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CRICKET | Page 2

Australia confirm veteran batsman Khawaja for Sydney Test



FOOTBALL | Page 4

Al Sadd crush Al Shamal 3-0 to pick up full points in QSL

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SPORT

TENNIS

Wawrinka ‘at peace’ with retirement but has no plans to go quietly

Page 3

CHESS

Carlsen fumes in Doha as Erigaisi shares Blitz lead

Known for his theatrics, Carlsen stuns fans by slamming the table in frustration after a costly mistake

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Trust chess maverick Magnus Carlsen to create drama when things are not going to plan. The drama at the FIDE World Blitz Championships reached a fever pitch in Doha yesterday when world number No 1 Carlsen suffered a stunning ninth-round defeat to India’s Arjun Erigaisi.

Known for his theatrics, Carlsen stunned onlookers by slamming the table in frustration after a costly mistake. A quick handshake followed as Carlsen walked off frustrated but the outburst immediately became the primary talking point of the tournament at Qatar University.

At the close of play yesterday, Erigaisi, Maxime Vachier-Lagrave and Fabiano Caruana were neck-and-neck at the 2025 FIDE World Blitz Chess Championship, sharing the lead with 10/13 points

With six rounds of the Swiss stage remaining, all eyes are on Carlsen; despite his recent Rapid title win, two losses have left him trailing the leaders by a full point.

“I was a bit unhappy that I forgot about the A5-pawn hanging - it should’ve been a draw, it’s an unfortunate way to lose for him,” a composed Erigaisi said after beating Carlsen.

“Although I won within time but I think I played well in the middle, got into a winning position but then I messed up as something happened. But I played well the latter part,” the Indian said.

In a stunning upset yesterday, world champion D Gukesh lost to



Indian GM Viswanathan Anand (second left), a five-time World Champion, makes the first round between Ju Wenjun (left) of China and Luong Phuong Hanh of Vietnam during the women's Blitz first round of the FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Championships at the Sports and Events Complex, Qatar University, in Doha yesterday. Mohamed al-Mudahka, President of Qatar Chess Association, is also present. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil



Arjun Erigaisi of India competes against Pranav V during the Blitz Open 4th round game of the FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Championships at Qatar University yesterday.



Hamad al-Tamimi, Tournament Director

12-year-old Sergey Sklokin in the third round and was 26th with 8.5 points.

Dutch IM Eline Roebers yesterday finished the day as leader of

the women’s pack with 8.5 points out of 10 games. Starting in round five, she won six games in a row, notably against GM Aleksandra Goryachkina in round nine.

QATAR GEARS UP FOR CHESS FINALE

The world’s elite chess stage is set for its final act as the World Rapid & Blitz Chess Championships prepare to conclude today.

Hamad al-Tamimi, Executive Director of the Qatar Chess Association and Tournament Director, yesterday confirmed that preparations are finalised for the closing ceremony, scheduled for 7:00pm today. The festivities will follow immediately after the high-stakes

final match of the Blitz Championship.

Beyond the crowning of world champions, al-Tamimi emphasised the tournament’s lasting impact on the local sporting landscape. He described the event as a “crucial milestone” for the Qatari national team, highlighting the invaluable exposure it provided to the nation’s youth.

“This has been a unique opportunity for our young players to observe the world’s top-ranked masters in person,” al-Tamimi stated. He noted that the QCA’s goal is to inspire future generations to pursue chess professionally and elevate the sport’s standard within the country.

GLOBAL PRAISE FOR QCA

The International Chess Federation (FIDE) has officially recognised Qatar’s hosting efforts, issuing a statement on its official website praising the ‘exceptional organisational atmosphere’ of the tournament. The global governing body specifically highlighted the high-quality competition hall, optimised for high-level focus and play, as well as the seamless logistics involving accommodation and facilities for international delegations.

Furthermore, FIDE expressed admiration for the fan zone, noting that the engaging side events and activities successfully brought the tournament to life for spectators,

while also commending the overall excellence in officiating throughout the competition.

The sentiment of success was echoed by Dr Yousef al-Mahasneh, Head of the Referees Committee. Describing the atmosphere as ‘exceptional’, al-Mahasneh pointed to the tournament as a landmark moment for Qatari officiating.

Notably, the event featured prominent local referees, including Hussein al-Haddad and Sarah al-Mohannadi.

This event marked a significant career debut for al-Mohannadi, who recently earned her IM badge, signalling a new era of Qatari representation in the upper echelons of chess regulation.

FOCUS

Al-Hammadi elected new QTTA president

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The General Assembly of the Qatar Table Tennis Association (QTTA) yesterday elected Hamad Ahmed al-Hammadi as President by acclamation for the 2025-2028 term.

This was announced during the General Assembly held yesterday, chaired by Khalil al-Mohannadi, the former president of QTTA, after a quorum was reached. The meeting was attended by members of the General Assembly, representatives of the sports clubs and the Qatar Olympic Committee.

Ahmed Khalil al-Mohannadi was elected Secretary-General of QTTA by acclamation. The newly elected members of the QTTA’s Board of Directors by acclamation are: Jaber Saeed Afifa, Mohammed Hassan al-Rumaihi and Abdullah Bader al-Sada.

Al-Hammadi said yesterday: “It is an honour to assume the leadership from as esteemed sports figure, Khalil al-Mohannadi. This new role is a historic code of trust bestowed on me. I feel this is a double responsibility to preserve the great legacy achieved over the last three decades.”

Al-Hammadi said the new board of directors will operate according to a vision focused on continuing the path of global successes, with a strong emphasis



Newly-elected Qatar Table Tennis Association President Hamad Ahmed al-Hammadi cuts a cake with outgoing chief of the federation Khalil al-Mohannadi in Doha yesterday.

on developing the youth base and discovering promising Qatari talent to ensure the sustainability of achievements.

Al-Hammadi paid tribute to al-Mohannadi, emphasising that his experience will remain a valuable resource and a distinguished legacy for QTTA. He stressed that the coming phase will witness concerted efforts to elevate the sport to new technical and administrative levels that align with the aspirations of Qatari sports and its future plans.

The new QTTF president further emphasised that the motto of continuity with renewal will be the driving force behind the new board of directors, striving to solidify Doha’s position as a global

capital of the sports world and enhance its role in shaping the future of table tennis regionally and internationally.

Ahmed Khalil al-Mohannadi, the new Secretary-General of QTTA, yesterday said the next phase will aim to consolidate the gains achieved by the sport over the past three decades.

He said the QTTA General Secretariat will serve as a fundamental pillar in supporting the vision of the board of directors, headed by al-Hammadi, by activating communication channels with the clubs and developing local competitions to be the primary source of talent for the national teams.

He concluded by saying: “We promise you that we will do our



QTTA President Hamad Ahmed al-Hammadi poses with QTTA Secretary-General Ahmed Khalil al-Mohannadi and board members Jaber Saeed Afifa, Mohammed Hassan al-Rumaihi and Abdullah Bader al-Sada.

utmost to provide the best possible support for our national teams. We look to the future with eyes full of optimism and hearts determined to achieve plenty of good name. Our biggest desire is for Qatari table tennis to remain at the top.”

The agenda of the General Assembly included ratifying the minutes of the previous General Assembly meeting in 2024, the Board of Directors’ report on its activities during the 2024-2025 sports season, future participation plans, and approving the draft budget for the upcoming year (2026).

During the meeting, Khalil al-Mohannadi was unanimously approved to be the honorary presi-

dent of QTTA in recognition of his great contributions to the federation over the past 30 years.

In a moving address during the General Assembly meeting, outgoing president al-Mohannadi said the last three decades were spent forging Qatar table tennis into a major regional and global force, on and off the field.

“The last three decades were a journey to build a Qatari sporting legacy that we all take pride in on the international stage. The successes achieved would not have been possible without the generous support of the wise leadership of Qatar and the unity of the Qatari table tennis family,” al-Mohannadi said.

Al-Mohannadi expressed his



Khalil al-Mohannadi during the QTTA General Assembly in Doha yesterday. Al-Mohannadi was involved with the game for 30 years in Qatar.

confidence in the new Board of Directors, headed by al-Hammadi, urging them to continue building upon past achievements with a spirit of innovation and development.

He said the ‘House of Qatari Table Tennis’ will always remain a model of excellence to ensure the continued superiority and leadership of the sport regionally and globally.

Al-Mohannadi said yesterday: “I thank our wise leadership in the State of Qatar for their unlimited support, and I thank everyone who worked with me, from board of directors and technical committees to administrators, coaches, players and the media. It was an honour serving my country.”

FOCUS

Australia's Khawaja confirmed for Sydney Test

Reuters
Melbourne

Australia head coach and selector Andrew McDonald has confirmed Usman Khawaja will play in the fifth Ashes Test against England at the Sydney Cricket Ground amid media speculation it could be his last international.

The oldest player in an ageing squad, the 39-year-old lefthander's spot in the line-up is under scrutiny following his demotion down the batting order and as selectors look to the future.

With the promoted Travis Head taking his opening spot, Khawaja batted at number four in the third Adelaide test and number five in the fourth match in Melbourne.

While some reports in Australian media have suggested Sydney could be Khawaja's last international, McDonald said he had not had any conversations with him about his future. "There's no indication at my end that he's calling it in Sydney," McDonald told reporters in Melbourne yesterday.

"But his performance in this calendar year has been good enough to warrant selection so I'd say he'll be there marking centre in Sydney."

Khawaja has not spoken publicly of his plans and returned home to Queensland for a break with family ahead of the Sydney test, which starts on January 4.

The 87-test veteran suffered back spasms during the first Ashes test in Perth and missed the second match in Brisbane. He is averaging just over 30 with the bat in his three Ashes tests and scored 82 at Adelaide Oval to help Australia seal the series with two matches to spare.

However, he scored 29 and zero in his two innings in the fourth test in Melbourne as the hosts slumped to a four-wicket defeat.

While criticised for a soft dismissal in his second innings in Melbourne, Khawaja's numbers stack up better than several Australian batters this series, including opener Jake Weatherald, Marnus Labuschagne and all-rounder Cameron Green. On the bowling front, Australia will again be without three of their world-class bowlers in Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and Nathan Lyon in Sydney.

Cricket Australia (CA) said in an injury update on Monday that

Lyon would not play any further part in the home summer after having surgery on a high-grade hamstring injury he sustained during the third Ashes test.

A target date for his return would be determined later.

CA said Hazlewood had started running again after hamstring and Achilles injuries and was on track to play in the T20 World Cup starting on February 7.

McDonald said Cummins would be included in Australia's squad of 15 for the World Cup, to be co-hosted by India and Sri Lanka, but would need to be cleared by a scan on his lower back.

"Pat will have a scan, I think in another four weeks, so that'll give us the information then on where he's at for the World Cup," McDonald added.



Usman Khawaja of Australia departs after being dismissed by England's Gus Atkinson during the fourth Ashes Test in Melbourne. (Reuters)

ASHES

ICC rates MCG pitch 'unsatisfactory' after two-day Test

'THE MCG PITCH WAS TOO MUCH IN FAVOUR OF THE BOWLERS'

AFP
Melbourne

The Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG)'s seam-friendly pitch for the fourth Ashes Test was rated "unsatisfactory" yesterday by the International Cricket Council after it ended inside two days.

Under the world governing body's four-tier rating system "unsatisfactory" is the second lowest, characterising a pitch "favouring the bowlers too much".

It broke the venue's streak of "very good" ratings for the past three Boxing Day Tests and earned it one demerit point.

"The MCG pitch was too much in favour of the bowlers," said match referee Jeff Crowe.

"With 20 wickets falling on the first day, 16 on the second day and no batter even reaching a half-century, the pitch was 'unsatisfactory' as per the guidelines and the venue gets one demerit point."

England beat Australia by four wickets in the final session of day two, with no batsman scoring more than 46 across the four innings. The first Test in Perth also ended in two days, but that pitch was rated "very good" by the ICC.

MCG curator Matt Page and his team left 10 millimetres (0.4 inches) of grass on the wicket, providing the seamers with movement and bounce and making batting treacherous.

The carnage left Cricket Australia facing Aus\$10mn (US\$6.7mn) in revenue shortfall, with tickets for day three and four needing to be refunded.

"We were disappointed for the fans holding tickets for days three and four, and also the millions of fans excited to watch the action in Australia and around the world,



Fans cheer as England's Ben Duckett is dismissed during the second day of the fourth Ashes Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in Melbourne on Saturday. MCG pitch offered lavish movement to seam bowlers during the Test. (AFP)

that the pitch did not provide the MCG's customary balance between bat and ball," said Cricket Australia's chief of cricket James Allsopp.

"We appreciate the outstanding work the MCG staff have done over recent years producing excellent Test match pitches," he added.

Before the ICC decision was handed down, Australia coach Andrew McDonald came to the defence of Page and warned against authorities meddling in pitch preparation.

McDonald said Page had done an "outstanding" job over the years and the batsmen should also

shoulder some of the blame for not scoring enough runs.

"The perspective that I always use is we have bad Test matches as well - this Test we weren't at our best and sometimes these things can happen.

"We support him in what he's done and are really proud of the evolution of the MCG.

"He's found a nice balance for a long period of time."

Cricket Australia are set to undertake their own end-of-season review of the management of Test wickets. Chief executive Todd Greenberg has suggested a more interventionist approach might be

needed, with shorter Tests "bad for business".

But McDonald said he was not in favour of any interference, with curators in Australia traditionally independent when preparing pitches, both from captains and Cricket Australia.

"I don't want to get to a situation... where we are asking for specific surfaces and tailor-made," McDonald said.

"I don't think Australia will ever go there, and I don't think they've ever been there, to my knowledge."

Australia lead the series 3-1 with the fifth and final Test in Sydney starting Sunday.

SPOTLIGHT

Potts in line for Sydney Test after Atkinson injury

Reuters
Melbourne

England's ever-changing attack will have yet another iteration in the Ashes finale in Sydney with Matthew Potts expected to replace injured fast bowler Gus Atkinson for the fifth and final Test.

Atkinson was ruled out of the match, which starts on January 4, having strained his left hamstring soon after picking up his third wicket during England's victory at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Saturday.

Atkinson is the third England seamer to return home early following Mark Wood and Jofra Archer but will not be replaced in the squad.

One-Test Surrey pacer Matthew Fisher is the other reserve quick in the side but 10-Test Potts may be first cab off the rank as the last unused seamer from the original squad of 16.

If selected, it would be the fast-medium pacer's first Test since taking five wickets in a heavy defeat by New Zealand in Hamilton a year ago.

While England brought a large crop of quicks for the long series, their fans may never have imagined their first Test win in Australia in 15 years would be delivered with Brydon Carse and Atkinson starting with the new ball, and Josh Tongue being named Man of the Match after taking seven wickets.

With 12 wickets in two

matches at an average of 18.58, Tongue's figures have raised questions as to why selectors waited until the third Test in Adelaide to pick him.

The door was open for Tongue when Wood was ruled out of the series after the first Test defeat in Perth, but selectors opted for spin-bowling all-rounder Will Jacks instead of a fourth seamer for the pink ball Test in Brisbane.

Tongue's unorthodox action and early release of the ball has proved a handful for Australia's batters, earning praise from Steve Smith, who has been dismissed by the Nottinghamshire quick in every first-class match they have played against each other.

"He gets above the perpendicular, shapes the ball back into you with that angle, and draws you into playing, I suppose - similar to Scotty Boland in a way," the Australia batsman told reporters after the defeat in Melbourne.

"(They have) similar release points and angles they create. He's a good bowler, bowled really nicely in this game, and he's done a pretty good job every time he's had the opportunity to play for England."

Tongue's efforts drew similar praise in English media reports on tour, and also prompted questions about who should open the bowling in Sydney.

Carse and Atkinson opened in Melbourne but Atkinson's injury could see Tongue take on the lead role.



England's Gus Atkinson during the second Ashes Test at The Gabba in Brisbane. (Reuters)

OPINION

Root says 'silly' to change England management after Ashes loss



England's Joe Root bats during the second day of the fourth Ashes Test in Melbourne on Saturday. (AFP)

AFP
Melbourne

Veteran England batsman Joe Root has said it would be "silly" to change England's management team after losing the Ashes, with players "absolutely committed" to the current setup.

England meekly surrendered the famous urn after just 11 days of play with back-to-back eight-wicket defeats in Perth and Brisbane and an 82-run loss at Adelaide.

Their capitulation was compounded by criticism of their low-key preparations and allegations of excessive drinking during a mid-series beach break in Noosa.

The team restored some pride with a frantic four-wicket win in Melbourne, snapping an 18-match winless streak on Australian soil.

It relieved pressure on coach

Brendon McCullum, skipper Ben Stokes and cricket chief Rob Key, who have all indicated they want to stay in their roles.

"In terms of the playing group, we're absolutely committed to the management," Root, England's all-time leading Test run-scorer and a former captain, told English media in Melbourne. "Yes, we can be better and there are certain areas that we'll continue to keep working at, but the management work extremely hard.

"They might do things in a slightly different way, but I think we've made great strides as a group and a big reason for it is because of the guys we have behind us."

Management's case to stay on would be strengthened by another win in the fifth Test in Sydney starting Sunday.

Root was captain on England's last tour of Australia in 2021-22 when they were crushed 4-0,

costing coach Chris Silverwood and cricket director Ashley Giles their jobs.

But Root said a lot of progress had been made since under the current regime.

"You look at the group of players we've got and you look at the guys that were involved in the team when I was captain, four years ago, and you look at their records individually, and every single one of them has improved as a player," he said. "This team has improved. I think it would be silly (to consider change) for the amount of hard work and things that have been done."

Victory in Melbourne was Root's first in Australia in more than a decade of trying and he said it "would be better if we win next week as well".

"If we can build on it and do it again next time it's momentum in the right direction for the next tour here (in 2029-30)," he added.

SPOTLIGHT

Joshua injured in Nigeria highway crash

AFP
Lagos

Former world heavyweight champion **Anthony Joshua** suffered “minor injuries” in a fatal car accident that killed two people yesterday, Nigerian police said. Pictures circulating online showed a shirtless Joshua - a British national of Nigerian heritage - surrounded by what appeared to be broken window glass on the seats around him. The circumstances around the wreck are “currently being investigated,” said police in Ogun state, just north of Nigeria’s economic capi-

tal Lagos, which throngs with visitors from across the country and diaspora each December. Joshua “was seated in the rear of the vehicle, sustained minor injuries and (is) receiving medical attention,” the police statement said. Joshua’s promoter Eddie Hearn told *Daily Mail Sport* he was on a family holiday and “awoke to the news of this incident”. “We are trying to contact Anthony and in the meantime we don’t want to speculate on how he is but thankfully he appears OK from what I have seen in the images,” he said. Police said the wreck, in which two people in Joshua’s car were killed, occurred around 11:00 am,

in the town of Makun, along the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway. Nigeria’s Federal Road Safety Corps said in a statement that the Lexus Joshua was riding in “was suspected to be travelling beyond the legally prescribed speed limit on the corridor, lost control during an overtaking manoeuvre and crashed into a stationary truck... by the side of the road”. Witness Adeniyi Orojo told Punch news Joshua was travelling in a two-vehicle convoy, and was seated behind his driver. “The passenger beside the driver and the person beside Joshua died on the spot,” he said. The police gave the same toll, saying the two killed were “pas-

sengers in the vehicle” who “lost their lives at the scene”. The names of the victims have not been released but a spokesman for the Ogun state governor said preliminary reports indicated they were “two male foreign nationals”. Earlier this month Joshua knocked out YouTuber-turned-boxer Jake Paul in a Netflix-backed bout in Miami. The former Olympic champion Joshua has since been linked with a fight against compatriot and fellow former world champion Tyson Fury. Joshua’s last fight prior to the match with Paul was a fifth round knockout loss to fellow Briton Daniel Dubois in September last year.



TENNIS

Wawrinka ‘at peace’ with retirement but no plans to go quietly

‘Of course, I’m still passionate about the game, about the sport I love’

AFP
Perth

Three-time Grand Slam winner **Stan Wawrinka** said yesterday he was “at peace” with his decision to make 2026 his last year on tour but insisted there were still goals to meet. The 40-year-old announced this month that he plans to call it quits, with the United Cup in Perth starting Friday the beginning of the end for the popular Swiss star. “Of course, I’m still passionate about the game, about the sport I love,” he said. “What I received from it, the emotion playing in a different country, coming back here with a lot of fans, a lot of support, so I’m going to miss that part, that’s for sure,” he said. “The last few months, I’ve had time to decide whether it will be my last year or not, and for me, it’s quite clear. I’m happy with the decision, I’m at peace with that.” Wawrinka won the Australian Open in 2014, the French Open a year later and the US Open in 2016, at a time when Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic were dominating men’s tennis. A former world number three, he is now ranked 157 after struggling with injuries but said he would work as hard as ever this season. “I still want to play some good tennis, I still have goals. Hopefully I can come back in the top 100, finish on a good ranking,” he said. “I want to play the full year, the big tournaments, the main ones, and let’s see my ranking in the next few months.” Wawrinka has 16 career ATP titles although the last came in Geneva in 2017. He won Olympic



gold in doubles alongside Federer at Beijing in 2008 and helped deliver a first Davis Cup triumph for Switzerland in 2014. Wawrinka leads a Swiss team also boasting world number 11 Belinda Bencic at the mixed-teams United Cup where they are grouped with France and Italy. In Perth, Wawrinka will captain and compete alongside Bencic, another player who achieved national glory when she led Switzerland to the 2022 Billie Jean King Cup trophy, a year after winning women’s singles gold at the Tokyo Olympics. With such a history of suc-

cess when donning Swiss colours, both Wawrinka and Bencic will be motivated to translate that to the United Cup. In two previous appearances, in 2023 and 2025, the team has finished second in its group and not progressed to the knockout stage. Bencic has the form and confidence behind her to help change that. The 28-year-old captured a late-season title at the WTA 500 tournament in Tokyo, her second title of 2025 after she triumphed in Abu Dhabi in February. Those trophies came either side of her run to the Wimbledon semi-finals, her best performances at a major

in almost six years. Bencic is set to take part in a blockbuster against top-10 star Jasmine Paolini of Italy - scheduled for the evening of 4 January - a day after facing Roland Garros breakout star Lois Boisson. Wawrinka, meanwhile, takes on France’s Arthur Rinderknech and Flavio Cobolli of Italy, both players who shot up the rankings in 2025. Should the Swiss prevail and move on to the quarter-finals, and possibly beyond, it would mark the latest success in Bencic’s upward trajectory while serving as a memorable farewell to the competition for Wawrinka.

FOOTBALL

Spurs rising star Gray eager to keep learning after first senior goal

AFP
London

Tottenham Hotspur teenager Archie Gray is determined to improve after scoring his first professional goal in a valuable 1-0 win at Crystal Palace. Gray was at fault when Spurs conceded a goal in a 3-0 loss at Nottingham Forest a fortnight ago after being dispossessed on the edge of his own penalty area, but was backed by Spurs manager Thomas Frank afterwards. The 19-year-old retained his place in Spurs’ midfield and rewarded that decision at Selhurst Park with a close-range header to score for the first time on his 112th professional appearance. “It was a difficult game for me at Forest,” said Gray after he helped Tottenham to only a second win in their last nine Premier League matches. “The mistake was obviously my fault but that game I just tried to get on the ball as much as I could, tried to be positive and forget about the mistake. “Obviously (this) still wasn’t the best game, it was a scrappy game but to get a goal is something every child dreams of,” he also told SpursPlay.

“We knew if we could keep a clean sheet, we would get the chances to try and get a goal. Our back four was amazing and everyone to be fair with the mentality. “I just found myself in the right place at the right time and it was probably Richy’s (Richarlison’s) flick which did all the work. I was stood what, two yards out from goal? “I didn’t really have much to do but it’s an incredible feeling.” Gray comes from a long line of professional footballers, with his relatives including Eddie and Frank Gray, both stars of the celebrated Leeds team of the early 1970s. But it was advice from his father Andy Gray, the former Nottingham Forest forward, that helped him recover from his recent error. “My Dad has always said to me after you make a mistake, just go get on the ball and don’t be scared,” Gray explained. “That is something that stuck with me and I will never go hiding for the ball or anything like that. “It is not something I have ever done or will do. If I make a mistake, that is football sometimes and I have just got to learn from that. I have and I’ve been working on training every day to put it right.”



Tottenham Hotspur’s Archie Gray. (Reuters)

FOCUS

De Minaur sets sights on Sinner and Alcaraz

AFP
Sydney

Alex de Minaur has muscled up in a bid to bridge the gap on Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz, with the Australian aiming to be a “disruptor” to the pair’s tennis dominance. The world number seven is yet to beat either player and admits he has to find new weapons to challenge the Spaniard and Italian who have shared the last eight Grand Slam titles. In contrast, De Minaur is yet to go beyond the last eight at a major. “I’ve played some very close matches over the years with both of them and you feel like you’re getting closer and closer,” De Minaur told reporters in Sydney ahead of the season-opening United Cup starting on Friday. “You’ve got to work on your game, find new weapons. “For me, it’s finding different ways to hurt these players and



trying to be ready to take more risks and be a little bit more of a disruptor. “There’s a couple of things here and there that we’ve tried to work towards in my team throughout this off-season to try to take the next step, and that’s obviously the next goal.” One of the things De Minaur has been working on is body

strength, employing a new fitness trainer as he prepares for the Australian Open in Melbourne on January 18. “I’m ultimately trying to get bigger and stronger and just keep on improving,” he said. “Over the years I’ve gained a little bit of weight, which has definitely helped me.

“There’s no substitute for hard work, so that’s what we’ll be doing.” De Minaur secured one title last season in Washington, adding to his nine other career victories. Australia face the Czech Republic and Norway at the mixed-teams United Cup, which is also being played in Perth.

FIFA WORLD CUP TICKET DEMAND BREAKING ALL RECORDS

WASHINGTON: More than 150mn ticket requests have been submitted by fans from more than 200 countries for the 2026 World Cup in North America, FIFA announced yesterday. The demand has reached record levels just 15 days after the start of the random selection draw ticketing phase, which remains open until January 13. “We have 6 to 7mn tickets on sale... in 15 days we received 150 million ticket requests,” FIFA president Gianni Infantino said at the World Sports Summit in Dubai yesterday. “So 10mn ticket requests every single day. It shows how powerful the World Cup is. “In the almost 100 years of the World Cup, FIFA has sold 44mn tickets in total. So, in two weeks... we could have filled 300 years of World Cups. Imagine that. This is absolutely crazy.” The 48-team World Cup is taking place across 16 host cities in the United States, Mexico and Canada from June 11 to July 19. Fans from the U.S. have made the highest number of ticket requests, followed by Germany and the United Kingdom, per FIFA. “This overwhelming response from passionate fans is a true representation of how our game is loved globally - we are going to make history in North America when we bring the world together like never before in a celebration of unity and the best of football,” Infantino said. Following the closing of the current ticket request phase, a draw will take place that gives all fans an equal chance of success. Those who are unsuccessful will have the opportunity to secure their seats during the subsequent sales phases as additional tickets are made available.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Mujica's hat-trick in Al Sadd's win over Al Shamal

By Sports Reporter
Doha

With the help of striker Rafa Mujica's hat-trick, Al Sadd continued their winning run in the Qatar Stars League (QSL) by defeating second-placed Al Shamal 3-0 at Al Shamal Stadium yesterday.

After this victory, Roberto Mancini's side raised their tally to 20 points and moved to third place in the league table. Spanish striker Mujica scored all three goals for the former champions, finding the net in the 19th, 50th, and 54th minutes. It was his second consecutive hat-trick for the side, after achieving the same in the last AFC Champions League Elite game against Shabab Al Ahli of the UAE.

Mujica expressed his delight after scoring hat-trick of goals yesterday. "I am very happy with the win and to have contributed to this great victory alongside my teammates," Mujica said after the match.

"We knew very well how important this match was, so we entered the game with seriousness and strong determination to achieve the win and secure the three points, and we succeeded in achieving our objective," the 27-year-old striker said in his post-match comments.

Speaking about scoring three goals for the second consecutive match, he said: "Scoring three goals for the second consecutive game makes me very happy."



Al Sadd striker Rafa Mujica celebrates after completing a hat-trick of goals against Al Shamal in their Qatar Stars League match yesterday.



Al Sadd players celebrate after their 3-0 win over Al Shamal yesterday.

AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

Egypt finish group stage unbeaten after Angola draw

Angola third in Group B and have to wait to see if they advance

Reuters
Agadir, Morocco

Egypt rested all their key players but still kept up their unbeaten run at the Africa Cup of Nations, drawing 0-0 with Angola yesterday to finish their Group B campaign on seven points.

Egypt had already confirmed top spot in the group before kick-off, allowing them the luxury of making 11 changes from their 1-0 win over South Africa on Friday, and giving players like Mohamed Salah and Omar Marmoush the day off.

Angola finished third in the group but must wait to see whether they could advance to the last 16 as one of the best four third-placed finishers.

Their two-point haul means they have an anxious wait and will only advance if Comoros and Zambia lose in Group A later on Monday and Tanzania and Uganda are beaten in their last Group C matches on Tuesday.

Angola had the better of the chances to win the game with Chico Banza's 42nd-minute effort coming closest.

He played a quick one-two with fellow forward Mabululu and held off two defenders but put his effort past the post.

Mabululu had two shots on goal and captain Fredy shaved the outside of the post with a free kick early in the second half, after forcing a sharp save from Egypt goal-



Angola's defender Nurio Fortuna (right) vies for the ball with Egypt's forward Mostafa Fathi during the Africa Cup of Nations Group B match in Agadir yesterday. (AFP)

keeper Mostafa Shobeir minutes before the break.

Substitute Mbala Nzola had a run on goal in the 80th minute but hit the side netting while a last-minute free kick from Manuel Benson went sailing over.

French-based striker Mostafa Mohamed captained Egypt and set up a 20th-minute opportunity

with a spectacular overhead kick from a corner that offered Hossam Abdelmaguid a chance to score from close range, but he headed over the crossbar.

Substitute Ahmed Zizo could also have claimed the opener in the second half but was thwarted while in a good position.

Egypt will stay in Agadir for

their last-16 clash against one of the best third-placed finishers next Monday.

South Africa, who beat Zimbabwe 3-2 in Marrakesh in the other Group B clash on Monday, ended second in the group with six points, and will play the runner-up in Group F in their last-16 tie in Rabat on Sunday.

FOCUS

Arsenal boss Arteta will 'actively look' at January signings

AFP
London

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta says his Premier League leaders will be "actively looking" at bolstering their squad during the January transfer window.

The Gunners could be missing up to four defenders for their key match against high-flying Aston Villa at the Emirates today.

Jurrien Timber, Riccardo Calafiori, Ben White and Cristhian Mosquera were all absent for Arsenal's tense win over Brighton on Saturday which kept them two points clear of title rivals Manchester City at the top of the table.

Arsenal spent more than £250 million (\$337 million) on eight new arrivals during the summer transfer window and Arteta is prepared to bring in further recruits next month.

"The window is there and I mean we are Arsenal and we have to be looking at it - 'Okay, what do we need?' And we have to be actively looking and then, whether we can do it or not, that's a different story," he said, with the north London club bidding to be crowned champions of England for the first time since 2004.

The Spanish boss added: "But our job is to always be very prepared because something can happen, so hopefully it'll be very positive. "When you look across the other clubs, they have 24 or 25 squad players. Although

we have had more injuries than expected, some of them not avoidable, we want to be better and we know how important the part of having the right availability with players is going to be this season."

Villa ended Arsenal's 11-match unbeaten run in the league with a stoppage time 2-1 victory over Arteta's men on December 6.

The Birmingham club, fresh from securing a club record 11th straight win in all competitions, will head into Tuesday's contest knowing another victory would draw them level on points with Arsenal.

Asked if a Villa side managed by compatriot Unai Emery, a former Arsenal boss, were title contenders, Arteta replied: "They are meant to be there when you look at what they are doing and how consistent they have been and what Unai has done with the club.

"They fully deserve that credit because they are doing it on the pitch where you have to show your level.

"But every opponent that comes here, we want them to suffer, and be as dominant as we were against Brighton for the majority of the game.

"We know we will have a tough match. We will watch the last game back (against Villa) and I have a few ideas on things that we have to do better.

"It was quite cruel on us, the way we lost it, but we have learned from it and we can use that as motivation and hunger in the right manner."

OPINION

Amorim says now is the time to change formation

AFP
London

Manchester United manager Ruben Amorim insisted he had to establish a formation at Old Trafford before asking his squad to demonstrate tactical flexibility as succumbing to media pressure would have been "the end" for him.

Amorim departed from a back three with wing-backs for the first time in Friday's 1-0 win over Newcastle and instead fielded a conventional back four with two holding midfielders.

The Portuguese boss memorably once said not even the Pope could force him to change his system. But Amorim, with United now just three points adrift of a Champions League place, insisted he was never as obstinate as he appeared.

"When I came here last season, I understood maybe I don't have the players to play well in that system, but it was the beginning of a process," he said ahead of Tuesday's match

against relegation-threatened Wolves at Old Trafford.

"We were trying to build an identity. Today is a different moment. We don't have a lot of players, and we need to adapt, so they understand why we are changing."

The 40-year-old former Sporting Lisbon boss added: "When you (the media) talk about changing the system all the time, I cannot change because the players will understand I'm changing because of you and I think that is the end for the manager.

"When we are playing well in our system, that is the moment to change.

"We are going to become a better team because when all the players return, we are not going to play with three defenders all the time."

United only had two wins in eight games prior to beating Newcastle and will be without seven senior players for the match against bottom-of-the-table Wolves, still without a victory after 18 Premier League fixtures this season.

South Africa edge Zimbabwe 3-2 to book knockout place

Oswin Appollis scored a penalty in the final 10 minutes to hand South Africa a 3-2 victory over Zimbabwe in Marrakesh yesterday and seal second spot in Group B at the Africa Cup of Nations, dumping their southern African rivals out of the tournament.

South Africa finish with six points in the group, one behind winners Egypt. Both of those advance to the last 16 as Angola (2) finish in third and face an anxious wait to see if that is enough as one of the four best third-placed sides.

South Africa led three times in the game thanks to a first international goal from Tshepang Moremi, as well as strikes from Lyle Foster and Appollis, but coach Hugo Broos will be concerned by how open his side were at times at the back.

Tawanda Maswanhise scored an excellent first equaliser for Zimbabwe and they also profited from an Aubrey Modiba own goal as they missed several other chances and should have earned at least a draw.

South Africa, who finished third in the Ivory Coast two years ago and have qualified for the 2026 World Cup, have yet to hit top gear in the tournament, and were cut apart far too easily by Zimba-

bwe at times. South Africa led after seven minutes as Moremi's shot took a wicked deflection off Divine Lunga and looped into the net.

Zimbabwe hit back in the 19th minute with a goal that will go down as one of the best of the tournament as Maswanhise picked up the ball 35 yards out and danced past two defenders before drilling a low shot past goalkeeper Ronwen Williams.

But South Africa were back in front five minutes after the break when Lunga's back header to keeper Washington Arubi allowed Foster to sneak in ahead and nod the ball into the net.

Zimbabwe equalised again in the 73rd minute as Maswanhise's low shot was saved by Williams, but the ball deflected onto Modiba and into the net for an own goal.

South Africa were awarded a penalty with 10 minutes remaining when midfielder Marvelous Nakamba made a goalkeeper-style diving save and handled a shot that appeared to be going wide.

Appollis converted from the spot and Zimbabwe's hopes of qualifying for the knockout stages at the sixth attempt were dashed.



South Africa's midfielder Oswin Appollis celebrates scoring the team's third goal from a penalty during the Africa Cup of Nations Group B match against Zimbabwe in Marrakesh yesterday. (AFP)