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Regaining Super Cup will give Barcelona ‘energy’, says Flick

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DAKAR RALLY

Al-Attiyah slips to 10th place after two punctures, Guthrie takes lead

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Overnight leader Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah slipped to 10th place at Dakar Rally after the Qatari ace suffered two punctures in yesterday's 421km third stage in Saudi Arabia. Five-time winner al-Attiyah had led the standings after Monday's stage but dropped to 11 minutes and 39 seconds off the pace. He was the only driver of Monday's leading six to remain in the top 10. Toyota had filled the top five places in the second stage.

Yesterday, Ford Raptors filled the top five places as American Mitch Guthrie Jr won the third stage, his first victory in the top car category, and took the overall lead. Guthrie ended the loop starting and finishing in Al-Ula with a 26 second overall lead over Czech driver Martin Prokop with

Sweden's Mattias Ekstrom third. "We started at the back and (co-driver) Kellon (Walch) killed it with the navigation," said Guthrie. "There were a lot of tricky spots, but we had no flat tyres. The car was great so we just kept moving all day, really."

Al-Attiyah, who finished 22 minutes 11 seconds behind Guthrie and dropped from first to tenth place overall said: "Today was very tricky. We had two punctures and it really wasn't easy. "We took it easy on the last one hundred kilometres because we just needed to survive and finish the stage. Today and yesterday, we just need to survive. But I'm quite happy, we didn't lose too much time. Tomorrow will be a good day".

Spaniard Carlos Sainz, a four-times Dakar winner still competing at 63, was in fourth place overall and compatriot Nani Roma fifth. Brazilian Lucas Moraes was sixth with Dacia Sandrider team-

mates Cristina Gutierrez, Al-Attiyah and Sebastien Loeb seventh, 10th and 12th respectively. Nine-time world rally champion Loeb also lost time with two punctures in the first 100km and no further spare tyre after that. "We're driving at about 20% of our capacity just to avoid punctures and we still get them," said the Frenchman. "You don't see the punctures coming and with two flat tyres and 300km to go, I had no spare wheels left so we drove the rest of the stage at crawling pace. I'm just happy to be at the finish because at one point I really didn't think we were going to make it".

In the motorcycle category, Spain's To-sha Schareina won the stage for Honda with Australia's defending champion Daniel Sanders retaining the overall lead on a KTM, one minute and seven seconds ahead of Honda's Ricky Brabec. Today's fourth stage is 417km from Al-Ula with an overnight bivouac in the desert.



Dacia Sandriders' Qatari driver Nasser al-Attiyah and Belgian co-driver Fabian Lurquin compete during the stage three of the 48th edition of the Dakar Rally in Al Ula, Saudi.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Gharafa stay top after narrow win over Umm Salal

Rayyan regain winning form with a 3-1 victory over Sailiya

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Leaders Al Gharafa returned to winning ways after edging Umm Salal 3-2 in the Qatar Stars League yesterday. The victory lifted Al Gharafa to 28 points, five clear of second-placed Al Rayyan, while Umm Salal remained on nine points in tenth place.

Gharafa were coming off a surprise defeat in the previous round at the hands of Al Shahaniya, who beat them 3-0, but they responded strongly with a commanding first-half display. Jamal Hamad put Gharafa ahead early, scoring in the fifth minute before doubling the advantage in first-half stoppage time (45+5). Romanian winger Florinel Coman added the third goal in the 79th minute to put Gharafa firmly in control.

Umm Salal mounted a late comeback, reducing the deficit through Croatian Antonio Mance in the 86th minute before Spaniard Cristo Gonzalez struck again in the 89th minute, but it proved too late to deny Gharafa all three points.

Later, Al Rayyan also regained their winning form with a 3-1 victory over Al Sailiya. Rayyan's goals were scored by Spaniard David Garcia in the 23rd minute and Brazilian Roger Guedes, who netted twice in first-half stoppage time (45+1) and again in the 86th minute. Al Sailiya's lone goal came through Khaled Ali in the 65th minute. The win moved Al Rayyan up to third place with 23 points, while Al Sailiya stayed on eight points in 11th place.

Al Sailiya began brightly and threatened early when Mohammed Al Taabouni tested the Rayyan goalkeeper with a shot that was turned behind for a corner in the fifth minute. However, Al Rayyan soon took control and opened the scoring from a corner kick delivered by Guedes, which found David Garcia, who fired home from close range.

Rayyan continued to press and nearly doubled their lead when Gabriel Pereira's powerful effort from the edge of the box flew just over the crossbar in the 44th minute. The second goal arrived moments later as Rodrigo Moreno's cross was finished by Guedes in stoppage time.

After the break, Al Rayyan maintained their attacking momentum. Guedes came close to a third when he broke into the area in the 61st minute but lifted his shot over the bar. Al Sailiya pulled one back against the run of play when Khaled Ali struck powerfully after a defensive lapse in the 65th minute.

Rayyan responded with renewed pressure, hitting the crossbar from a free kick in the 68th minute, before sealing the win late on. A corner from Thiago Silva was met by Guedes, who headed in his second goal of the night in



Al Gharafa's Jamal Hamad celebrates after scoring against Umm Salal in the Qatar Stars League.



Al Rayyan and Al Sailiya players vie for the ball. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

the 86th minute to complete the victory. Al Rayyan's Jassim Jaber expressed his delight after his side's victory. He said: "We succeeded in getting the result we were looking for and that is what is important. There is no doubt that starting the second half of the league competition with this victory will be important for us going forward."

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar eye strong start against UAE in U-23 Asian Cup opener



Qatar players train in Jeddah yesterday, ahead of their AFC U-23 Asian Cup match against the United Arab Emirates.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Qatar will be aiming to set the tone for their AFC U-23 Asian Cup campaign when they face the United Arab Emirates in their Group B opener today at the Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Sports City Stadium in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Head coach Ilidio Vale underlined the importance of a positive start, describing the opening fixture as one of the most challenging phases of the tournament. "The focus is on the first match against the UAE, because opening games are always difficult due to the high motivation and desire to start strongly," the Portuguese coach said during the pre-match press conference.

Confident in his squad, Vale added that Qatar possess "a fantastic group of players" capable of delivering the required performance as the team looks to progress step by step in the competition.

This marks Qatar's sixth appearance at the tournament finals, with the side hoping to better their best-ever finish of third place at the 2018 edition in China. Preparations have gone smoothly, and captain Jaseem al-Sharshani expects a stern test against a well-organised UAE side. "The first match is always the most difficult," said the Al Ahli midfielder. "UAE are playing well, so we are looking forward to the challenge. We will take it match by match."

Al-Sharshani also highlighted the personal significance of the tournament, viewing it as an opportunity to push for senior national team selection ahead of Qatar's second successive FIFA World Cup appearance. "This is a very important tournament, particularly for me personally. I believe

this is a very important opportunity to prove ourselves to join the first team for the World Cup," he said.

The UAE, however, enter the contest with confidence high following an extended preparation period. Head coach Marcelo Broli believes continuity within his squad will be a key advantage. "Qatar are not easy to play against, but we are confident in our players," Broli said. "We have spent a long time together and know each other very well. This Asian Cup features the best teams, so every match is important."

Despite the absence of injured forward Sultan Adil, the UAE squad still boasts experience, including Montpellier striker Junior Ndiaye and several players who have featured at senior international level. Broli stressed a collective approach, noting that the tournament presents opportunities for other players to step up and make their mark.

**TRIVIA**

» This will be the first time Qatar and United Arab Emirates face off in the tournament, with the latter having lost each of their last three games when facing an opponent for the first time in the competition.

» Qatar have never lost the first game of an AFC U-23 Asian Cup campaign, winning three times and drawing twice; in fact, they made it past the group stage in the 2024 edition, after failing to do so in 2020 and 2022.

» UAE have lost each of their last four games in the AFC U-23 Asian Cup, only Malaysia have a longer active such streak in this competition (7 straight); UAE lost all their games in an edition for the first time in 2024, having won at least once in their other three participations.



TABLE TENNIS

# Shidong, Manyu headline WTT Champions field as Doha gets set for TT extravaganza

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The world's fastest sport is taking centre stage in the desert. Starting today, the Lusail Sports Hall transforms into a global coliseum as the 31st edition of the Qatar Open that kicks off a month-long marathon of elite competition.

This isn't just a tournament; it's a high-stakes statement of intent from Qatar, solidifying its status as the undisputed hub of the international game under the leadership of Hamad al-Hammadi and the Qatar Table Tennis Association (QTTA).

The opening act, WTT Champions Doha 2026, is a lean and mean sprint featuring only the best of the best. A staggering \$500,000 prize money is up for grabs.

A curated field of 64 players, 32 men and 32 women, representing over 50 nations - will battle for supremacy over five days of intense, single-elimination play.

There are no 'easy draws' in a field this deep, and the official bracket has already served up some mouth-watering matchups that feel like gold-medal finals.

In the men's singles, all eyes are on the top-seeded Lin Shidong of China, who faces a dangerous opening test against the electric French rising star Flavian Coton.

Meanwhile, a clash of styles and generations looms as veteran German powerhouse Dimitrij Ovtcharov goes head-to-head with Brazil's human highlight reel, Hugo Calderano, in a first-round bout that promises to set the arena on fire.

But the WTT Champions is merely the first chapter in a massive January 'Grand Slam' for the city. Once the first trophy is raised on the 11th, the action



The draw ceremony of the WTT Champions Doha 2026 is being conducted in Doha yesterday. The five-day event starts today.



moves immediately into the WTT Star Contender from January 13-18, bringing 170 players into the fold.

The focus then shifts to the 'Next Gen' stars with back-to-back Youth Contender and Youth Star Contender

events, before finally concluding with the WTT Feeder Doha at the end of the month.

This tiered gauntlet offers something for everyone, from world number ones to emerging talents fighting for their first ranking points.

With more than 200 participants including coaches and world-class training partners on-site, Doha has officially become the preferred destination for the global sports community.

The QTTA has transformed the Lusail Sports Arena into a fortress of world-class infrastructure, proving that the nation's sporting vision extends far beyond the football pitch.

For the next five days and the weeks that follow, the world will be watching the blur of the ball and the grit of the players as Doha reminds the world why it is the capital of international table tennis. The paddles are out, the draw is set, and the first serve is just hours away.

## DREAM DEBUT AWAITS AIA AND ABDULWAHAB IN DOHA



Qatar table tennis players Aia Mohamed and Mohammed Abdulwahhab are seen during the draw ceremony of the WTT Champions Doha 2026.

**Doha:** The countdown clock to the opening WTT Series event of the season is approaching its final ticks, with the first-ever WTT Champions Doha 2026 taking over Lusail Sports Arena from January 7-11. Amongst the superstar names are two of Qatar's finest players.

Wildcard entries for the five-day spectacle, Aia Mohamed and Mohammed Abdulwahhab make their WTT Champions debut, joining the world's best players in an exclusive event reserved for the table tennis elite. Despite this marking a first-time appearance for both players at this level, Aia and Abdulwahhab are no strangers to the spotlight. Both Qatari players were present at last year's ITTF World Championships Finals in Doha, flying the home flag with great pride.

While Aia's hopes were dashed at the first hurdle, Abdulwahhab picked up a mighty 4-0 win in his opening round clash against Alfred Dela Pena, finishing in the Top 64

positions in the Men's Singles field. The memories of competing at a home World Championships Finals will stick with both players throughout the rest of their careers, and soon they will have another taste of the big time as WTT Champions comes to town. Today evening, Abdulwahhab will step out onto the event venue with a huge clash against No 7 seed Sora Matsushima, with Aia rounding off the action one day later against Prithika Pavade.

Wang Manyu, Miwa Harimoto, Lin Shidong, Truls Moregard - these are just some of the world class names set to compete at Lusail Sports Arena, with highly coveted trophies and the lion's share of the \$500,000 prize money up for grabs.

For Aia and Abdulwahhab, the honour of competing at this level is something to cherish unto itself. An opportunity to test their credentials and learn from the very best is a tantalising prospect, and with home advantage on their side, they can dare to dream.

CRICKET

# Head, Smith tons put Australia on top in Sydney Test

The hosts build a lead of 134 runs with two days to go at SCG

AFP  
Sydney

Run-machine Travis Head hit a swashbuckling 163 and Steve Smith a composed unbeaten 129 as Australia built a 134-run lead over England to seize control on day three of the fifth and final Ashes Test yesterday.

It was destructive opener Head's third ton of the series, to go with the phenomenal match-winning 123 he made in Perth and 170 at Adelaide.

The fidgety Smith was equally impressive, with his 37th Test hundred driving the hosts to 518-7 by stumps at a packed Sydney Cricket Ground in reply to England's 384 after they began the day on 166-2.

Beau Webster was alongside him on 42 at the close.

The hosts lead the series 3-1 and have already retained the Ashes, with England desperate for another win after victory at the previous Test in Melbourne.

Head brought up three figures off just 105 balls and seemed destined to score 200. But he came undone in the third over after lunch by the part-time spin of Jacob Bethell, who was bowling for the first time in the series.

In his second over, Bethell trapped the 32-year-old lbw attempting a sweep shot to end a magnificent knock. Smith treated Bethell with contempt, launching him for a big six on his way to a 13th Ashes century to move past England legend Jack Hobbs. Only Donald Bradman with 19 has more. Usman Khawaja, in his 88th and last Test after announcing his retirement, fell lbw to Brydon Carse for 17, while Alex Carey made 16 before Josh Tongue enticed an edge.

Nightwatchman Michael Neser made 24 and Cameron Green 37.



England's captain Ben Stokes (left) greets Australia's Steve Smith at the end of day three of the fifth Ashes Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground yesterday. (AFP)



Australia's batsman Travis Head celebrates reaching 150 on day three of the fifth and final Ashes Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground yesterday. (AFP)

Head resumed on 91 and Neser on one after Jake Weatherald (21) and Marnus Labuschagne (48) were out on Monday.

Head clattered an early mid-wicket boundary off Ben Stokes and reached three figures with his

17th four, crunched through the covers from Tongue, windmilling his bat in celebration.

It was his 12th century and first in Sydney to cement his reputation as one of the game's most versatile batsmen.

Head only moved to the top of the order in the second innings of the first Test in Perth due to Khawaja's back injury, but he has made the position his own.

With his hundred secure, he banged three straight fours off Matthew Potts then had a massive let-off on 121 when he pulled Carse and Will Jacks dropped a sitter near the ropes.

Neser ably stuck around for 90 balls to foil England, who wasted their last two reviews on him.

Batting like a top-order batsman, he smacked four boundaries before getting a thin edge to wicketkeeper Jamie Smith off Carse.

Smith, on 12, was dropped at leg slip by Zak Crawley but safely made it to lunch and passed 50

with a drive down the ground.

When Khawaja departed, Carey produced a series of textbook strokes before being dismissed in a similar fashion to his last two Tests.

Unruffled, Smith slammed Stokes to the ropes for four to put Australia in the lead for the first time and, steely-eyed, kept going to yet another stylish century.

All-rounder Green came into the Test under increasing pressure after failing to fire with either bat or ball through the series, with his automatic selection being questioned. He produced a glorious cover drive and a big six to show flashes of what he can do.

But he then needlessly spooned Carse to Ben Duckett in the deep to throw away his wicket.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**Australia 518 for 7** (Head 163, Smith 129\*) **lead England 384** (Root 160, Brook 84, Neser 4-60) **by 134 runs**

PREVIEW

## Pakistan-Sri Lanka T20 series seen as vital World Cup tune-up

AFP  
Colombo

Pakistan captain Salman Ali Agha said yesterday the three-match T20 series against Sri Lanka will be a vital dress rehearsal for the World Cup next month, which Colombo co-host with India.

The series gets under way in Dambulla today, with the next match on Friday and the final on Sunday, all at the same venue.

"We are playing all our World Cup games in Sri Lanka and this series will help us get familiar with the conditions," Agha told reporters yesterday.

With diplomatic relations between Pakistan and India strained, Pakistan will play their World Cup games only in Sri Lanka.

Should they go the distance, both their semi-final and final will be staged in Colombo.

Pakistan will be without several marquee names, with Babar Azam, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Mohammad Rizwan and Haris Rauf currently playing their trade in Australia's Big Bash League.

"We will miss them, no doubt," Agha said. "But this is also an opportunity to try out new players."

One boost for Pakistan is the return of all-rounder Shadab Khan, back in action after being sidelined since June last year with injury.

Sri Lanka, meanwhile, will be led by Dasun Shanaka, who has been

handed the captaincy through to the World Cup.

The skipper admitted there are areas to fix after a mixed run in recent months.

"Our top order has done well in the last few series, but we need to sort out the middle order," Shanaka said. Shanaka also explained the recall of all-rounder Dhananjaya de Silva, who returns to the T20 setup after a prolonged absence.

"We needed someone who can steady the innings," Shanaka said.

"If he can hold things together, others can play their shots around him. He also gives us a bowling option and in our conditions spin is key."

### Pakistan squad

Salman Ali Agha (capt), Abdul Samad, Abrar Ahmad, Faheem Ashraf, Fakhar Zaman, Khawaja Nafay, Mohammad Nawaz, Mohammad Salman Mirza, Mohammad Wasim, Naseem Shah, Sahibzada Farhan, Saim Ayub, Shadab Khan, Usman Khan and Usman Tariq.

### Sri Lanka squad

Dasun Shanaka (capt), Pathum Nissanka, Kamil Mishara, Kusal Mendis, Kusal Perera, Dhananjaya de Silva, Charith Asalanka, Janith Liyanage, Kamindu Mendis, Wanindu Hasaranga, Dunieth Wellalage, Maheesh Theekshana, Dushan Hemantha, Traveen Mathew, Dushmantha Chameera, Matheesha Pathirana, Nuwan Thushara, Eshan Malinga.

## Left is sometimes right for NZ's switch-hitting Phillips

**Auckland:** New Zealand batter Glenn Phillips said his audacious switch-hitting show in a recent Super Smash match was no gimmick but a tactical option he has honed for years to counter left-arm spin.

In last week's match against Central Districts, Otago right-hander Phillips switched stance while off-spinner Dean Foxcroft was midway through his run-up, and hit the bowler for a four with what could have been mistaken for a full-blooded cover drive from a left-handed batter.

Jaws dropped further in the final over of the Otago innings when Phillips took up a left-hander's stance even before left-arm spinner Jayden Lennox had begun

his run-up and hit the bowler for a six.

"I do enjoy my left-handed batting training," Phillips, who smashed an unbeaten 90 off 48 balls in the game, said before leaving for New Zealand's white-ball tour of India today.

"Obviously, I do it for multiple reasons. One, just to keep both hands and both sides of the brain working, but (also) for the opportunity to take down left-arm spin. I've always been able to bat left-handed. It's something I've done since I was young," Phillips said. "I was going to switch when I was about 10-years-old and actually bat left-handed full time, but decided to stick with the right hand as it was."



MOTORSPORT

# Arabian Drag Racing League opening round from today

Our new highlight this year is the return of the Pro Mod category, says QRC Director General Sheikh Jabor

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Speed, adrenaline and intense competition take centre stage today as the 2026 Arabian Drag Racing League officially begins, launching its opening round at Qatar Racing Club (QRC)'s purpose-built drag racing venue.

The championship is held under the patronage of QRC Chairman HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani. The league features global legends across six consecutive rounds, opening with testing yesterday, qualifying today and tomorrow, tandem races Friday, and concluding February 13 with champions crowned.

With extensive experience, the organisers are fully prepared to deliver a championship worthy of its reputation.

Widely regarded as one of the world's strongest drag racing series, the club's renowned track has witnessed numerous time and speed records across categories.

QRC Director General Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani said the club has taken a number of steps to elevate the level of competition in this year's edition.

"To date, we have held three rounds of both the Qatar Drift Championship and the Qatar Drag Racing Championship, while last week we concluded the third round of Qatar Freestyle Championship this season. We have now reached the most important milestone on the annual events calendar: the 2026 Arabian Drag



Action from the last year's final round of the Arabian Drag Racing League.



Racing League," Sheikh Jabor, who is well known for his deep passion for motorsports and his strong interest in organisational and operational matters, said in a statement.

"Each year, this championship presents us with major challenges in terms of the diversity of categories, the intensity of competition, and attracting the largest pos-

sible number of motorsport fans. Our new highlight this year is the return of the Pro Mod category, which will feature elite drivers, led by the 2025 NHRA Championship title holder J R Gray, as well as the veteran champion Mike Castellana, who has won the championship title over multiple seasons. Both drivers compete for Qatar's Al Annabi Team and have been racing in the US championship for years."

"In response to competitors' requests, the Street Bike category has been added, bringing the number of motorcycle categories to two, with the possibility of increasing to three. We have expressed our readiness to add the



QRC Director General Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani.

Pro Bike category, the most powerful class in motorcycle drag racing, should the number of competitors reach six or more."

He added: "In line with the directives of the club chairman, HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani, we are keen to provide a suitable environment for all participating teams in our championships."

Sheikh Jabor affirmed that the Arabian Drag Racing League sits at the top of the club management's priorities, as it is the largest in terms of participation and the strongest in terms of competition.

"Our current focus is on mobilising all efforts to ensure the success of the championship and to

present it in the best possible image. The main focus will be on the fans by enhancing accompanying activities and events. We have provided entertainment areas for children as well as dedicated spaces for families," he said.

"As in previous years, the club will also host - on the sidelines of the championship and specifically in conjunction with its second round - the Qatar Custom Show in its 13th edition."

## Prize money approaches QR3.5mn

With the approval of 10 categories for this year's championship, approximately QR485,000 has been allocated as prize money per round. The strongest category in the championship, Pro Mod, receives the largest share of these prizes: the winner of each round will earn QR50,000, the runner-up QR25,000, and QR12,500 will be awarded to third place.

If the Pro Bike category is approved, the total number of categories will rise to 11, and the total prize value per round will increase to approximately QR530,000.

At the conclusion of the six championship rounds, the leaders of the overall standings in each category will receive a commemorative shield for the season championship in addition to a valuable cash prize, bringing the total prize pool of the championship to approximately QR3.5mn. Meanwhile, more than 150 participating companies specialising in automobiles and related industries will participate in the Qatar Custom Show.

TENNIS

## Australian Open title rivals ease through in Brisbane warm-up

AFP  
Brisbane

Australian Open title rivals Aryna Sabalenka, Madison Keys and Elena Rybakina all launched their build-up with straight-sets wins yesterday in Brisbane but home favourite Nick Kyrgios lost on his return.

Sabalenka, the world number one beaten in last year's Melbourne final by Keys, took just 48 minutes to dispose of Cristina Bucsa 6-0, 6-1 in the second round of the season-opening tournament. Sabalenka said the fact that she played so well in her first match of the campaign showed that her divisive December 28 "Battle of the Sexes" exhibition match in Dubai against Kyrgios had been worthwhile.

"When you play against a guy the intensity is completely different," said the Belarusian.

"Especially when there is Nick, who is drop-shotting every other shot, so you move a lot, so there was a great fitness for me."

"And today I was, like, whew, let's move around, you know."

Sabalenka will now play Sorana Cirstea in the third round and remains on track to meet Keys in the quarter-finals, a rematch of last year's Australian Open final. Keys



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka in action during her round of 32 match against Spain's Cristina Bucsa at the Brisbane International yesterday. (Reuters)

reached the Brisbane third round with a 6-4, 6-3 win over fellow American McCartney Kessler.

Like Sabalenka, Keys had a bye into the second round and said she had found it tough to find her rhythm early on.

"I think it's sometimes a little bit harder when the person you're playing has already played a match, and then you're kind of trying to still knock off a bit of the rust," she said.

"I felt like it took a little bit just to find my rhythm, but I feel like once I did it, I kind of settled in a little bit better."

Former Wimbledon champion

and third seed Rybakina moved through with a 6-3, 7-5 win over Chinese qualifier Zhang Shuai.

Kyrgios is making a tentative comeback to tennis after an injury-ravaged three years saw him slip to 670 in the world.

In his first tour-level singles match since March, the former Wimbledon finalist showed glimpses of his talent but lacked consistency against American Aleksandar Kovacevic in a 6-3, 6-4 loss. "I feel good and I'm going to be able to try and use it as a building block," said Kyrgios.

The Australian Open starts January 18.

FOCUS

## Djokovic pulls out of Australian Open lead-up in Adelaide

AFP  
Sydney

Serbian great Novak Djokovic yesterday pulled out of the Adelaide International, saying he was "not quite physically ready" as prepares for the Australian Open.

The 38-year-old was planning to use the event from January 12 as a springboard to the opening Grand Slam at Melbourne Park where he is targeting an 11th title and elusive 25th major crown.

"To all my fans in Adelaide, unfortunately I'm not quite physically ready to compete in the Adelaide International next week," Djokovic said on Instagram.

"It's personally very disappointing to me, as I have such great memories of winning the title there two years ago. I was really excited about returning as it truly felt like playing at home."

"My focus is now on my preparation for the Australian Open and I look forward to arriving in Melbourne soon and seeing all the tennis fans in Australia."

The world number four has not played a tour match since he defeated Lorenzo Musetti in the Athens final in early November.

Djokovic has had to settle for a



secondary role since Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz took control of the men's tour. He made the semis at all four majors in 2025 but failed to go further, with his last Grand Slam title coming at the US Open in 2023.

Meanwhile Nick Kyrgios urged Djokovic to stay in tennis "as long as possible".

Australian showman Kyrgios, competing at the Brisbane International this week as he returns from a long injury layoff, urged everyone involved in tennis to appreciate Djokovic while he was still playing. "There's obviously something there that he wants to achieve, whether it's another Grand Slam or something else,"

he told the *Sydney Morning Herald*. "But I think we should just cherish the fact that someone that old in our sport is still at the top of it and still gives everything to it."

"The longer we have guys like this around, the better it is for our sport. I feel like there's been a void in the sport ever since (Roger) Federer and (Rafael) Nadal left... and obviously when Novak goes, that era is completely gone. I want him to stay for as long as possible."

Djokovic indicated last year that he wanted to stay in the sport until the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics so he could defend the gold medal he won in Paris.

SPOTLIGHT

## De Minaur drags hosts Australia into United Cup quarters

AFP  
Sydney

World number six Alex de Minaur beat up-and-coming Jakub Mensik and then won in doubles to drag hosts Australia into the quarter-finals of the United Cup yesterday and thrill an energised Sydney crowd.

Also progressing into the last eight of the season-opening 18-team ATP-WTA event were Belgium and the Czech Republic, but Italy bowed out.

Hopes are high at home that De Minaur, fondly known as "Demon", can go deep at the Australian Open starting this month and he served warning with a 6-4, 6-1

win over the 18th-ranked Mensik. That drew Australia level in the tie against the Czech Republic and De Minaur then paired up with Storm Hunter as they won the mixed doubles rubber in straight sets to progress.

The Czechs went through despite the 2-1 loss.

"I didn't start the year the way I wanted to," said De Minaur, who fell to Casper Ruud in his first group match. "But something I've done really well in my career is bouncing back, so I'm happy I bounced back today."

In Perth, world number three Jasmine Paolini defeated France's Leolia Jeanjean 6-2, 6-3 for an opening win of the season, finally sealing the deal on her sixth match point. But it was not enough as

Italy joined France in exiting the competition.

Paolini, a two-time Grand Slam finalist, said: "First matches are always tricky."

"I'm happy how I felt on court today. We could not win the group this year but we did our best and fought to the last ball."

Today's include quarter-finals between holders the United States and Greece, and Switzerland and Argentina, both in Perth. World number two Iga Swiatek is in action in Sydney as Poland face the Netherlands.

Australia's Alex de Minaur serves against Czech Republic's Jakub Mensik during their United Cup match in Sydney yesterday. (AFP)





PREVIEW

# Regaining Super Cup success will give Barca energy: Flick

The record 15-time champions face Athletic Bilbao in Jeddah today

AFF  
Jeddah

Barcelona coach Hansi Flick said retaining the Spanish Super Cup this week would be a boost for his team's other ambitions this season. The record 15-time champions face Athletic Bilbao today in a semi-final clash at the King Abdullah Sports City stadium in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Barca won the competition last season as the first part of a domestic treble, the first triumph of Flick's reign, followed up by triumphs in La Liga and the Copa del Rey. "This tournament is a little bit different (to the equivalent competition) in Germany, but I like it," said former Bayern Munich coach Flick. "For us to win the Super Cup (last season) gave us a lot of energy for the rest of the season and this is also what we want this year."

Even though significant questions remain around their defending, Barcelona are favourites to win the Super Cup and lead La Liga after nine consecutive top flight victories. Despite being outplayed by neighbours Espanyol in a tense derby clash on Saturday, late goals and a sensational performance from stopper Joan Garcia helped the Catalans claim a 2-0 victory.

Flick insisted his team had to perform better at the back if they are to succeed in the sixth edition of the tournament held in Saudi Arabia. "It will not be an easy match (if) we make the same mistakes as on Saturday, it will not be easy, so we have to work on our things," continued Flick.

"We have to play much better in the defence, we have to play connected as one team, and this is



Barcelona players take part in a training session, ahead of the Spanish Super Cup match against Athletic Bilbao at King Abdullah Sports City in Jeddah. (AFP)

what I missed on Saturday, so we have to make things much better."

Central defender Ronald Araujo could return to action this week after an extended mental health break. The Uruguayan was granted leave for around a month following a red card in Barcelona's 3-0 Champions League defeat by Chelsea in November.

"We will see this training (session) today and I will also want to speak with him, so we have not decided how to do it tomorrow," said Flick.

"I think it takes time, so if he feels ready for tomorrow maybe we will change something, but at the moment it's not our plan to do this."

Flick confirmed Barcelona are close to signing Joao Cancelo from Al Hilal on loan until the end of the season, but the deal has not been

completed. "With Joao maybe he can give us more options also as full-back, both sides in the offence, good quality, but (as far as) I know, it's not done," said Flick.

Cancelo spent the 2023-24 season on loan at Barcelona from Manchester City.

Athletic, eighth in La Liga, last won the Super Cup in 2021, beating Barcelona in the final, and have lifted the trophy on three occasions. Only the Catalans and Real Madrid, on 13 triumphs, have a better record.

"It's widely expected that the final will be Barca against Madrid, but a lot can happen in 90 minutes, and we have to go out there and capitalise on that," said Athletic coach Ernesto Valverde.

"Our intention is to take advantage of any opportunity we get. We know the difficulties and the

opponent we're facing, we have to try to overcome them, and that's about it."

## Real Madrid's Mbappe to miss Spanish Super Cup

Real Madrid striker Kylian Mbappe will miss the Spanish Super Cup this week as he recovers from a knee sprain. The Spanish giants did not name the French superstar, the team's top goalscorer, in their squad for the tournament.

Mbappe was diagnosed with the issue last week and a source close to the 27-year-old said he would likely be sidelined for at least three weeks. Xabi Alonso's side face city rivals Atletico Madrid tomorrow in the semi-finals. The Spanish coach is under pressure after a disappointing start to the season, with his team trailing champions Barca by four points in La Liga.

FOCUS

# Chelsea appoint inexperienced Rosenior as boss

AFF  
London

Liam Rosenior was confirmed yesterday as Chelsea's new head coach on a six-and-a-half-year deal, saying the opportunity to succeed Enzo Maresca at Stamford Bridge was too good to turn down.

The 41-year-old Strasbourg boss told a press conference earlier in the day at the Ligue 1 club that he had "verbally agreed" on the move. Chelsea officially announced that Rosenior, who will take charge of his first match in the FA Cup at the weekend, had signed a deal until 2032.

"I am extremely humbled and honoured to be appointed head coach of Chelsea Football Club," he said in a statement on the Premier League team's website. "This is a club with a unique spirit and a proud history of winning trophies. My job is to protect that identity and create a team that reflects these values in every game we play as we continue winning trophies."

Rosenior has just three years' experience as a manager, with Hull City and French club Strasbourg, and has never coached in the Premier League. But he had been widely touted as the frontrunner to succeed Maresca since the Italian left Chelsea last week. Strasbourg are part of the Todd Boehly and Clearlake Capital-owned BlueCo multi-club ownership group that also controls Chelsea. Rosenior is Chelsea's fourth permanent managerial appointment since BlueCo took control of the club previously owned by Roman Abramovich in 2022.

The club said the Englishman had shown "he can build teams with a clear way of playing while setting the highest standards with players on and off the pitch". "While there will continue to be a focus on player development, the club's expectations and ambitions remain high," Chelsea added.

Rosenior said he had wanted to announce the news himself in Strasbourg because of his deep feelings for the French club. The



former defender, whose father, Leroy Rosenior, was also a player and a manager, told reporters the chance to manage Chelsea was "an opportunity I cannot turn down".

"I'm so excited about the future. I cannot lie. My whole life I've worked to be a coach," he said. "To be presented with this opportunity to manage a world-class football club is something I've always dreamed of. With that is a mixed emotion of sadness of what I'm leaving behind."

Chelsea interim manager Ca-lum McFarlane told reporters that he would remain in charge for today's Premier League match against Fulham. McFarlane said he had spoken briefly to the club's new boss. "He's obviously really excited about taking the role," he said. "It's a brief conversation, so my understanding is he's going to be at Cobham (Chelsea's training ground) later on today."

Rosenior played in the Premier League and the second-tier Championship in England. His clubs included Fulham, Reading and Hull. He had a variety of coaching roles at Derby, which included 12 matches as caretaker manager at the start of the 2022/23 season. Later in 2022 Rosenior took over as manager of Championship team Hull. He was sacked after 18 months and in July 2024 was appointed by Strasbourg, who he guided to seventh place in Ligue 1 last season.

McFarlane said Rosenior's teams played "aggressive, front-foot football" and that his appointment would inspire English managers. Since the formation of the Premier League in 1992, not a single English manager has won the title.

AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

# Boulbina extra-time stunner takes Algeria through to quarters



Algeria's forward Adil Boulbina (right) celebrates scoring the team's first goal with teammate Ramiz Zerrouki during the Africa Cup of Nations round of 16 match against DR Congo in Rabat yesterday. (AFP)

AFF  
Rabat

A thunderous strike by substitute Adil Boulbina deep in extra time settled a tense encounter as Algeria beat the Democratic Republic of Congo 1-0 in their Africa Cup of Nations last-16 tie yesterday. The game at the Moulay El Hassan Stadium in Rabat was edging towards a penalty shoot-out when Boulbina, a forward who plays club football in Qatar, was released on the left in the 119th minute and advanced into the area before unleashing a vicious strike into the net.

The moment of magic sparked wild celebrations within the ground, with the majority of the 18,837 fans in attendance backing Algeria. The 2019 champs, who won all their group games, are looking like serious contenders to win a third continental title but now face a fascinating quarter-final showdown with Victor Osimhen's Nigeria in Marrakesh on Saturday.

The outcome is a painful one for the Congolese, who came into the AFCON with big ambitions and had been hoping to set up another clash with Nigeria having defeated the Super Eagles on penalties in a World Cup qualifying play-off in November.

The Leopards will now at least be able to console themselves with the fact they have an intercontinental play-off to come in March, where a win against either

New Caledonia or Jamaica will see them qualify for a first World Cup since 1974. Algeria, having already guaranteed a berth at the finals in North America, remain focused for now on going all the way in Morocco.

The match itself, between two of the continent's leading nations, had the makings of the tie of the round but never quite lived up to its billing.

There was a lack of quality in the final third from both sides despite all the attacking talent on the pitch, with neither captain Riyad Mahrez nor the thrilling Ibrahim Maza lasting 90 minutes for Vladimir Petkovic's Algerian team.

Burnley defender Axel Tuanzebe headed just wide from a corner for DR Congo and Maza fired narrowly past the goal from the edge of the box at the other end in the first half. An Edo Kayembe shot fizzed in from range that forced a good save from goalkeeper Luca Zidane was the closest either team came in the second half as the match drifted to extra time.

Algeria had been the more consistently threatening team though, and began to turn the screw in the extra half-hour, with Congolese goalkeeper Lionel Mpsi saving well from Fares Chaibi and Baghdad Bounedjah in quick succession in the 111th minute. But a shoot-out appeared an inevitability until Zerrouki and Boulbina, who both emerged from the bench together in the second half of extra time, combined for the winning goal. Zerrouki released Boulbina with a terrific pass in behind, and the Al Duhail player did the rest.

COMMENT

# Man Utd coaching job was not in wildest dreams, says Fletcher

AFF  
London

Manchester United interim coach Darren Fletcher said yesterday he did not think he would manage the club in his "wildest dreams" as he prepares for his first game following the sacking of Ruben Amorim. The Portuguese was axed on Monday after 14 months at Old Trafford after an explosive post-match interview following his team's 1-1 draw at Leeds on Sunday.

Under-18s coach and former United player Fletcher was put in charge for today's match at Burnley and faced the press for the first time yesterday.

The former Scotland international is expected to remain in place until the club appoints a caretaker boss, with United planning to name Amorim's permanent successor at the end of the season. Fletcher, 41, said the past 24 hours at Old Trafford had been "surreal".

"It's an amazing honour to be able to lead a Manchester United team," he said. "I don't



even think it was in my wildest dreams that that was something that could potentially happen, even thinking about playing for the club and stuff like that. But to lead out the team is an amazing honour and something I am really proud to do. It's not (happened) in the circumstances that I expected it to happen so that obviously is something that doesn't sit quite easy with me, but I just have to think I've got a job to do and I've got to lead the team tomorrow and think of the great honour and pride in doing that."

Fletcher said conversations

with the club's hierarchy had focused on today's game against struggling Burnley and they would speak again after the match. Fletcher, United's technical director between 2021 and 2024, was asked whether he wanted to try to earn the manager's job on a full-time basis.

"Honestly it's not something I've thought about," he said. "I'm focusing on Burnley. I think that discussion is for after the game. There has been that much going on and it has all happened so quickly that all my concentration, efforts and thoughts have gone into Burnley."

## Dias, Gvardiol sidelined as Man City face defensive crisis

Ruben Dias will be sidelined for up to six weeks and Josko Gvardiol is out for "a long time" as Manchester City battle a growing defensive crisis, manager Pep Guardiola said.

The injuries could persuade the club to bring in reinforcements in the January transfer window, with Crystal Palace centre-back Marc Guehi understood to be on City's radar.

City announced on Monday Gvardiol was facing a lengthy lay-off with a tibial fracture to his right leg he suffered in Sunday's 1-1 draw with Chelsea. Speaking to reporters yesterday, on the eve of City's home game against Brighton, Guardiola confirmed the depth of the crisis in central defence, with John Stones also sidelined.

The City boss said Dias had injured his hamstring

and would be out of action for "between four and six weeks" while he did not put a timescale on Gvardiol's return. Referring to Stones, Guardiola said: "(He is not) ready for the next games. Of course, he's an important player for us for a long time and he was injured for a long time last season. This season looks the same. He's trying a lot and trying everything, but he's not fit."

To add to the defensive problems, Rayan Ait-Nouri is at the Africa Cup of Nations and Nathan Ake, after a number of fitness issues in recent years, is not considered a regular option by Guardiola. City, who trail Premier League leaders Arsenal by six points, are also without Savinho, Mateo Kovacic, Oscar Bobb and Omar Marmoush through either injury or international duty.