reaction. As soon as the match got over, Carlsen was seen shaking his opponent's hands, grabbing his blazer, and teeing off furiously. The FIDE cameraperson walked with him for a bit, only to see Carlsen turn towards him and slap the camera away, although it didn't stop the former from following the chess great.

Carlsen was the subject of hushed murmurs on day one of the competition itself when he reportedly made officials and players wait, as the start of the Championship got delayed.

Meanwhile, Artemiev's remaining two games against Maxime Vachier-Lagrave and Sarana lasted for a total of 38 moves and were rather uneventful games — the latter with its 10 moves, of course, far more staid as compared to the somewhat imbalanced game against Vachier-Lagrave.

Niemann also impressed, scoring three wins, starting with a victory over Indian wonderkid Goutham Krishna and following with key wins against Le Quang Liem and Alexander Shimanov. His creative pawn gambit in the Scandinavian Defense almost backfired but he quickly regained his advantage, converting flawlessly in equal endgames.

India's young star Gukesh, initially modest about his prospects, has impressed with his resilience so far in the tournament, staying just one point behind the leaders along with Arjun Erigaisi (6.5 points) and 12 others, even as his compatriots R Praggnanandhaa and Nihal Sarin (both on six points) dropped to joint 20th.



Russian Grandmaster Vladislav Artemiev had a remarkable day, opening with a victory over Arjun Erigaisi before inflicting Magnus Carlsen's sole defeat in nine rounds.



Magnus Carlsen of Norway reacts during his match against Maxime Vachier-Lagrave of France at FIDE World Rapid Championship at the Sports and Events Complex at Qatar University in Doha yesterday. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil

During the sixth round, Gukesh, playing black, faced a strong challenge from Anish Giri. Despite being cornered by the Dutch Grandmaster's superior rook formation, Gukesh managed to secure a draw in 57 moves. He then drew with former European champion Alexey Sarana before winning against Spaniard David Anton in the day's penultimate round.

Gukesh's only defeat came when he blundered on the 34th move with white against former world rapid champion Abdusattorov of Uzbekistan.

**HUMPY CATCHES ZHU IN
WOMEN'S RAPID**

In the women's event, reigning rapid champion Koneru Humpy of India caught

up with Zhu Jiner of China, both sitting on 6.5 points after eight rounds.

Humpy surged to the top after winning three games and drawing one in round eight against Aleksandra Goryachkina in what was a topsy-turvy game. Humpy was quite dangerous with the Black pieces. In round 6, she won a game in Black after Yana Zhapova had a winning advantage

After winning a comfortable White game in round 7 against Sarasadat Khademalsharieh, Humpy almost repeated her success against Goryachkina as she was lost at some point, but found a way to keep the game going and eventually end up in a winning position. Unfortunately for Humpy, she missed multiple chances to convert and had to settle for a draw.



Reigning Women's World Rapid Champion Koneru Humpy (left) of India put on a strong show yesterday as she finished the day as co-leader with China's Zhu Jiner.



Owing to her 4/4 start, Zhu Jiner decided to play pragmatically yesterday and drew her first three games by using some very solid, if not somewhat unambitious, opening lines.

By doing so, she got her games against Aleksandra Goryachkina, Nino Batsiashvili, and Mariya Muzychuk out of the way, and with some renewed energy, she was

able to defeat Divya Deshmukh in an end-game.

There are nine players on 6/8, just a half point behind the two leaders. These players are Aleksandra Goryachkina, Lei Tingjie, Kateryna Lagno, Harika Dronavalli, Mariya Muzychuk, Afruza Khamdamova, Nino Batsiashvili, Meri Aravidze, Bat-Erdene Mungunzul and Chen Yining.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Sayyar nets brace as bottom-placed Shahania stun leaders Gharafa



Al Shahania's Mohammed Bader Sayyar celebrates after scoring against Al Gharafa.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Bottom-placed Al Shahania produced a stunning upset as they swept aside league leaders Al Gharafa 3-0 at Al Khor Stadium yesterday, on the resumption of the Qatar Stars League following the international break.

Shahania wasted no time in making their intentions clear, taking the lead as early as the fourth minute when Mohammed Bader Sayyar found the net.

The early goal rattled Gharafa, and while the leaders pushed forward in search of an equaliser, they were caught out again as Sayyar struck for a second time in the 22nd minute to give his side a commanding advantage.

The underdogs maintained their control after the break and sealed a memorable victory in the

64th minute, when Lotfi Rabah Madjer added the third goal to cap a dominant performance. The win lifted Shahania's points tally to seven, moving them up to 11th place, while Gharafa remained top of the standings on 25 points despite the defeat. Gharafa have played a game more than second-placed Al Shamal, but they also have a four point cushion at the top.

Speaking after the match, Shahania goalscorer Madjer praised his team's confidence and commitment. "We entered the match believing in ourselves, and every player delivered," he said. "We showed that Al Shahania are a respectable team capable of competing with any side in the league."

Madjer also credited the coach's half-time instructions for maintaining their intensity. "The coach asked us to continue with the same approach we showed in the first half, and we stuck to the plan. We hope to carry this performance forward in the coming matches."



ASHES

England snap 15-year losing streak to win chaotic 4th Test

'A GOOD FEELING, A TOUGH TOUR UP TO NOW. VERY PROUD. WE SHOWED BRAVERY AND WERE COURAGEOUS'

AFP
Melbourne

A fighting England won their first Test on Australian soil in 15 years yesterday, restoring their battered pride with a gutsy four-wicket victory to clinch a chaotic fourth Ashes clash that was all over inside two days.

The pumped-up tourists dismissed Australia for 132 soon after lunch in front of a bumper 92,045 crowd at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, following the 20 wickets that tumbled on day one.

It left them chasing 175 to win, with Harry Brook unbeaten on 18 and Jamie Smith on three seeing them home for the loss of six wickets to huge roars from their travelling "Barmy Army" of fans.

Jacob Bethell contributed 40 and Zak Crawley 37. "A good feeling, a tough tour up to now," said England skipper Ben Stokes.

"After the build-up to the Test, a lot thrown our way, to put in a performance on the back of all that, and beat a very good Australian team, a lot of credit has to go to players, staff and management for keeping the focus on cricket.

"Very proud. We showed bravery and were courageous."

England crashed in the first three Tests and came to Melbourne under enormous pressure amid questions about their limited preparations and allegations of excessive drinking during a mid-series beach break.

But they finally came good and will head to Sydney for the fifth and final Test brimming with confidence.

England had not won a Test in Australia since January 2011 at Sydney, losing 16 and drawing two since, and openers Crawley and Ben Duckett had a clear objective to snap the streak - play ultra-aggressive "Bazball" style.

Duckett hit a boundary off



England's Harry Brook (right) and Jamie Smith celebrate after hitting the winning runs during the second day of the fourth Ashes Test at the MCG in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

Mitchell Starc in his first over while Crawley slammed Michael Neser for a six and a four in successive balls.

They brought up a whirlwind fifty opening partnership but next ball Duckett was bowled by a Starc yorker for 34. Fast bowler Brydon Carse then strode to the middle as

a surprise number three in place of Bethell. But England's pinch-hitting experiment failed as Carse lasted only eight balls before sky-ing Jhye Richardson to Cameron Green. Crawley fell lbw to Scott Boland after a gritty knock and Bethell was caught by Usman Khawaja from the same bowler.

Richardson trapped Joe Root lbw for 15 and Starc accounted for Ben Stokes for two, but by then only 10 runs were needed and Brook and Smith completed the job. "It was a tricky one, a quick game," said Australia captain Steve Smith.

"If we had got 50-60 more in both innings then things might

have been different. The wicket played as expected, but once the ball softened, it didn't quite behave the way I'd hoped.

Australia resumed on 4-0 in their second innings after an explosive opening day of searing pace saw 20 wickets fall with the hosts dismissed for 152 and Eng-

land just 110.

It was the most wickets to tumble on the first day of an Ashes Test since 1909, and eclipsed the 19 on day one of the series opener in Perth.

With 10 millimetres of grass on the track it was a bowler's dream, but a host of former greats criticised the pitch for "doing too much" and being "unfair for the batters".

Nightwatchman Boland edged Gus Atkinson to wicketkeeper Smith but the bowler left the field soon after clutching his left hamstring. Josh Tongue came into the attack on a hat-trick after bagging the last two Australia wickets on day one, but Jake Weatherald whipped his full ball for three.

Weatherald needed a decent knock to cement his spot at the top of the order, but he failed again, bowled by Stokes for five leaving a delivery that nipped back.

Travis Head was joined by Marnus Labuschagne but he only made eight, caught by Root in the slips off Tongue.

Head was in good touch before being bowled on 46 by a peach of a delivery from Carse that beat the outside edge, and when Khawaja (0) and Alex Carey (4) departed in the space of nine balls the momentum was back with England. After reaching lunch at 98-6, Green (19) became the seventh wicket to fall with the score on 119, edging a rising Stokes ball to Harry Brook at slip.

Carse bagged Neser and Starc without scoring and Richardson fell to Stokes with the last four wickets tumbling for 13 runs, leaving Steve Smith unbeaten on 24.

BRIEF SCORES: England 110 (Brook 41, Neser 4-45, Boland 3-30) and 178 for 6 (Bethell 40, Richardson 2-22) **beat Australia 152** (Neser 35, Tongue 5-45, Atkinson 2-28) and 132 (Head 46, Carse 4-34, Stokes 3-24) **by four wickets.**

HORSE RACING

Mubkhar Al Shahania claims Ras Mlajji Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Mubkhar Al Shahania produced a commanding front-running display to land the Ras Mlajji Cup, the feature event at Al Uqda Racecourse, stamping his authority in the Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (65-85) for three-year-old+ over 2,000m.

Breaking smartly, the grey colt was quickly into stride and assumed control near the front, settling comfortably into a steady rhythm under Lukas Delozier. Once in command, he dictated the tempo with confidence, travelling smoothly and conserving enough energy for the decisive stages.

Approaching the home turn, pressure was briefly applied from behind, but Mubkhar Al Shahania responded with authority. Turning for home, he lengthened his stride, quickened clear and put the race to bed well before the finish, drawing away to score a decisive victory.

The remainder of the card delivered competitive racing across several divisions. Maarek returned to winning form in the Purebred Arabian Handicap (45-65) for three-year-old+ over 2,000m, with Damien Morin guiding the winner to a strong finish. Hazm Al Uraiq rolled back the years to prevail in the Local Thoroughbred Handicap (0-45) for three-year-old+ over 1,200m, scoring under Youssef Lachhab.

Salah Al Deen finally broke his maiden in the Thoroughbred Maiden Plate for four-seven-year-olds over 2,000m, edging a pulsating finish with Soufiane Saadi in the saddle. Hay'er Al Shahania continued his progress with a decisive success in the Local Purebred Arabian Handicap



Connections of Mubkhar Al Shahania celebrate after the grey colt won the Ras Mlajji Cup at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaïm

(55-75) for three-year-old+ over 1,200m, partnered by Salman Fahad al-Hajri.

Alnood showed marked improvement to strike in the Purebred Arabian Novice Plate for four-year-olds over 2,000m, with Szczepan Mazur aboard. Rathmoy shed his maiden tag in the Thoroughbred Handicap (0-85) for three-year-olds over 2,000m, edging home under Arnaud De Lepine. Townsend Manor closed the card in style in the Thoroughbred Handicap (75-95) for three-year-old+ over 1,200m, producing a powerful late burst to score with Soufiane Saadi completing a riding double.

RESULTS
29th Al Uqda Race Meeting - Ras Mlajji Cup
WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1 - Ras Mlajji Cup, Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (65-85)
Mubkhar Al Shahania, Rudy Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier
2 - Thoroughbred Handicap (75-95)



Jockey Lukas Delozier guides Mubkhar Al Shahania to Ras Mlajji Cup victory yesterday.

3 - Thoroughbred Handicap (0-85)
Rathmoy, Ibrahim Saeed Ibrahim al-Malki, Arnaud De Lepine
4 - Purebred Arabian Novice Plate
Alnood, Julian Smart, Szczepan Mazur
5 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (55-75)
Hay'er Al Shahania, Abdulla

Mesfer al-Shahwani, Salman Fahad al-Hajri
6 - Thoroughbred Maiden Plate
Salah Al Deen, Mohammed al-Ghazali, Soufiane Saadi
7 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (0-45)
Hazm Al Uraiq, Alanoud Khalifa al-Malki, Youssef Lachhab
8 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (45-65)
Maarek, Jihad El Ahmad, Damien Morin

Dhaka assistant coach Zaki dies after collapsing before BPL game

Dhaka Capitals assistant coach Mahbub Ali Zaki died yesterday after collapsing on the field ahead of his team's Bangladesh Premier League game against Rajshahi Warriors in Sylhet, with local media reporting he suffered a heart attack. Zaki, 59, fell while the teams were warming up. He was rushed to hospital, but news of his death reached the ground after the match had already kicked off. "Mahbub Ali Zaki's dedication and invaluable contribution to the development of fast bowling and Bangladesh cricket will be remembered with profound respect and gratitude," the Bangladesh Cricket Board posted on X. Players of both teams observed a minute's silence during the innings break to pay respect. "We are deeply saddened by this irreparable loss. May his soul rest in peace and heartfelt condolences to the bereaved family," Dhaka posted on Instagram.

GOLF

Daly expresses interest in Ryder Cup role

Reuters
New York

Two-time major winner John Daly has an idea to correct the biggest regret of his golf career: United States captain for the 2027 Ryder Cup.

Daly said he would like to be a part of the US team in any capacity, up to and including a captain role. "I'd love to see it, put my input in, and hopefully help the guys," Daly said in an interview with Hard Rock Bet. "I think it'd be an experience for me that I've always dreamed of doing ever since I won the PGA Championship in 1991."

Despite his success as a player, Daly never put together consistent enough stretches to earn a spot on the United States team.

Daly as captain would be a must-see moment for the team-fashion choices alone. Adding intrigue to the idea is that the next Ryder Cup will take place in Ireland. "My ancestors are from Cork," Daly said. "I'd love to be a captain one day, but that ain't never going to happen. But Tiger (Woods) would be an unbelievable captain. I would love to be a co-captain or just be a part of it somehow. "I feel like I should have been on two teams, but it

just didn't happen. I didn't play good enough, so I didn't get on them. But to be a part of the Ryder Cup would be something I would love to do, whether it's a co-captain or just be a part of it."

Daly was riveted this past summer when the United States struggled against Europe then nearly rallied to win the Ryder Cup during singles matches on the final day.

"They were just a point away with the last three groups from really getting back and maybe winning it," Daly said. "It would have been the most incredible comeback. It made the last round - the singles matches - made the tournament for us anyway, to even come back the way we did."

As for strategies, Daly was clear on a few points. "Well, I just don't think you should put a long hitter with a shorter hitter," he said. "I think your shorter hitters that we have, that I've always seen, are grinders, and I'd rather be feeding off a guy that's hitting as far as I am. Especially in an alternate shot.

"They're going to be a little behind some of the guys, but if you take Justin Thomas and Jordan Spieth, they're not the longest hitters in the world, but man, they got it going when they played the alternate shots."

TENNIS

Sabalenka ‘excited’ for face-off against Kyrgios in Dubai

‘We’re here to bring tennis to another level to help our sport grow’

Reuters
Dubai

World number one Aryna Sabalenka and Australian Nick Kyrgios said they were excited about facing the unknown when they meet in today’s “Battle of the Sexes” exhibition match that has divided opinion in the tennis world.

Today’s showdown between four-times Grand Slam champion Sabalenka and former world number 13 Kyrgios is seen by many as entertainment, but critics believe it risks undermining women’s tennis by trivialising decades of progress toward equality.

The duo said they were not paying too much attention to the debate surrounding the contest at Dubai’s Coca-Cola Arena.

“This event is really unpredictable, and I don’t know what to expect,” Sabalenka told reporters yesterday.

“That’s what I love because this is the feeling you chase when you play sport, these unpredictable situations, and I love to challenge myself. For me, it’s a huge challenge, especially playing Nick, the guy who’s unpredictable and crazy.

“That’s great training for me and that’s a great message to the girls out there. I hope they’re going to watch, and they’re going to see how strong and tough I am to have the guts to challenge myself to play against the guy.”

In the original 1973 “Battle of the Sexes”, women’s trailblazer Billie Jean King beat then 55-year-old former Grand Slam champion Bobby Riggs, who had maintained that women’s tennis was inferior to the men’s game.

King recently told the BBC that while the Dubai match shared the same banner it did not have as

much riding on it as her clash with Riggs. Her contest was a battle for social change in a vastly different cultural era, she said.

Sabalenka agreed. “They were trying to fight for different things. We’re here to bring tennis to another level, and to bring attention to our sport, to help our sport grow,” she said.

“I feel like women have already proved that we deserve equal and tomorrow, I’ll just show that we are capable of putting up a great fight against a man and have fun.”

INCREDIBLE THINGS

Kyrgios said the world needed more collaborative efforts like his match against Sabalenka.

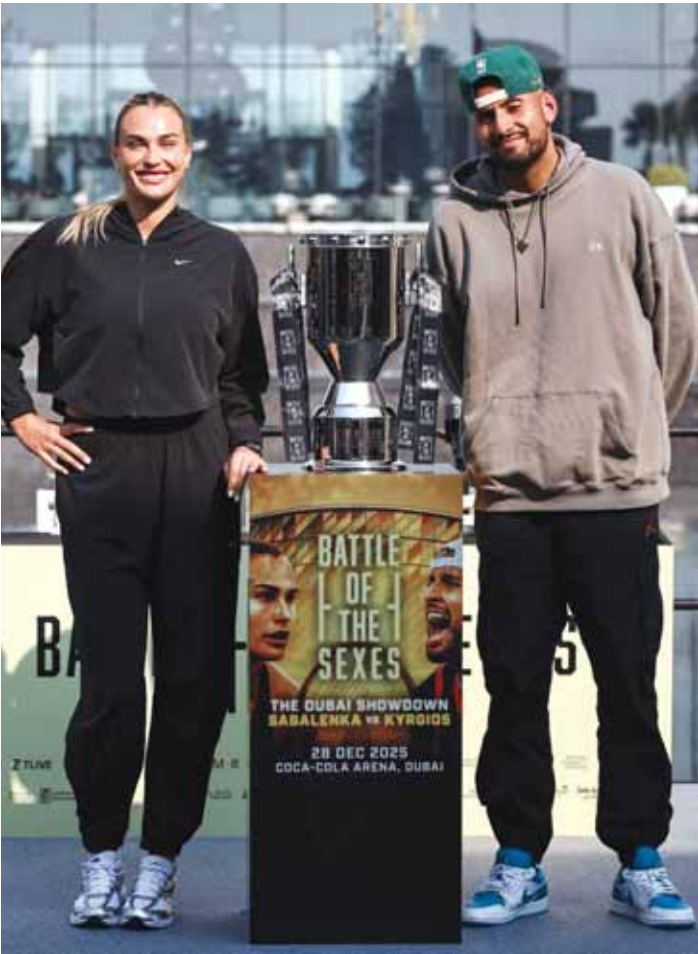
“There’s too much division and too much fighting and not enough teamwork,” he added.

“So regardless of the outcome, obviously I’m not saying I don’t want to win, but I want to win. I think it shows that we can do some pretty incredible things together in sport.”

While Riggs had retired from the men’s tour when he faced King, Kyrgios is still active player on the ATP circuit. The former Wimbledon runner-up’s career has been dogged by injuries over the last few seasons, however, and he has played only five professional singles matches in 2025.

The best-of-three sets encounter will have modified rules, including one serve for each player and a slightly smaller court for Sabalenka, with a 10-point tie-break settling the contest should it go into a decider. “Just because the court is going to be shorter, he’s not going to go for bigger strokes, and I’ll be always in attacking mode,” Sabalenka said.

“That’s my power, my game and my strength... I’ve also got good touch and I have a bigger target to do fun things.”



Belarus’ Aryna Sabalenka (left) and Australia’s Nick Kyrgios pose with the trophy during a press conference in Dubai. (AFP)

Draper to miss Australian Open

Briton Jack Draper said on Friday he will not compete in next month’s Australian Open, citing ongoing recovery from an injury. Draper, 10th in the world rankings, was forced to withdraw from the second round of the U.S. Open in August due to bone bruising in his left arm. “Unfortunately, me and my team have decided not to head out to Australia this year. It’s a really, really tough decision,” the British number one said in a video posted on X. The 24-year-old is targeting a February return alongside preparation for the defence of his Indian Wells title in March.

FOOTBALL

Amorim praises Man United spirit in win over Newcastle

Reuters
Manchester

Manchester United boss Ruben Amorim conceded his team’s Boxing Day victory over Newcastle United on Friday was far from pretty, but hailed the grit and togetherness that got them over the line.

Patrick Dorgu struck in the first half before Amorim’s men fended off an onslaught of Newcastle chances after the break, particularly in the dying minutes, to climb to fifth in the Premier League standings.

Amorim said desire and togetherness were the difference on Friday. “Especially if you see the second half, we managed to defend, sometimes with a back six, but we suffered together, and that is a good feeling,” he told reporters.

“If we have always this spirit, we are going to win so, so, so many games. I think it’s something that we need, to feel that we can win sometimes without playing so well, that we can win games with the spirit and with the togetherness in the team.”

It was their second clean sheet of the season, and came despite having 32% of possession, and with a depleted team without several key players including captain Bruno Fernandes, Amad Diallo and Bryan Mbeumo. “The feeling is good, but if you com-

pare to other games, we suffer so much more today, but in certain moments, we put everything on the line,” Amorim said.

“We were inside the box, we are putting our body in front of the goal, we were defending every cross. So that is a good feeling to have a clean sheet. But if you look at the game, we had so many games that we controlled so much better the opponent and we suffer (a) goal – sometimes you just need a little bit luck.”

Amorim praised the 21-year-old Dorgu, who scored his first goal for United – a stunning volley into the bottom corner – after starting in an advanced role on the right wing.

“You put him in one position that is more in front the responsibility is not the same,” the manager said. “He has more freedom to lose the ball and I think it helped Patrick to play better.”

He also had kind words for 19-year-old defender Ayden Heaven, who is becoming a mainstay in United’s back line largely due to injuries and was named man of the match. “I’m really pleased with Ayden,” Amorim said. “You can feel he is improving every game. It will be really hard (for another player) to take his place.”

The one negative on the night was the loss of Mason Mount after the first half due to injury. “He felt something at halftime,” Amorim said.



Manchester United manager Ruben Amorim celebrates after the Premier League match against Newcastle United at the Old Trafford in Manchester on Friday.

FOCUS

Mane rescues AFCON draw for Senegal against DR Congo

AFP
Tangiers, Morocco

Sadio Mane’s equaliser earned 2022 champions Senegal a 1-1 draw with the Democratic Republic of Congo in their heavyweight Africa Cup of Nations clash yesterday.

Cedric Bakambu had given the Leopards the lead just after the hour mark in Tangiers but Al Nassr forward Mane replied soon after and the result ensures Senegal stay on top of Group D with one round of matches still to play. Both teams have four points but Senegal have a superior goal difference before their final group match against Benin on Tuesday. Benin have three points after a 1-0 victory earlier Saturday in Rabat against Botswana, who are bottom without a point or a goal scored.

Sebastien Desabre’s Congolese side were seeking revenge after a dramatic defeat in the last meeting of the nations, in World Cup qualifying in September.

Senegal came from 2-0 down to win that encounter 3-2 in Kinshasa, a result which allowed them to go on and top their group to secure a place at next year’s finals in North America. DR Congo were therefore forced to settle for second place but can still make the World Cup if they win a one-off play-off against either New Caledonia or Jamaica in Mexico in March.

Senegal, fresh from beating Botswana 3-0 and seen as perhaps the biggest threat to Morocco’s chances of winning the title on home soil, had more of the possession and more chances on the day. However, the Leopards took the lead in the 61st minute when Theo Bongonda – scorer of the only goal in their opening win against Benin – had a shot at the end of a fine move parried by goal-



Senegal’s Sadio Mane celebrates after scoring a goal during the Africa Cup of Nations Group D match against DR Congo in Tangiers, Morocco.

keeper Edouard Mendy and Real Betis striker Bakambu pounced to convert the loose ball.

But Senegal were only behind for eight minutes, their equaliser coming after a superb run by teenage substitute Ibrahim Mbaye. The 17-year-old Paris Saint-Germain winger Mbaye, who was born in France and represented them up to Under-20 level, recently committed his international future to Senegal, for whom he qualifies through one of his parents.

He replaced Ismaila Sarr just after Bakambu’s opener, and made the leveller from a penetrating run down the right. Mbaye burst away from Arthur Masuaku, who appeared to injure himself going to tackle, and then saw his shot blocked by Lionel Mpasi, but Mane was on hand to score. It was a 10th AFCON goal for former Liverpool superstar Mane, who is appearing at his sixth tournament.

Late penalty miss denies Uganda win against Tanzania
In Rabat, Uganda’s Allan Okello

missed a late penalty as his side had to settle for a 1-1 draw against East African neighbours Tanzania. Okello’s failure to convert from the spot denied Uganda a precious victory in the Group C clash after Uche Ikpeazu had scored a late equaliser for the Cranes in front of 10,540 fans at Al Medina Stadium.

Before that it looked like Tanzania, winless in 10 previous matches across four AFCON tournaments, might finally break their duck when Simon Msuva put them in front from the penalty spot. But Ikpeazu, who plays in the Scottish second tier for St Johnstone, headed in a cross by fellow substitute Denis Omedi to level the scores with 10 minutes remaining.

The stalemate between the regional rivals, who will co-host the 2027 Cup of Nations along with Kenya, does little to help their chances of progressing to the last 16 from Group C.

Both have one point from two matches and trail Nigeria and Tunisia, with the two former champions facing off later in Fes.

SPOTLIGHT

Morocco forced to wait for AFCON knockout place after Mali draw

AFP
Rabat

Morocco missed the chance to guarantee their spot in the last 16 of the Africa Cup of Nations after Lassine Sinayoko’s second-half penalty earned Mali a 1-1 draw with the hosts yesterday.

The match was a tale of two spot-kicks, with Brahim Diaz giving Morocco the lead from a penalty deep in first-half injury time and Sinayoko replying on 64 minutes.

The stalemate at the Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in the capital Rabat ended Morocco’s world record winning run which had been taken to 19 matches with their 2-0 victory over Comoros in the tournament’s opening game.

It also means Morocco have not yet confirmed their place in the knockout phase, although they are on top of Group A with four points from two games. Mali come next on two points alongside Zambia, who drew 0-0 with minnows Comoros earlier in Casablanca.

Morocco next face Zambia tomorrow and a victory in that match against the 2012 champions will ensure that the hosts go through as group winners.

Morocco captain Achraf Hakimi, the African player of the year, was again an unused substitute as he continues his recovery from an ankle injury suffered playing for Paris Saint-Germain at the start of November.

His former PSG teammate Kylian Mbappe, the current Real Madrid superstar and France skipper, was among the spectators in the crowd of 63,844 and appeared to be wearing a Moroccan shirt with Hakimi’s number two on it.

Algeria’s Mandi backs move to hold AFCON every four years

The decision to stage the Africa Cup of Nations every four years is a positive step by the Confederation of African Football (CAF) that will give the tournament greater value, Algeria defender Aissa Mandi has said.

“Organising the competition every four years is a good thing. It’s better than every two years,” Mandi told a press conference, a day before Algeria’s Group E clash with Burkina Faso.

“It will be like all the major continental tournaments such as the Euros, and that makes sense and is good for African football overall,” he added.

CAF’s decision to stage AFCON every four years from 2029

on the eve of the 2025 tournament in Morocco sparked widespread debate, with many critics saying it shows a lack of respect for the continent’s tradition of holding the tournament every two years since 1957.

Mali coach Tom Saintfiet was extremely critical, blaming world football governing body FIFA for the switch. “Since 1957, Africa has organised the Cup every two years, now they say every four. It’s not fair. Africa must be respected,” he said.

Algeria opened their campaign with a 3-0 win over Sudan to top the group on three points, ahead of Burkina Faso on goal difference after they came from behind late on to beat Equatorial Guinea 2-1.



Mali’s Dorgeles Nene is tackled by Morocco’s Anass Salah-Eddine during the Africa Cup of Nations Group A match at Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat. (AFP)

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arsenal respond to Man City challenge with narrow win

Villa stay in title race after Watkins scores twice in win over Chelsea



Arsenal's captain Martin Odegaard celebrates with Declan Rice after scoring against Brighton at the Emirates Stadium in London. (Reuters)

AFP
London

Manchester City threw down the gauntlet for the second successive weekend and Arsenal proved undaunted as they kicked off their festive fixtures with a narrow 2-1 defeat of Brighton & Hove Albion to stay as Premier League leaders yesterday. City won 2-1 at Nottingham Forest with Rayan Cherki grabbing a goal and an assist to briefly move top of the pile. But Arsenal, just as they had done last week by beating Everton after City's earlier win over West Ham United, were unwavering as captain Martin Odegaard scored his first goal of the season for Mikel Arteta's side. Arsenal also needed an own goal and a spectacular save by keeper David Raya to preserve their lead as the halfway point in the Premier League season looms. The London side have 42 points from 18 games with City on 40. Aston Villa remain in the thick of the title race in third with 39 points thanks to Ollie Watkins' double in a 2-1 comeback win over Chelsea. Villa equalled their all-time club record of 11 consecutive wins across all competitions. Florian Wirtz scored his first Liverpool goal as they beat Wolverhampton Wanderers 2-1 on an emotional Anfield afternoon when both sets of fans remembered the late Diogo Jota who died in a car crash in July. Wirtz doubled Liverpool's lead shortly after Ryan Gravenberch had put them in front although Wolves rallied in the second half and Santiago Bueno pulled a goal back. Reigning champions Liverpool moved fourth on 32 points while the misery for bottom club

Wolves goes on. They have now broken the Premier League record for winless starts to a season and have two points from 18 games and are 16 points behind fourth-from-bottom Nottingham Forest. "We're trying," Wolves boss Rob Edwards said. "The players are giving everything, they're trying really hard. And they are showing they're not caving in, they're not going under." Some timely perspective was offered though in the shape of former Wolves and Liverpool forward Jota's young sons Dinis and Duarte walking out alongside Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk as they acted as mascots. Burnley stay in 19th place after a 0-0 draw with Everton while 18th-placed West Ham United's relegation fears grew as a 1-0 home defeat by Fulham left them five points from the safety zone. When Odegaard drilled in a 14th-minute opener for Arsenal and Georginio Rutter's own goal from a Declan Rice corner made it 2-0 shortly after the break, it should have been a routine three points for the hosts. But Diego Gomez's reply for Brighton changed the complexion of the contest and there was relief at the final whistle as Arsenal cleared another obstacle in the title chase. "The knock-on effect of winning is incredibly powerful," Arteta said of a victory that should have been easier. "It should never be 2-1, but that's the Premier League. What I like is that we have a lot of issues, we're dealing with it in an incredible way, yesterday we lost Jurrien (Timber), today we lost (Riccardo) Calafiori in the warm-up, Declan (Rice) has to play as a full-back and you see the performance that he put in, so that's the spirit and that's how much our players want it."

MAN CITY LATE SHOW

City have now won eight in a row in all competitions although they left it late against Forest. Cherki set up Tijjani Reijnders to give them the lead but it lasted only six minutes as Igor Jesus crossed for Omari Hutchinson to score past Gianluigi Donnarumma. But Cherki made it 2-1 with a half-volley from a City set-piece in the 83rd minute to give the visitors all three points. "Winter time, Nottingham Forest away... I know the memory is weak, but when we won one of the six Premier Leagues this type of game happens a lot," City manager Pep Guardiola said. "Three points, but it's a massive three points, mainly for the quality of the opposition." At Stamford Bridge, Chelsea had been in total control when captain Reece James' 37th-minute corner swung towards a crowded goalmouth and clipped Joao Pedro's leg before crossing the line to put the home side 1-0 up. Villa soaked up intense Chelsea pressure until the 63rd minute when substitute Watkins scored from a rebound off home goalkeeper Robert Sanchez four minutes after he entered the game. Watkins completed the turnaround in the 84th minute, heading home a Youri Tielemans corner. "I feel like teams are worried about us, even if we may not play the prettiest football at times," Watkins said. "There's a lot of talk about us and people asking if we can win the title, but it's a long way away. We're just focusing on the next game." Chelsea remain fifth, level on 29 points with sixth-placed Manchester United. Brentford moved into the top eight as they beat Bournemouth 4-1 with a hat-trick for Kevin Schade. Struggling Bournemouth's consolation came from Manchester City target Antoine Semenyo.

SERIE A

Paz sparks Como revival as Parma and Udinese win

Agencies
Rome

Como returned to winning ways in Serie A with a comprehensive 3-0 victory at Lecce, moving back into European contention. After suffering successive defeats, the visitors showed early intent under the guidance of Cesc Fabregas, although the opening stages were cagey from both sides. The breakthrough came in the 21st minute when star forward Nico Paz, who has now scored six league goals this season, unleashed a long-range strike that took a slight deflection and beat Lecce goalkeeper Wladimiro Falcone. The goal settled Como, while Lecce struggled to respond. The home side managed only a single shot on target before the interval, leaving fans and coach Eusebio Di Francesco visibly frustrated. Di Francesco was subsequently dismissed from the touchline following a confrontation with the referee, complicating Lecce's challenge further. The second half saw Lecce push harder for an equaliser, with Youssef Maleh coming close from a free-kick delivery, but Como's defence held firm. The visitors capitalised on a rare counter, doubling their advantage against the run of play as Jacobo Ramon tapped in at the back post following a poorly cleared free-kick. The second goal effectively ended Lecce's resistance, and Anastasios Douvikas added a third in the

75th minute, thanks to a precise through ball from Paz, sealing a convincing win. The victory lifted Como into sixth place provisionally, two points clear of Bologna, while Lecce remain four points above the relegation zone but face a daunting schedule against Juventus, Roma, Inter, and AC Milan. Elsewhere, Parma edged out Fiorentina 1-0 at the Stadio Ennio Tardini to move five points clear of the drop zone. A goalless first half featured few clear-cut chances, with Jacob Ondrejka missing narrowly just before halftime. The breakthrough arrived early in the second half when Oliver Soerensen capitalised on a mishit effort from Mateo Pellegrino to score his first goal of the season. Fiorentina pressed late, with Moise Kean and Roberto Piccoli squandering opportunities, but Parma held firm to secure a vital three points. The result marks Parma's third win in five league matches, providing a boost in their fight for survival. Udinese also claimed a hard-fought point, drawing 1-1 at home against Lazio thanks to a dramatic late equaliser from Keinan Davis, extending their unbeaten streak to four matches. The hosts started cautiously, with Tijjani Noslin firing narrowly wide for Lazio, while Udinese missed several early chances through Jakub Piotrowski and Nicolo Zaniolo. Both sides created opportunities throughout, but it was Davis who rescued a share of the spoils, keeping Udinese's top-six aspirations alive.



Como's Nico Paz celebrates after scoring against Lecce.

Ronaldo double drives Al Nassr to record 10th straight win

Riyadh: Cristiano Ronaldo scored twice as Al Nassr beat struggling Al Okhdood 3-0 to become the first team in Saudi Pro League history to win their opening 10 matches, setting a new record and extending their perfect start to the season. Ronaldo opened the scoring in the 31st minute with a close-range finish after a corner and added a spectacular backheel in first-half stoppage time to take

his tally to 12 goals this season. The Portuguese forward now sits joint-top of the scoring chart alongside teammate João Félix, who sealed the victory with a late strike in second-half stoppage time. The win keeps Al Nassr top of the table with 30 points from 10 matches, four clear of nearest rivals Al Hilal. By achieving 10 consecutive wins, Al Nassr surpassed the previous best start in the league's history.

Qatar clinch U-16 team and individual gold at Gulf Golf Championship

Doha: Qatar's national golf team claimed both the team and individual titles in the under-16 category at the Gulf Golf Championship, held at Ghala Golf Club in Muscat, Oman. The youngsters delivered a consistent performance over three days to finish top of the team standings with a total score of +51 in one of the most competitive junior editions of the championship. Bahrain placed second after a close contest that went down to the final rounds, posting +59, while the United Arab Emirates finished third on +67. In the individual event, Qatar's Daniel Sokolov stole the spotlight with a commanding display, securing the gold medal with an impressive overall score of -6. Sokolov finished well clear of his nearest challengers, underlining his promise and potential at both regional and continental levels. Bahrain's Khalid Sadeeq took second place on +26, while Oman's Mohib al-Kathiri claiming third at +31. The Gulf Junior Golf Championship is regarded as a key event on the GCC sporting calendar, playing an important role in identifying



and nurturing young talent and preparing future national team players. Ghala Golf Club, one of the region's most renowned courses, added a technical edge to the competition with a layout that demands precision and consistency. Qatar Golf Association president and head of the Qatari

delegation Hamad Abdullah al-Mana expressed pride in the achievement. Al-Mana added that the result reflects the QGA's continued commitment to junior development and its long-term strategy of building competitive national teams capable of achieving success at Gulf, regional and international levels.

SPOTLIGHT

Jota's children join tributes as Liverpool, Wolves pay respects

AFP
Liverpool

Two of Diogo Jota's children were mascots at Anfield yesterday as Liverpool and Wolves paid tribute to their former forward. Jota, who was killed in a car accident in July, joined Liverpool from Wolves in 2020. In the first meeting between the sides since his death, both sets of fans sang chants in Jota's name in the 18th and 20th minutes – the shirt numbers he wore during his spells at Molineux and Anfield respectively. Two of his three children, Dinis and Duarte, as well as family members performed the role as mascots, while his wife Rute Cardoso was also in attendance. Liverpool retired the number 20 shirt worn by Jota and there are plans for a permanent memorial to the Portugal international and his brother Andre Silva, who was also killed in the accident, at Anfield. "After the tragedy happened until now, I have seen so many special moments – where the fans remembered him or our players conducted themselves unbeliev-



Liverpool's captain Virgil van Dijk with former player Diogo Jota's sons Dinis and Duarte before the match against Wolves. (Reuters)

ably in the circumstances," said Liverpool boss Arne Slot. "Not only our fans but the fans of away teams have shown the respect both Diogo and his brother deserved. It was special to see his children being the mascot and how emotional it was before the game and then in the 20th minute." On the field, both clubs have suffered this season with Wolves

staring down the barrel of relegation after taking just two points from their opening 18 league games. Liverpool's form has improved late and Florian Wirtz is beginning to show flashes of the brilliance that lured the English champions into paying Bayer Leverkusen £100m for the German international.