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CHESS

Carlsen and Goryachkina crowned Rapid champions

DRAMATIC DAY OF COMPETITION AS WORLD NO 1 CARLSEN STORMS TO ANOTHER TITLE GLORY

By Sports Reporter
Doha

In a dramatic final day at the Qatar University Sports and Events Complex, Norway's Magnus Carlsen and Russia's Aleksandra Goryachkina emerged as the undisputed champions of the 2025 World Rapid Chess Championship.

World No 1 Carlsen cemented his legacy by clinching his sixth World Rapid title (2014, 2015, 2019, 2022, 2023 and 2025).

Finishing with 10.5/13 points, Carlsen navigated a high-stakes final round, securing a draw against third-seed Anish Giri of India to stay ahead of the pack.

The victory, worth €70,000, was far from a 'walk in the park.' Carlsen faced a mid-tournament crisis after a shocking Day 2 loss to Russia's Vladislav Artemiev, who led for much of the late stages.

"I am very happy to win the title in Qatar," Carlsen said yesterday.

"It was a big field with a lot of strong players. The serious advantage that I have is that I play for first place when I'm appearing here, while most other players are thinking about getting a good prize and maybe a medal. That gives me a huge psychological advantage," said Carlsen after his victory.

When asked to compare this Rapid crown to the previous five, Carlsen remarked: "What stands out is that I managed to beat everyone who is not a top player, something I'm very happy with. Overall, except for the start on day two, which was horrendous, everything else was really good for me here."

The world number one noted that he faced some difficulties in the early rounds of the tournament, as his start was not as he had hoped, but he was able to quickly regain his composure and 'come back strongly' in the crucial stages, deservedly winning the title.

However, a masterclass recovery in the final rounds allowed the 35-year-old Norwegian to leapfrog Artemiev after the Russian faltered with a draw against American Wesley So.

Erigaisi, the Indian Grandmas-



Norway's Magnus Carlsen and Russia's Aleksandra Goryachkina attend the official press conference after emerging men's and women's title winners at the 2025 World Rapid & Blitz Championships in Doha yesterday. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil

ter, expressed disappointment after entering as the top seed but failing to secure the title following a Round 10 loss to Turkiye's Ediz Gurel (Yagiz Kaan Erdogan). However, he lauded the organisation of the event.

American GMs Hans Moke Niemann and Leinier Dominguez Perez finished with 9.5/13.

GORYACHKINA DOMINATES THE WOMEN'S FIELD

In the Women's Rapid, three players were tied for the lead before the final round: Zhu Jiner, Goryachkina, and defending champion Humpy Koneru, all on 8/10 points.

In Round 11, both Zhu and Goryachkina drew their games. Koneru, the only leader with a chance to take sole first place, had a completely winning endgame against compatriot Shri B Savitha but misplayed in time trouble, al-

lowing Savitha to escape with a draw.

According to the regulations, in case of a tie for first place, only the top two players (based on tiebreaks) went to the playoff finals. To Koneru's misfortune, she wasn't one of them.

Instead, Goryachkina and Zhu contested two blitz games.

Goryachkina quickly won the first and drew the second to secure the title.

This is the first World Rapid crown for Goryachkina, who was the World Champion challenger in 2020 in classical time control.

Jiner, who led for most of the tournament, finished in second place.

After winning gold in New York in 2024, Koneru takes home the bronze medal from Doha.

Goryachkina got richer by €40,000.



Jan Henric Buettner, Entrepreneur and Freestyle Chess Grand Slam co-founder; Arkady Dvorkovich, FIDE President; and Mohammed al-Mudahka, President of Qatar Chess Association, are seen playing the first round at the First Move Ceremony between Magnus Carlsen of Norway and Sarana Alexey of Russia at the Sports and Events Complex, Qatar University, in Doha yesterday.

COMMENT

QCA prepares for the Blitz showdown as FIDE applauds Qatar efforts

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The 2025 World Rapid & Blitz Chess Championships reached a fever pitch yesterday as Norway's Magnus Carlsen secured the World Rapid title, setting the stage for a wide-open battle in the Blitz rounds scheduled to begin today.

Lukasz Turlej, Secretary-General of the International Chess Federation (FIDE), yesterday said that the tournament has entered its critical final phase. Speaking from the venue, Turlej characterised the event as one of the most prestigious in international chess, highlighting both the "fantastic atmosphere" and the elite calibre of the 400-player field.

The headline of the day belonged to Carlsen, who navigated a gauntlet of top-ranked opponents to clinch the Rapid Championship. However, the victory was



Lukasz Turlej, Secretary General of FIDE

hard-fought. Turlej noted that the "fierce competition" among the world's best has left little room for error, with the gap between the podium finishers and the rest of the field remaining razor-thin.

While Carlsen holds the momentum, FIDE officials believe

the upcoming Blitz Championship remains an open race. Unlike the Rapid format, the Blitz rounds demand instantaneous intuition, and the parity seen earlier this week suggests a volatile final day.

"I believe the chances are equal for all competitors in the Blitz Chess Championship," Turlej stated. "The levels of competition witnessed in the Rapid tournament were incredibly close, and tomorrow's rounds will be the ultimate decider."

The tournament has drawn significant international eyes to Qatar, serving as a showcase for the Qatar Chess Association (QCA)'s efforts to grow the sport within the region. Turlej praised the local organisers for delivering a world-class venue that has facilitated high-level play.

"This has become one of the most important editions of the World Championship," said Turlej. "The presence of every top-ranked player and the excellent



A general view of chess players in the tenth round of the FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Championships at the Sports and Events Complex, Qatar University, in Doha yesterday.

organisation have made this a standout event on the global circuit."

All eyes now turn to the clock for today's Blitz opener. With 400 grandmasters and special-

ists fighting for the final title of the week, the pressure in Doha has never been higher.

CRICKET

MCG curator in ‘state of shock’ after Test carnage

‘WE KNOW THIS HASN’T GONE AS WE PLANNED’

AFP
Melbourne

Melbourne Cricket Ground head curator Matt Page said yesterday he was in a “state of shock” watching the carnage unfold during the two-day fourth Ashes Test which has left Cricket Australia facing millions of dollars in revenue shortfall.

Page and his team left 10 millimetres of grass on the wicket, providing fast bowlers with excessive seam movement and bounce which made batting treacherous.

Thirty-six wickets tumbled in 142 overs, 20 on the first day, and the game was all over in the evening session of day two as England won by four wickets for their first victory in Australia since January 2011.

More than 90,000 fans were expected for day three and many more for days four and five.

But with ticket sales having to be refunded, Cricket Australia faces another big financial hit after the Ashes series opener in Perth also ended within two days.

Chief executive Todd Greenberg yesterday estimated that the Melbourne shortfall alone would cost the governing body more than Aus\$10mn (US\$6.7mn).

It is the first time the same series has had multiple two-day Tests for 129 years, dating back to the time when wickets were left uncovered to the weather.

“I was in a state of shock,” Page said.

“I’ve never been involved in a Test match like it and hopefully never involved in a Test match like that again.

“We know this hasn’t gone as we planned. We will look at what we need to do to improve.”

A year ago the grass on the pitch had been shaved down to seven millimetres and produced a thrill-



MCG head curator Matt Page (left) speaks to a match official during the second day of the fourth Ashes Test at the MCG in Melbourne. (AFP)

ing Test that went all the way to the final session on day five as Australia beat India.

Page said that cool and wet weather leading into this year’s Test combined with forecast heat on days three and four meant he had needed to take a different approach.

“We’re trying to balance that contest between bat and ball throughout, over the four or five days, to provide that captivating Test for all,” he said.

“We left it longer because we knew we were going to get (hot) weather at the back end that we knew we needed our grass (for).”

International Cricket Council referee Jeff Crowe is yet to deliver his assessment of the pitch, pondering whether to give it an “un-

satisfactory” rating which would see the venue slapped with a demerit point.

England captain Ben Stokes and Australia counterpart Steve Smith were both critical of the surface, as were a string of former greats.

“Being brutally honest, that’s not really what you want,” Stokes said. Smith added: “It was tricky. No one could really get in. When you see 36 wickets across two days, that’s probably too much.”

Former England captain Michael Vaughan labelled the pitch “a joke.”

Greenberg said Cricket Australia would undertake an end-of-season review of the management of Test wickets, conceding that the financial deficits “sting”

“With the way batters are bat-

ting, and the way the game is evolving, are the preparation of our wickets in lockstep with that?” he told cricket.com.au.

“If they’re not, how do we make sure that they are so that we can try to balance the commercial imperatives versus the performance?”

Despite the controversy, MCG chief executive Stuart Fox backed Page and his ground staff to continue.

“We bought Matt on eight years ago because he’s considered one of the best in the country, if not the best,” Fox said. “I still believe that, and I always will.

“You can see he’s disappointed. He carries that responsibility and my job as a leader is to support people.”

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Al Duhail beat Qatar SC 1-0 as Al Rayyan fight back for 2-2 draw

BY Sports Register
Doha

Qatar football giants Al Duhail yesterday beat Qatar SC 1-0 in their Qatar Stars League (QSL) Week 11 clash at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium.

Coached by Djamel Belmadi, Al Duhail secured a hard-fought 1-0 victory to get a much-needed boost as they look to climb back up the table following a mixed run of form in recent weeks. Ismaeel Mohamad scored the only goal of the match in the 55th minute.

The opening 45 minutes were a tactical battle with limited clear-cut chances. Both sides went into the tunnel at halftime locked at 0-0 though Al Duhail dominated the lion’s share of possession (over 70%).

Ten minutes into the second half, Ismaeel broke the deadlock. His 55th-minute strike proved to be the decisive moment of the match, finishing off a period of sustained pressure from the home side.

Qatar SC attempted to find an equalizer late in the game, but Al Duhail’s backline, bolstered by the presence of Bassam al-Rawi, held firm to secure the clean sheet and all three points.

In another thrilling match yesterday at Al Thumama Stadium, Al Rayyan and Al Arabi played out a 2-2 draw in their highly anticipated derby.

Roger Guedes initially rewarded Al Rayyan’s early offensive pressure with a clinical finish in the 35th minute, but the momentum shifted shortly after the halftime break when Pablo Sarabia equalized for Al Arabi in the 52nd minute.

The home side then appeared to have secured a victory after Alexis Pérez converted from close range in the 72nd minute to give Al Arabi their first lead of the match; however, Al Rayyan’s persistence paid off deep into stoppage time when Mohammed Saleh found the back of the net in the 95th minute to rescue a dramatic point for the Lions.

In the day’s last match, Al Sailiyah and Al Wakrah played a goalless draw.



Al Duhail’s central midfielder Marco Verratti helps teammate Edmilson Junior get up during their QSL match against Qatar SC at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium yesterday.

ASHES TEST

Australia’s Head backs struggling opening partner Weatherald

AFP
Melbourne

Australia’s Travis Head yesterday backed under-pressure opening partner Jake Weatherald to come good after an “extremely tough” start to his Test career in a wild Ashes series.

Weatherald made his debut in the opening Test against England in Perth, the latest in a flurry of players looking to fill the giant hole left by David Warner calling it quits two years ago. None have managed to cement the spot, with Weatherald the latest to struggle.

The aggressive left-hander has scored 146 runs at 20.85 across eight innings so far, with almost half of that courtesy of his 72 at the second Test in Brisbane.

With the likes of Matt Renshaw and Sam Konstas waiting in the wings, he needs a big score at the final Test in Sydney this week to extend his tenure.

“International cricket is extremely tough,” Head told Australian media in Melbourne after they lost the fourth Test by four wickets. “The wickets have been challenging across the board the last few years, that’s well documented.

“It’s not an excuse and I think he’s a good enough cricketer for international cricket and I think he showed a lot of glimpses over his first four Tests.”

Weatherald is not the only Australian batsman under scrutiny with Cameron Green and Marnus Labuschagne also short of runs.

Head was promoted to opener in the second innings at Perth when Usman Khawaja was sidelined with back spasms and has



Australian batsman Jake Weatherald is bowled by England’s Ben Stokes on the second day of the fourth Ashes Test at the MCG in Melbourne on Saturday. (AFP)

kept the position, cracking two centuries. He said he was content to stay there for the time being.

“I see myself as this team’s opening batter for the series and then we’ve got a long gap to piece the puzzles together for where

the team wants to go,” he said. “I’ve felt good at the top, I feel like I’ve been batting well.” After the final Ashes match in Sydney, Australia’s next Test series is not until the middle of 2026, when they host Bangladesh.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Shadab returns to Pakistan T20I squad for Sri Lanka tour

AFP
Karachi

Fit-again allrounder Shadab Khan returned to Pakistan’s squad for next month’s three-match Twenty20 international series in Sri Lanka, selectors said yesterday.

The 27-year-old missed a large part of Pakistan’s cricket with a shoulder injury since June but regained full fitness after surgery in Britain.

Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) said the squad had new players as some seniors were allowed to play in the Big Bash League in Australia.

“Shadab is included in the squad after he regained full fitness for the three-match T20I series against Sri Lanka in Dambulla on 7, 9 and 11 January,” said a PCB release.

Senior batsman Babar Azam and pace bowlers Shaheen Shah Afridi, Haris Rauf and Hasan Ali will miss the tour due to playing in Australia. Salman Ali Agha will continue to lead the side who are in the final phase of preparations



for the Twenty20 World Cup in February-March in India and Sri Lanka.

Uncapped wicketkeeper-batsman Khawaja Nafay is also included in the squad after his impressive show with Pakistan’s second string team in the last two years.

SQUAD: Salman Agha (captain), Abdul Samad, Abrar Ahmed, Faheem Ashraf, Fakhar Zaman, Khawaja Nafay, Mohammad Nawaz, Salman Mirza, Mohammad Wasim, Naseem Shah, Sahibzada Farhan, Saim Ayub, Shadab Khan, Usman Khan, Usman Tariq.

Former England cricket boss Morris dies aged 62

Glamorgan announced the death of Hugh Morris, the former chief executive of the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB), at the age of 62 yesterday.

Morris won three Test caps for England in 1991 as an opening batsman and also led Glamorgan to the Sunday League title two years later as captain. After his playing career came to an end, Morris went on to hold a series of senior positions at the ECB.

Following a stint as deputy and acting chief executive, he served as England’s first managing director from 2007 to 2013, during which time the men’s team reached number one in the Test rankings, won three Ashes series and the 2010 T20 World Cup. Morris returned to south Wales in 2013 and enjoyed nine years as Glamorgan chief executive. He was diagnosed with bowel cancer in January 2022 and left

his role at the Welsh county in September 2023 to spend time with his family as he underwent treatment. “Everyone here at Glamorgan County Cricket Club and further afield are devastated on hearing the awful news about Hugh,” said Dan Cherry, who succeeded Morris as Glamorgan chief. “As a player and administrator, Hugh led from the front. He leaves us with an outstanding legacy.”

TENNIS

Kyrgios beats Sabalenka in exhibition match

KYRGIOS HAILS SABALENKA'S COMPETITIVENESS AND TALENT

Reuters
Dubai

Nick Kyrgios beat Aryna Sabalenka 6-3, 6-3 yesterday in a "Battle of the Sexes" exhibition match billed as a modern take on Billie Jean King's famous win over Bobby Riggs over 50 years ago, but one that ignited controversy over its relevance and meaning.

The clash between four-times Grand Slam champion Sabalenka and former world number 13 Kyrgios was billed as entertainment but critics warned that it risked reducing women's tennis to a sideshow and trivialising its progress toward equality.

The match that gave the event its name was the 1973 "Battle of the Sexes" when women's tennis pioneer King beat 55-year-old former Grand Slam winner Riggs, who had said that the standard of women's tennis could never match that of the men's game.

King told the BBC that although this year's clash carried the same tagline, it lacked the stakes of her showdown with Riggs, a contest she described as a fight for social change in a vastly different cultural era.

"I don't think many people would have put their hand up to be in this position, especially in my position," Kyrgios said.

"Obviously, Aryna was up for the challenge. The scoreline was closer than it was. I was under the pump there... and then anything happens once the crowd gets behind it. I was nervous."

Playing in front of a sold-out crowd at Dubai's Coca-Cola Arena, Kyrgios negotiated the slightly smaller "equaliser" court on women's world number one Sabalenka's side to secure victory after an entertaining contest played under modified rules.



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka (left) and Australia's Nick Kyrgios celebrate with trophies at the end of the exhibition match in Dubai yesterday. (AFP)

With a one-serve-per-point rule in effect, both players faltered on their deliveries in crucial moments before Kyrgios broke for a 4-3 lead and went on to take the opening set.

The maverick Australian was drenched in sweat and appeared out of breath in the second set after going 1-3 down, while his opponent danced to the music during a strategic timeout, but he persevered to make it 3-3 after Sabalenka sent a shot long.

Unlike Riggs, who had long retired from the men's tour when he took on fellow American King, Kyrgios is an active player on the ATP Tour even though his recent seasons have been blighted by a succession of wrist and knee injuries.

The former Wimbledon runner-up, a major draw on and off the court with his natural talent and charisma, managed only five

professional singles matches in 2025.

'GREAT OPPORTUNITY'

"It was a really tough match," Kyrgios added. "She's a hell of a competitor and such a great champion. Obviously, she's a multiple Grand Slam champion. And I didn't really know what to expect.

"As I said before this whole event, whatever role I was to play, it was another great opportunity to go out here. She broke my serve numerous times. And honestly, I had to strap it because she was putting the pressure on; hitting amazing shots.

I would love to play her again and showcase her talent and also what I have left in the tank. Ultimately, it was a really hard-fought battle and there were breaks back and forth.

"Seeing someone as great as Aryna out here, and myself, it truly

is a spectacle and I think this is a great moving stepping stone forward for the sport of tennis."

Kyrgios, who shortened the points with cheeky drop shots and used variations on his serve to good effect, pulled away and sealed the victory on serve before sharing a warm embrace with Belarusian Sabalenka at the net.

"I think I put on a great fight," Sabalenka said.

"He was struggling. He got really tight. I'm happy to see that the guy is getting tight and (after) taking away one of my serves. I think it was a great level.

"I made a lot of great shots, moved a lot to the net... great drop shots, Nick, great serving. I really enjoyed the show and I feel like the next time when I play him, I already know the tactics.

I know his strengths, his weaknesses, and it's going to be a better match for sure."

AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

Mahrez penalty takes Algeria through last 16

AFP
Rabat

Algeria secured their place in the last 16 of the Africa Cup of Nations after a Riyad Mahrez penalty gave them a 1-0 victory over Burkina Faso yesterday.

Captain Mahrez converted from the spot midway through the first half at the Moulay El Hassan Stadium in Rabat and Algeria then held on to win a bruising contest against a determined Burkina outfit.

Algeria, African champions in 1990 and in 2019, have the maximum six points after two games in Group E and are yet to concede a goal, with Vladimir Petkovic's side living up to their billing as one of the pre-tournament favourites.

Burkina Faso and Sudan come next on three points each but play each other in the final round of group games on Wednesday - that means Algeria are guaranteed a top-two finish even if they lose their final outing against currently pointless Equatorial Guinea.

Algeria had to come from two goals down to draw 2-2 with the Stallions when the teams met at the last AFCON in Ivory Coast, a result which contributed to their group-stage elimination.

This time they claimed all three points, with the penalty that decided the game, awarded when Manchester City's Rayan Ait-Nouri was bundled over.

Mahrez made no mistake with his 23rd-minute kick as he followed his brace in the opening 3-0 defeat of Sudan to take his tally at this Cup of Nations to three goals. The former Leicester City and Manchester City winger, appearing at his sixth AFCON, now has nine goals at the tournament, an Algerian record.

The game was played out amid a boisterous atmosphere in a stadium packed with Algerian fans in a crowd of 18,522.

France legend Zinedine Zidane was among those present to watch his son Luca play in goal for the Desert Foxes - he was also at the win over Sudan.

Pierre Landry Kabore, the Hearts striker, came close to equalising for Burkina Faso with a header from a corner, before Mahrez teed up Mohamed Amoura for a shot that was saved by goalkeeper Herve Koffi at the end of an Algerian breakaway in first-half stoppage time.

Bayer Leverkusen's Ibrahim Maza twice failed to convert good opportunities in the second half while substitute Georgi Minoungou fired just over as Burkina Faso pushed unsuccessfully for an equaliser.



Algeria's Riyad Mahrez scores his team's first goal from the penalty spot during the Africa Cup of Nations match against Burkina Faso at Moulay Hassan Stadium in Rabat yesterday. (AFP)

SUDAN BEAT EQUATORIAL GUINEA FOR RARE WIN

Casablanca: Sudan boosted their chances of qualifying for the knockout stage of the Africa Cup of Nations after a Saul Coco own goal gave them a 1-0 win over Equatorial Guinea yesterday. Unlucky Torino centre-back Coco saw the ball come off him and ricochet into the net in the 74th minute in Casablanca when his teammate Luis Asue attempted to clear a Sudan free-kick. Sudan won the Africa Cup of Nations in 1970 but this is just their second victory in 18 matches across six appearances at the tournament since then. They lie 117th in the FIFA world rankings, compared to Equatorial Guinea in 97th. The win leaves Kwesi Appiah's team on three points from two games in Group E, while Equatorial Guinea have lost both matches so far. Meanwhile, Mozambique ended a 39-year wait for a first Africa Cup of Nations victory by defeating Gabon 3-2 in a Group F thriller in Agadir yesterday. The Mambas began the match having drawn four and lost 12 since making the first of six appearances at the tournament in 1986. Goals from Faisal Bangal, Geny Catamo and Diogo Calila won a seesaw struggle for the Mozambicans, who led 2-1 at half-time in the Moroccan coastal city. Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and Alex Moussounda netted for Gabon, who twice halved two-goal deficits before suffering a second straight loss after falling to Cameroon.

HAKIMI TO FEATURE IN MOROCCO'S FINAL AFCON GROUP GAME

African player of the year Achraf Hakimi will make his first appearance at the Africa Cup of Nations when hosts Morocco play Zambia today, coach Walid Regragui confirmed. "What he has done to come back is extraordinary. What I can say is that Achraf will play tomorrow," Regragui said yesterday in Rabat, on the eve of Morocco's last group game. "Whether he starts or not it will be his first match at the AFCON. "What we want - because we want to go as far as possible - is that Achraf progresses with the team and that we can keep him for the whole competition." Hakimi has not played since suffering an ankle injury in action for Paris Saint-

Germain at the beginning of November and was an unused substitute in Morocco's first two matches at the Cup of Nations. Without him, Morocco beat Comoros 2-0 in the tournament's opening game before being held to a 1-1 draw by Mali on Friday. They sit top of Group A with four points from two outings and a win against Zambia will allow them to advance to the last 16 in first place in their section. A draw will also guarantee their spot in the knockout phase. "I think people don't realise what Achraf brings to our team," Regragui added. "We have played two games without our best player, our leader and captain, but we have not hidden. Other players

have stood in for him. "But would we be a different team with Achraf? Of course. He is the best player in Africa, one of the best in the world." Hakimi admitted his frustration at not having taken part in either of the first two matches and said he was disappointed that Moroccan supporters had jeered the hosts during the draw against Mali. "We know it is not easy sometimes, that they want us to win and finish games by half-time, but we have to respect our opponents too," said the defender who helped PSG win the Champions League last season. "It is not normal for them to boo us. We want to have the supporters behind us.

MOTORSPORT

Third round of Qatar Drift Championship concludes

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Amid a large crowd that filled the stands of the dedicated drift circuit at Qatar Racing Club (QRC), and with the participation of an elite group of drift champions from Qatar, the GCC, and the wider region, the third round of the Qatar Drift Championship came to a close.

The competitions, which extended over two days, were full of surprises, starting with the first and second qualifying sessions.

Riyadh al-Mabsali managed to record the best score, topping the standings with 88.67 points, leaving second place to the overall championship leader Ahmed al-Amri, while Mohammed al-Jaber delivered a strong performance that placed him third.

This position secured him the top spot in qualifying for the local category, which saw the participation of eight drivers in this round. Yasser Mustafa finished second in the local category qualifying, while Yazan Jabsha took third place.

The action began with the first round, which featured eight races.



Qatar Drift Championship's third round winners celebrate on the podium.

Qualifying leader Riyadh al-Mabsali defeated Fahad al-Jadaie, who was making his first appearance in the championship after missing the previous two rounds.

Last round's runner-up Mohammed Khurshid overcame his rival Mohammed al-Azmi. Meanwhile, Mesyar Abu Shaiba advanced to the second round after defeating the two-time local

category champion Abdullah al-Muhtasib.

Yasser al-Shatir was absent from his scheduled matchup against Yazan Jabsha due to car issues, allowing Jabsha to advance automatically to the second round.

On the other side of the bracket, second-place qualifier Ahmed al-Amri defeated Ahmed Jaber to

move on to the next round. Last season's champion Ali Makhseed also advanced after overcoming Mazen Nasser. In an all-local matchup between Mohammed al-Jaber and Khaled al-Shafie, victory went to al-Jaber.

In the final first-round battle, Salem al-Sarraf defeated Bkhaite al-Hajri to secure the last spot in the second round.



Action from the third round of Qatar Drift Championship.

Based on these results and what followed in the second round, Mohammed al-Jaber was crowned local category champion, achieving a perfect score after winning the qualifying sessions.

Last season's champion Yazan Jabsha finished second.

In the second round, both Ali Riyadh al-Mabsali and Mesyar Abu Shaiba qualified for the first semifinal.

On the other side, Ahmed al-Amri advanced to the second semi-final following an intense and highly competitive battle against Ali Makhseed.

The first semi-final between Riyadh al-Mabsali and Mesyar Abu Shaiba ended in favour of Abu Shaiba.

The second semi-final brought together Ahmed al-Amri and Mohammed al-Jaber.

The victory ultimately went to al-Amri, who reached his second final of the season. Attention turned to the final, where opening-round winner al-Amri faced Abu Shaiba. Al-Amri claimed his second victory of the season, while Abu Shaiba finished second. The fourth round of the championship will take place in March 2026.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Gray's first senior goal earns Spurs gritty win at Palace

Calvert-Lewin stretches hot streak as Leeds hold Sunderland

AFP

London

Tottenham ground out a much-needed three points for the under-fire Thomas Frank with a 1-0 win at Crystal Palace, while high-flying Sunderland were held 1-1 by Leeds yesterday.

Archie Gray was Spurs' unlikely match winner at Selhurst Park with his first senior goal as Frank's men won for just the second time in nine league games.

Richarlison had two goals disallowed for offside but Gray's header was enough for Tottenham against a Palace side running out of steam after a gruelling schedule.

The Eagles are now winless in five games as they have hit the wall from trying to stretch their limited resources across three competitions.

Oliver Glasner described his side's set-piece defending in a 4-1 defeat to Leeds last weekend as "embarrassing" and it was a dead ball that cost them once more against a Spurs team badly lacking in creativity.

An overdue victory will temporarily ease the scrutiny on Frank, but another performance devoid of flair going forward will do little to quieten his doubters in the Tottenham support.

The visitors did not have a shot on target from open play before half-time but were only denied by a VAR review for offside when Richarlison thought he had opened the scoring.

Instead the source of the only goal was an unexpected one as Gray headed in Richarlison's flick from a corner for his first goal in 112 appearances for Tottenham and Leeds.

Palace dominated territory and possession after the break but lacked the class needed in front of goal to make Spurs pay.

Justin Devenny blazed high over the bar from close range before Maxence Lacroix headed wide.

Palace were handed another re-



Tottenham Hotspur's midfielder Archie Gray heads in the opening goal during the Premier League match against Crystal Palace at Selhurst Park in south London yesterday. (AFP)

prieve when Richarlison turned in Mohammed Kudus' cross only for VAR to again intervene.

But Tottenham held out to climb to 11th, just one point behind Palace in ninth.

Earlier, Dominic Calvert-Lewin scored for a sixth consecutive Premier League game as Leeds denied Sunderland a place in the top five with a draw at the Stadium of Light.

Simon Adingra fired the Black Cats into a half-time lead, but the in-form Calvert-Lewin levelled early in the second period to pull Leeds further clear of the relegation zone.

Sunderland are still yet to lose at home on their return to the

top flight but have been severely depleted by the departure of six players to the Africa Cup of Nations.

Adingra was one of the Ivory Coast's key men in winning the AFCON on home soil last year, but he was not selected this time.

Sunderland were grateful for that decision as the former Brighton winger curled in his first goal for the club from Granit Xhaka's fine through ball on 28 minutes.

Leeds had been the better side for large spells of the first period and started the second with a bang.

Calvert-Lewin latched onto Brenden Aaronson's low cross for his eighth goal of the season, seven

of which have come in the last six games.

The former Everton striker's form has played a major role in edging Leeds towards safety and keeping his manager Daniel Farke in a job.

The German was reportedly on the brink of being dismissed prior to a five-game unbeaten run that has taken Leeds seven points clear of the bottom three.

"I'm not dancing on the table tonight," said Farke. "The feeling was if we were a bit more clinical we should have won the game."

Sunderland missed the chance to leapfrog Manchester United and Chelsea but sit seventh, just four points outside the top four.

FOOTBALL

Liverpool's set-piece problems a killer, says Van Dijk

AFP

Liverpool

Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk said the Premier League champions have to improve a woeful record defending set-pieces if they are to continue an upturn in form.

The Reds only edged past bottom-of-the-table Wolves 2-1 on Saturday after conceding a 12th league goal in 18 games from a set-piece.

No team has conceded more and, at the other end, Liverpool have only scored three times from set-pieces, excluding penalties, themselves. That minus nine differential is their worst in any Premier League season. "The fact is we've conceded too many set-piece goals and we don't score enough," said Van Dijk.

"It's something we have to improve. I would say at least 75 percent of the time or even more, it's not even about the first contact. It's the second phase that is the killer.

"Is it a mental thing? I hope not. If that's in your head then it's an issue. Personally, it's not in my head."

Liverpool boss Arne Slot has

bemoaned his side's dead ball defending for much of the season.

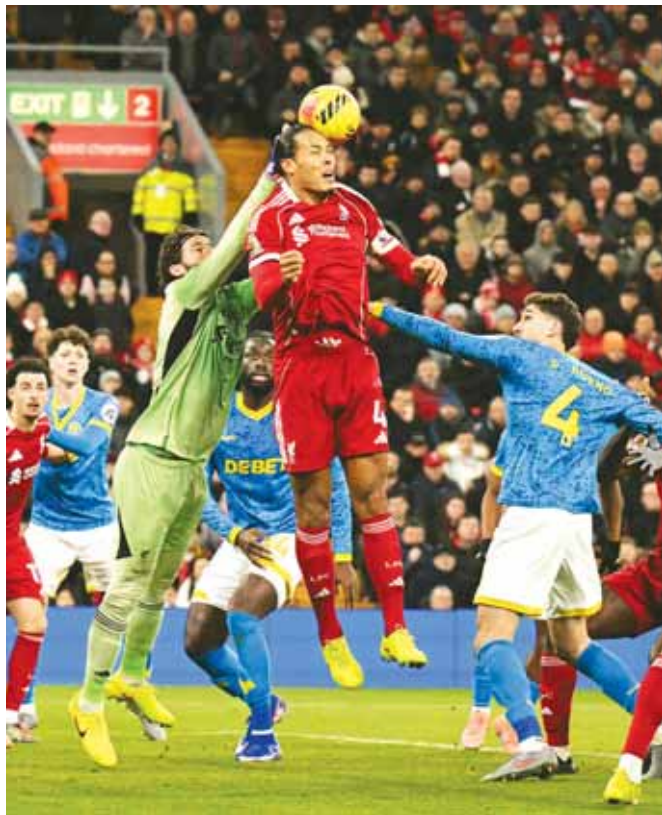
But the Dutchman sees signs of progress overall as Liverpool beat nine-man Tottenham and Wolves in their last two matches despite conceding from a corner in each of them.

"Unfortunately we're maybe the only team that hardly ever scores from a set-piece and, even worse, we constantly concede," said Slot.

"But then, I think I said two, three or four weeks ago, we have to make sure that when things go against us - it could be a set-piece, it could be other things - we still need to find a way to win.

"In the last two games we conceded from a set-piece but we were able to win and that hasn't happened many times this season. That's progress for me, but it's obvious there are more things for us to improve and this is definitely one of them."

Despite a string of unconvincing performances, Liverpool are on a seven-match unbeaten run. Three consecutive league wins have lifted Slot's men back into the top four but they remain 10 points adrift of leaders Arsenal.



Liverpool's goalkeeper Alisson Becker and defender Virgil van Dijk defend in their goalmouth during the Premier League match against Wolverhampton Wanderers at Anfield in Liverpool. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Nkunku fires Milan top of Serie A

AFP

Milan

Christopher Nkunku fired AC Milan top of Serie A with a brace in yesterday's 3-0 win over Verona at the San Siro, the France forward's first goals in Italy's top flight.

Nkunku doubled Milan's lead two minutes after half-time with a penalty he had earned, ending a league drought stretching back to February when he was playing for Chelsea in England.

Five minutes later he tapped home the third to ensure the hosts a one-point lead over Napoli who won 2-0 at Cremonese thanks to a Rasmus Hojlund double.

The 28-year-old Nkunku's only previous goal for Milan since signing from Chelsea for an initial 37mn euros (\$43.6mn) in August came against Lecce in the Italian Cup in September.

"He's a sensitive lad, one who is keen to do well here... I think he can continue to improve just like we have to," said Milan coach Massimiliano Allegri.

"We're going to need everyone because we have a really busy schedule over the next month or so."

Milan were sent on their way to a comprehensive victory on the stroke of half-time by Christian Pulisic who continued his sensational form by scoring his eighth goal in 11 Serie A appearances.

Pulisic, who has lost around a month of this campaign to injury, has played a part in 50 goals in Serie A since arriving at Milan in 2023.

He broke Verona's spirited re-



AC Milan's Christopher Nkunku (centre) celebrates after scoring his team's second goal during the Serie A match against Hellas Verona in Milan yesterday. (AFP)

sistance when he prodded home Adrien Rabiot's flick-on at a corner in the first minute of stoppage time at the end of the first half.

It helped Milan confidently beat one of the lower ranked teams, something which Allegri's players have had a hard time doing even though they haven't

been beaten in Serie A since the opening day of the season. Nkunku made sure of the points and made his case to lead the line for Milan, with Mexico striker Santiago Gimenez out until February and Niclas Fullkrug set to sign from West Ham next month.

Verona, who had won their last two matches against Atalanta and Fiorentina, stay in the relegation zone, two points behind Genoa who sit just outside the bottom three and face Roma today.

Hojlund took his all-competitions goal tally for Napoli to nine as champions Napoli cruised to

the three points in Cremona and maintained their push to retain the Scudetto.

Fresh from winning the Italian Super Cup in Saudi Arabia, Napoli were the better team from the first whistle and were deservedly ahead in the 13th minute when Hojlund pounced on a deflection to net from close range.

And Hojlund was again in the right place at the right time seconds before the break when Alesio Zerbin could only divert Matteo Politano's cross straight to the Denmark striker, who calmly poked home.

Hojlund has scored six times in 12 Serie A appearances, two more than he managed in an entire Premier League campaign with Manchester United last season.

Sunday's brace was his second for Napoli after he also scored both goals in their win earlier this month over fierce rivals Juventus who drop down to fourth, three points behind Milan.

"I'm just happy for the result. Obviously 2-0 here is not easy, Cremonese have done a lot of trouble to a lot of teams this season... It's a great three points," said Hojlund, who played in Italy for Atalanta before United.

"I'm getting better every season. Obviously when I was at Atalanta I was a bit younger and I've got a bit more experience now. I've played in the Premier League and in the Champions League and I'm playing with very good players now."

Inter can reclaim top spot later on Sunday when they make the short trip to Bergamo to face Atalanta who have been revitalised since Raffaele Palladino took charge last month.

FIVB NAMES QATAR BEACH VOLLEYBALL DUO WORLD'S BEST FOR 2025

LAUSANNE: The International Volleyball Federation (FIVB) has named Qatar's beach volleyball duo Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan as the world's best men's team for 2025.

In a statement issued yesterday, the FIVB said it selected the Qatari pair as the top beach volleyball duo globally for 2025 in recognition of their outstanding performances throughout the tournaments they competed in this year.

The federation said that Younousse's strong presence at the net, combined with Tijan's exceptional defensive work on the court, made the Qatari duo a dominant force throughout 2025. Their performances played a decisive role in Qatar's capture of four gold medals, establishing them as one of the standout beach volleyball teams in the world.

The FIVB described Qatar's performance in beach volleyball during 2025 as "remarkable," noting that Younousse and Tijan consistently delivered world-class displays and regularly reached the final stages of the Beach Pro Tour. Their performances, the federation said, demonstrated peak athletic form through a combination of tactical excellence and physical strength, further strengthening Qatar's standing on the global stage. The Qatari beach volleyball team, comprising Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan, secured four international gold medals during the Beach Pro Tour stops in Xiamen - China; Gstaad - Switzerland; New York - US; and Rio de Janeiro - Brazil.

(QNA)