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SPOTLIGHT

Board of Directors of the Doha 2030 Asian Games Organising Committee holds its first meeting

The Board of Directors of the Organising Committee for the 21st Asian Games - Doha 2030 held its first meeting yesterday, chaired by HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) and Chairman of the Organising Committee's Board.

The meeting comes as part of the ongoing preparations to host this major continental sporting event in Qatar.

During the meeting, Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain, Secretary-General of the QOC and Member of the Board of Directors of the Organising Committee for the Doha 2030 Asian Games, reviewed the main master plan for the Games and its key pillars, and highlighted the latest updates related to the organisational and preparatory aspects, supporting the integrated preparation process for this major continental sporting event.

The Board also appointed Dr Ahmed Abdullah al-Buainain as Chief Executive Officer of the Doha 2030 Asian Games Organising Committee. In his new role, he will play a central part in overseeing the executive operations of the Organising Committee and ensuring the effective im-



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee and Chairman of the Organising Committee's Board, chaired the meeting yesterday.

plementation of approved plans and strategies, in line with the highest organisational standards and the objectives set for delivering this major continental sporting event.

The meeting also addressed ways to enhance co-ordination and integration among relevant stakeholders from both

the public and private sectors, with the aim of unifying efforts and ensuring close co-operation to deliver a successful edition of the Games that reflects Qatar's standing and organisational capabilities in hosting major continental and international sporting events.

Discussions further covered several

themes related to the sustainable legacy of the Games, optimal utilisation of existing sports infrastructure, and leveraging accumulated national expertise in organising major championships. Emphasis was also placed on the importance of adopting best practices in innovation, sustainability, and governance.



Dr Ahmed Abdullah al-Buainain was appointed as Chief Executive Officer of the Doha 2030 Asian Games Organising Committee.

The first meeting of the Organising Committee's Board of Directors marks a key foundational step in the preparations for the Doha 2030 Asian Games, in line with Qatar National Vision 2030, and reinforces the country's leading role and growing influence in the development of sport across the Asian continent.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Yansane hat-trick powers Ahli past Shamal in thriller

Rodri scores the winner as Al Arabi edge past Al Wakrah

By Sports Reporter

Doha

Sekou Yansane struck a hat-trick as Al Ahli registered a commanding 4-2 victory over Al Shamal in an entertaining Qatar Stars League match at Al Thumama Stadium yesterday.

Al Ahli led 3-1 at the break after a frantic opening spell. Yansane opened the scoring in the third minute before Alex Collado levelled for Al Shamal in the seventh. The French striker restored Al Ahli's advantage two minutes later, and Michel Flep added the third goal in the 22nd minute. Al Shamal reduced the deficit early in the second half when Omar Mohammed scored in the 49th minute, but Yansane sealed the result with his third goal 15 minutes from time. Yansane's treble was Al Ahli's first league hat-trick in 10 years.

The win saw Al Ahli bounce back from their previous-round defeat to Umm Salal and secure their first victory under new head coach Younes Ali. Al Shamal, meanwhile, suffered a second successive loss following their defeat to Al Sadd, missing the chance to move into second place. With the result, Al Ahli moved



Al Ahli's Sekou Yansane celebrates after scoring a hat-trick against Al Shamal during the Qatar Stars League match at Al Thumama Stadium yesterday.

to 15 points in ninth place, while Al Shamal remained on 20 points in third, a position now under serious threat.

Later, Al Arabi edged past Al Wakrah 1-0 at Saud bin Abdulrahman Stadium. Spanish forward Rodri Sanchez scored the winner in the 39th minute with a powerful strike from inside the penalty area. The victory lifted Al Arabi to 20 points in fifth place, level with fourth-placed Al Sadd but behind on goal difference, while Al Wakrah stayed seventh on 16 points.

SADD FACE QATAR SC, EYE SECOND SPOT

Today, defending champions Al Sadd take on Qatar SC at Suhaib bin Hamad Stadium at 7.30pm, with a win set to move them into second place. Al Sadd coach Roberto Mancini said the match was crucial as his side look to maintain momentum and close the gap on the league leaders Al Gharafa. He noted that Qatar

SC are a strong team and expected a difficult contest.

Mancini said: "The match is very important for us because we need to continue our progress and collect as many points as possible to close the gap with the league leaders. We know it will be a difficult match because Qatar SC are a good team."

Elsewhere, eighth-placed Al Duhail travel to Al Khor Stadium to face bottom side Al Shahaania at 5.30pm. Al Duhail coach Djamel Belmadi said his team were determined to get back on track and deliver improved performances in the second half of the season, starting with the match against Al Shahaania.

Belmadi admitted the team's first-leg results fell short of the club's ambitions, adding that the upcoming phase would be extremely important. He also warned of a tough test against Al Shahaania, who have shown renewed confidence following a recent coaching change.

DAKAR RALLY

Lategan takes lead, al-Attiyah in second as al-Rajhi withdraws

Agencies

Jeddah, Saudi

South Africa's Henk Lategan surged to the top of the Dakar Rally standings yesterday, winning the fourth stage ahead of Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah as defending champion Yazeed al-Rajhi was forced to abandon his title defence with technical problems.

Lategan, last year's overall runner-up, claimed his fifth career stage win in demanding conditions around Al-Ula, finishing more than seven minutes clear of al-Attiyah in the 452km special, the first half of a two-day marathon stage. The result lifted him into the overall lead by three minutes and 55 seconds over the five-time Dakar winner al-Attiyah.

Al-Rajhi's title defence unravelled early in the stage as the Saudi struggled with his customer Toyota Hilux and eventually pulled out 234km in. He had already dropped to 19th overall before calling it a day. "Sadly, our Dakar 2026 journey ends here," al-Rajhi said. "We'll come back stronger next year."

He later explained that two punctures had cost him around half an hour and, with nearly half the stage remaining and no spare tyres left, he decided to withdraw. It capped a difficult year for al-Rajhi, who crashed in Jordan last April, breaking two vertebrae.

He returned to competition only in September after months of recovery.

Lategan's victory came after a

punishing start to the rally, which he said had tested both strategy and patience. "Yesterday, we had a total of nine punctures. It's unbelievable. I think that's a record in three days. I was lost," said the factory Toyota driver, who also missed his son's sixth birthday.

"I didn't know what to do on the rocks, whether to slow down or attack. Today I decided to forget all that and just go for it. It's a lottery anyway."

Al-Attiyah, now competing with the Dacia Sandriders team, finished second on the stage to climb from 10th overnight. "It wasn't easy for us. We had a puncture and then we saw Henk Lategan pass us, but he was attacking. We did a good job, we're here, and I think we didn't lose too much time," he said. "It might even be good for our start position tomorrow. We didn't need to push any harder; we're still some way back. The car is in good condition and we're happy."

Ford's Mattias Ekstrom held third place overall, with teammate and four-time Dakar winner Carlos Sainz fourth, nearly 16 minutes off the lead. Overnight leader Mitch Guthrie of the United States dropped to 13th.

In the motorcycle category, Spain's Toshia Schareina took over the overall lead for Honda from Australia's defending champion Daniel Sanders, who slipped to third on his KTM. American Ricky Brabec moved into second.

Schareina and Brabec led a Honda one-two-three on the stage, with American Skyler Howes third and Sanders fifth.



Honda HRC's Adrien Van Beveren in action during stage four of the Dakar Rally in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia. (Reuters)



Al Arabi and Al Wakrah players vie for the ball at Saud Bin Abdulrahman Stadium.



FOCUS

Pakistan cruise past Sri Lanka in opening T20

AFP

Dambulla, Sri Lanka

Pakistan underlined their credentials as serious contenders for the upcoming T20 World Cup with a commanding six-wicket win over Sri Lanka in the opening match of the three-game series in Dambulla yesterday.

Touted as a dress rehearsal for the World Cup, which Sri Lanka will co-host with India, the series holds added significance for Pakistan, who will play all their tournament matches on the island owing to political tensions with their nuclear-armed neighbours.

Pakistan ticked most boxes on the night, first bottling Sri Lanka up for a modest 128 and then knocking off the target with 20 deliveries to spare, barely breaking sweat.

The game tilted decisively in Pakistan's favour early, with Shadab Khan ripping the heart out

of the Sri Lankan innings by striking twice in his very first over.

The leg-spinner, returning after shoulder surgery and playing his first match for Pakistan since June last year, marked his comeback with a telling spell.

"When you are coming back from injury it is tough. You have to start from zero but the surface was helping me. We have our eyes on the World Cup. With all our games being played here in Sri Lanka, this is a very good series for us," player-of-the-match Shadab said.

Abrar Ahmed complemented

Shadab neatly, finishing with 3-25, while left-arm quick Salma Mirza bowled with fire, mopping up the tail with figures of 3-18 as Sri Lanka were bowled out with four balls unused.

During the run chase, openers Saim Ayub and Sahibzada Farhan flew out of the blocks, racing to 50 in just 25 balls. Nuwan Thushara bore the brunt of the assault, conceding 31 runs in his first two overs as Pakistan seized early control.

Farhan anchored the chase with a fluent 51 off 36 balls, peppered with four fours and two sixes - his eighth T20I half-century - as Pakistan cruised home without alar-

For Sri Lanka, the defeat compounds a turbulent lead-up to the series that saw captain Charith Asalanka axed, chairman of selectors Upul Tharanga shown the door and the coaching staff reshuffled. With little time to catch their breath, the hosts face a swift rethink ahead of the second match on Friday at the same venue.

"We didn't get a good start and lost too many wickets. That is an issue we need to address. We recovered well and should have got over 150, but we lost quick wickets," Sri Lanka captain Dasun Shanaka said.

BRIEF SCORES: Pakistan 129 for 4 (Farhan 51, Ayub 24, de Silva 1-4) beat Sri Lanka 128 (Liyanganage 40, Mirza 3-18, Abrar 3-25) by six wickets.



Pakistan's Shadab Khan (centre) celebrates with teammates after taking the wicket of Sri Lanka's Dhananjaya de Silva during the first Twenty20 match in Dambulla yesterday. (AFP)

ASHES

Bethell's maiden ton gives England hope in fifth Test

England 119 ahead, but with only two second-innings wickets in hand

AFP

Sydney

Jacob Bethell fulfilled his rich potential with a chanceless maiden Test century yesterday as England built a fragile 119-run second-innings lead with two wickets remaining to give themselves a glimmer of hope in the final Ashes Test.

At the end of day four at the Sydney Cricket Ground, England had reached 302-8 with Bethell imperious on 142 not out and number 10 Matthew Potts yet to score. England are desperate for another morale-boosting win after victory in the previous Test at Melbourne. Australia lead 3-1 and have already retained the Ashes.

It was the 22-year-old Bethell who kept their faint hopes alive after Zak Crawley fell early and first-innings centurion Joe Root departed cheaply.

He powered to his hundred off 162 balls by smashing a lofted drive over midwicket for four.

"It's pretty special, it's not really sunk in yet. I haven't really had time to kind of reflect on it," Bethell told reporters.

Bethell had his parents in the stands and raised his bat towards them as he passed the milestone.

"To do that and have the family there was very special," said the left-hander. "My dad was a cricketer so he knows how it feels to be out there batting, but I don't think that stops him from getting any less nervous."

It was not just Bethell's maiden Test ton but the only one he has scored in red-ball cricket, with his previous best 96 against New Zealand. Bethell was recalled for Melbourne to replace the under-performing Ollie Pope, scoring a gritty 40 in difficult batting conditions.

He proved to be England's rock,



England's Jacob Bethell celebrates reaching his century on day four of the fifth Ashes Test at the SCG in Sydney yesterday. (AFP)

but soon saw wickets tumbling at the other end as Harry Brook was trapped lbw for 42 and Will Jacks caught without scoring in the space of three balls from part-time off-spinner Beau Webster.

"I certainly didn't think I would (impact) with spin this game," said

Webster, who is more usually employed as a seamer, but returned figures of 3-51.

Webster believed the pitch had begun to take turn. "There was a bit of wear and tear there from Stacey's footmarks," he said. "And we managed to make the most of it

in that session."

A mix-up saw Jamie Smith run out for 24 just as he and Bethell were threatening to take the game away from Australia with a sixth-wicket partnership that had reached 45.

Ben Stokes then came in at number eight with the score 264-6 after limping off with a groin injury while bowling, but the captain lasted only five balls.

Australia were dismissed for 567 before lunch on the back of Travis Head's 163 and 138 from skipper Steve Smith, a first-innings lead of 183 runs. England needed a solid start, but chief tormentor Mitchell Starc once again conjured up a first-over breakthrough - his 29th wicket for the series.

A beautiful inswinger was misjudged by Crawley who shoudered arms as it thudded into his pad and he was out lbw for one.

Fellow opener Ben Duckett was dropped on 38, but failed to capitalise and was bowled by Michael Neser on 42, his highest score in a wretched series.

Root, fresh from his first innings 160, was terrorised by Starc and Neser. He finally fell lbw after facing 37 balls for just six runs to the relentless Scott Boland.

Bethell knew he would now have to shepherd the tail on the fifth morning as England try to eke out a competitive target.

"I'm going to have to be smart around how we let Pottsy and (Josh) Tongue come in and what they face," said Bethell.

"But I'm just going to have to hit the gaps. It's a big outfield, so there are plenty of gaps and I just have to try and hit them."

BRIEF SCORES: England 384 and 302 for 8 (Bethell 142*, Duckett 42, Brook 42, Webster 3-51, Boland 2-34) lead Australia 567 (Head 163, Smith 138, Tongue 3-97, Carse 3-130, Stokes 2-95) by 119 runs.

Vaughan says time for England to move on from failed 'Bazball'

England need to finally move away from their high-risk, attacking 'Bazball' style of cricket and get back to basics after their Ashes series defeat, former captain Michael Vaughan told Reuters in an interview yesterday.

England ended the fourth day of the fifth and final Test, at the Sydney Cricket Ground, battling to avoid falling to a 4-1 loss, despite the positives of centuries from Joe Root and 22-year-old Jacob Bethell.

Vaughan, who led England to a famous home Ashes series win over Australia in 2005, said it was time for team bosses to recognise that the style imposed by coach Brendon McCullum and captain Ben Stokes had ultimately failed. "The way that England play, that 'Bazball' method, the ultra-risky method with the bat in hand hasn't worked because they haven't won the big series," said Vaughan, who is working as an analyst for Fox Sports TV. "They haven't beaten India. They haven't beaten Australia. And obviously they've lost another Ashes series

and they're not anywhere near a World Test Championship final. "So it's (a need for) acceptance from the management and the leadership group and the ECB that things need to change." The Yorkshireman said that the first innings 160 from Root and Bethell's second innings ton, both built on a solid, orthodox approach to batting, offered a clear guide to the way forward for the team. "That's the tempo of Test match batting, you just play the ball on the merit," he added.

"They're all going to score because they are naturally gifted players but the real high-risk way of playing, I'm afraid it hasn't worked." As well as opposing the zealous approach to fast run-scoring under the current England regime, Vaughan questioned the lack of attention to detail along with the widely criticised preparations for this series.

"They need a bit more focus on that attention to detail which is required at the highest level. All the other teams, New Zealand, South Africa,

India, Australia, they all seem to have more focus on attention to detail," he said. "England look like a camp that's quite loose and that's something they have to tighten up."

McCullum has an "all-formats" coaching contract with the ECB running until the end of 2027 - after the next Ashes series in England - and whatever happens to the coach, Vaughan says the status quo approach cannot remain. "I would hope that there'll be discussions after the tour to see where everyone sits down, but if the team want to stay together, they have to change," he said. "It's not down to everyone else to change. It's down to the leadership group to accept. Stubbornness is a wonderful thing in sport, but it can always be a danger if you become too stubborn and think you're doing it right all the time. "There probably needs to be some honest conversations from those that are in the group, the hierarchy of the ECB, to try and think, 'Can they change? Can they move forward with learnings from this trip?'"

"affable and practical solution that ensures the smooth and successful participation of the team."

The ICC have not commented.

Bangladesh international Mustafizur was snapped up at IPL auction in December by the Kolkata Knight Riders for more than \$1 million.

India forced Bangladesh fast bowler Mustafizur Rahman to quit the Indian Premier League (IPL) on Saturday, prompting anger in Dhaka.

Political relations between India and Bangladesh soured after a mass uprising in Dhaka in 2024 toppled then-prime minister Sheikh Hasina, a close ally of New Delhi.

India's foreign ministry last month condemned what it called "unremitting hostility against minorities" in Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's interim leader, Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, has accused India of exaggerating the scale of the violence.

The BCB yesterday said it was "firmly committed to placing the highest priority on the safety, security and well-being" of the team.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Black Caps go spin heavy for T20 World Cup campaign

AFP

Wellington

New Zealand named a spin heavy squad yesterday to travel to the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka next month, led by captain Mitchell Santner.

Three of New Zealand's four pool games will be played at the spin-friendly Chepauk Stadium in Chennai, which is a familiar hunting ground for former Chennai Super Kings Devon Conway, Rachin Ravindra, Daryl Mitchell and Santner.

Joining Santner in the spin bowling ranks are Ish Sodhi - New Zealand's second-highest wicket taker in the format - as well as all-rounders Michael Bracewell, Glenn Phillips, and Ravindra.

Coach Rob Walter also named a strong pace-bowling quartet, led by the ICC's second-ranked T20I bowler Jacob Duffy in his first World Cup.

Duffy is joined by Matt Henry, Lockie Ferguson, and Adam Milne, while Kyle Jamieson will travel to India as pace-bowling cover. Jimmy Neesham plays as a seam-bowling all-rounder.

The batting unit features Finn Allen, Mark Chapman, Tim Seifert, Conway, and Mitchell. Seifert will wicketkeep.

As always, the balance of the squad is critical.

"We've got plenty of power and skill in the batting, quality bowlers who can adapt to conditions, plus five all-rounders

who all bring something slightly different," Walter said of his squad.

"This is an experienced group and the players are no strangers to playing in the sub-continent, which will be valuable."

New Zealand exited in the group stage of the 2024 World Cup in West Indies but will be better prepared this time having arranged a five-match T20 series against defending champions and tournament co-host India this month.

They will then play a World Cup warm-up match against the United States before launching into pool play against Afghanistan, Canada, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates. Walter said his team would be well prepared for the tournament.

They will begin their Group D campaign against Afghanistan in Chennai on February 8.

"The group have had a healthy diet of T20 cricket leading into this World Cup, with three T20 International series to start the home summer, followed by the Super Smash and franchise opportunities. "We've also got a hugely exciting tour of India, which will be a big challenge and provide ideal preparation for what's to come."

SQUAD: Mitchell Santner (capt), Finn Allen, Michael Bracewell, Mark Chapman, Devon Conway, Jacob Duffy, Lockie Ferguson, Matt Henry, Daryl Mitchell, Adam Milne, James Neesham, Glenn Phillips, Rachin Ravindra, Tim Seifert, Ish Sodhi.

CYCLING

Giro champ Yates announces shock retirement

AFP
Paris

Two-time Grand Tour winner Simon Yates announced yesterday that he was retiring from professional cycling, just seven months after winning the Giro d'Italia.

The news comes after Yates enjoyed probably the best season of his career, following up his stunning Giro success with a stage victory at July's Tour de France.

"This may come as a surprise to many, but it is not a decision I have made lightly," Yates said in a statement released by his team, Vismar Lease a Bike.

"I have been thinking about it for a long time, and it now feels like the right moment to step away from the sport."

Yates, 33, shared more than a decade in the peloton with his twin brother Adam, initially together at the Jayco-AlUla team.

He sprang to prominence with a seventh-placed finish at the 2016 Paris-Nice race aged 23 but

subsequently tested positive for a banned substance and copped a four-month suspension after his team doctor took responsibility for failing to apply for a therapeutic use exemption.

Months later he secured his first Grand Tour stage win at the Vuelta, where he finished an impressive sixth.

Yates, 33, shared more than a decade in the peloton with his twin brother Adam, initially together at the Jayco-AlUla team

His most dramatic and turbulent season came in 2018 when Yates was dominating the Giro - winning three stages and holding the race leader's pink jersey - before crashing spectacularly on the imposing Colle delle Finestre climb on the third-from-last stage.

Compatriot Chris Froome stormed to victory as Yates's hopes evaporated.

Ironically, it was on that very climb in 2025 that Yates gained re-

demption with his decisive move to claim the Giro title.

He bounced back quickly from his painful setback, claiming his first Grand Tour success at the Vuelta later in 2018.

His best Tour de France finish was fourth place in 2023, just behind his brother.

He finishes his career with three Tour stage victories, six at the Giro and two at the Vuelta, while he also won the prestigious Tirreno-Adriatico stage race in 2020.

"To my team, Team Vismar Lease a Bike, thank you for your understanding and support of my decision to stop now," said Yates, who still had a year to run on his contract.

"I step away from professional cycling with deep pride and a sense of peace."

"While the victories will always stand out, the harder days and setbacks were just as important."

"They taught me resilience and patience, and made the successes mean even more."

"This chapter has given me more than I ever imagined."



TENNIS

Gauff drags US into United Cup semis, Swiatek also wins

Gauff teamed up with Harrison to battle past Tsitsipas and Sakkari

AFP
Perth

Coco Gauff pulled off double duty to drag defending champions the United States into the United Cup semi-finals yesterday while world number two Iga Swiatek did her bit for Poland.

Fourth-ranked Gauff, who suffered a surprise defeat last time out, put the United States on their way in their quarter-final against Greece with a 6-3, 6-2 win over former world number three Maria Sakkari in Perth.

Stefanos Tsitsipas brought Greece level by defeating struggling Taylor Fritz 6-4, 7-5.

In the deciding mixed doubles, Gauff teamed up with Christian Harrison to battle past Tsitsipas and Sakkari 4-6, 6-4, 10-8.

The 21-year-old Gauff struggled with her serve as she suffered her first-ever defeat at the United Cup on Monday when she was stunned by Spain's Jessica Bouzas Maneiro. "Definitely a much better match today," Gauff said after making light work of Sakkari.

"Last match, I just tried to erase it. That's the beauty of this tournament. So definitely happy to give my team the lead today."

Six-time Grand Slam champion Swiatek beat 97th-ranked Suzan Lamens 6-3, 6-2 in the tie against the Netherlands in Sydney.

Hubert Hurkacz, on his way back after being out for seven months following knee surgery,



USA's Coco Gauff (left) and Christian Harrison celebrate after defeating Greece's Maria Sakkari and Stefanos Tsitsipas in the mixed doubles at the United Cup in Perth yesterday. (AFP)

defeated Tallon Griekspoor 6-3, 7-6 (7/4) as Poland sealed their last-eight spot.

Poland will play hosts Australia, with the winner facing the United States for a place in Sunday's final.

In Perth, Switzerland's Belinda Bencic beat Solana Sierra 6-2, 6-2 but a 7-5, 6-4 loss by Stan Wawrinka to Sebastian Baez sent the tie into a mixed doubles decider. The Swiss finished off the win with Bencic and Jakub Paul clinching the winning point over Maria Lourdes Carle and Guido Andreozzi 6-3, 6-3. The mixed team United Cup features 18 teams and serves as a build-up towards the Australian Open, which starts on January 18.

MEDVEDEV EXTENDS STRONG START TO SEASON

Former world number one Daniil Medvedev extended his impressive start to the season ahead of the Australian Open with straight-sets win over Frances Tiafoe in Brisbane yesterday. The top seed took just an hour to defeat the

American 6-3, 6-2 following his equally ruthless first-round win over Hungary's Marton Fucsovics on Monday. Medvedev served superbly against Tiafoe and didn't face a break point in reaching the third round.

"I'm really happy with the way I played the two matches," said Medvedev, a three-time beaten finalist at the Melbourne major.

"It's kind of continuing what I started doing at the end of the last year, already playing better and better," he said.

HORSE RACING

Al Maqam retains Baiddaa Algaaa Cup in a thrilling finish

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Maqam successfully defended the Baiddaa Algaaa Cup at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday, landing the Local Purebred Arabian Novice over 1,700m for the second consecutive year in the colours of Khalifa bin Sheil al-Kuwari.

Drawn wide, the six-year-old faced an early test of patience. Jockey Pierre Charles Boudot settled him quietly at the back, allowing the race to unfold before asking for his effort. When the field turned for home, Al Maqam found another gear.

Striding forward with determination, he answered every challenge, digging deep as Mared Al Zaeem launched a late bid. The finish was tight, but Al Maqam held on bravely, prevailing by a



Jockey Pierre Charles Boudot guided Al Maqam to Baiddaa Algaaa Cup win at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday. PICTURE: Juhaim

neck. Saad Ali al-Kubaisi, Deputy Director of the QREC Registration & Studbook Department, crowned the winners.

Meanwhile, Purebred Arabian Show Horses featured a solid display from Nibras Al Marroona, with Salman Fahad al-Hajri steering him to a length victory.

Corinth dominated the Thoroughbred Handicap (0-95) under Alberto Sanna, stretching clear to score by an emphatic 7½ lengths, while Purebred Arabian Handicap (60-80) turned into a tight contest as Lwlich De Bozouls, partnered by Boudot, edged out his rivals by a short head.

Thouab Al Shahania showed consistency in the Purebred Arabian Handicap (55-75) under Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi while Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (55-75) went the way of Aaneef Zakhir, with Arnaud De Lepine delivering a well-timed ride to win by a length.

Ruling Master was impressive in the Thoroughbred Handicap (0-70), as Salman Fahad al-Hajri guided him to a commanding five-length victory.

Local Thoroughbred Handicap (0-45) saw Malik and Soufiane

Saadi assert their authority to win by two lengths. White Christmas delivered a strong performance in the Thoroughbred Maiden Plate, with Louis Nomis aboard for a convincing 2½-length win in the first contest yesterday.

RESULTS

33rd Al Rayyan Race Meeting - Baiddaa Algaaa Cup

WINNERS (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

1- Baiddaa Algaaa Cup - Local Purebred Arabian Novice Plate (Class 5)

Al Maqam, Julian Smart, Pierre Charles Boudot

2 - Purebred Arabian Show Horses

Nibras Al Marroona, Mohammed Hassan al-Matwi, Salman Fahad al-Hajri

3 - Thoroughbred Handicap (0-95), three-year-olds, 1700m

Corinth, Hadi al-Ramzani, Louis Nomis

Alberto Sanna

4 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (60-80)

Lwlich De Bozouls, Hamad al-Jehani, Pierre Charles Boudot

5 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (55-75)

Thouab Al Shahania, Ahmed Hassan al-Maliki al-Jehani, Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi

6 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (55-75)

Aaneef Zakhir, Eng. Osama Omer al-Dafea, Arnaud De Lepine

7 - Thoroughbred Handicap (0-70)

Ruling Master, Jassim al-Ghazali, Salman Fahad al-Hajri

8 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (0-45)

Malik, Gassim Al Ghazali, Soufiane Saadi

9 - Thoroughbred Maiden Plate, four-seven-year-olds, 1200m

White Christmas, Ahmad al-Sheeb, Louis Nomis

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arsenal must win trophies to leave 'legacy': Arteta

Gunners head into Liverpool clash with a six-point lead at the top

AFP
London

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta said the Premier League leaders must win trophies if they were to be remembered like the "Invincibles" side that last won the title for the Gunners in 2004.

Arsene Wenger's side romped to the title 22 years ago without losing a single league game. Arsenal head into today's clash at home to reigning champions Liverpool with a six-point lead at the top of the table, although Manchester City and Aston Villa can cut that gap as they were in action late last night.

Arteta's men, runners-up for the past three seasons, have two more points and four more goals than Wenger's 'Invincibles' managed after 20 games. But the Spaniard said those stats matter little unless Arsenal go on to win the league.

"No because 'the Invincibles' won a lot," Arteta told his pre-match press conference on whether his side can be considered better than Arsenal's last title winners. "They won consistently, and they created a history and a legacy, and we have to do that."

The lone major piece of silverware won by Arsenal in six years under Arteta remains the 2020 FA Cup. "There are a lot of stats, but in the last two or three years we have managed more points and more goals than ever before. But at the end, we have to translate that to major trophies," he added. "Probably doing what we are doing now would have been enough (in 2004), but now it's not, and we have to make the margins even bigger."

Arsenal lost 1-0 to Liverpool at Anfield back in August in what was billed as an early showdown between title rivals. The defending champions head to the Emirates 14 points off the top after a difficult second season for Arne Slot, but Arteta insisted the Reds remain a superb side.

The Gunners remain without sidelined defenders Riccardo Calafiori and Cristian Mosquera but are "monitoring the load" on Kai Havertz as the Germany forward intensifies



Arsenal defender Gabriel Magalhaes trains with team-mates ahead of the game against Liverpool.

his training while continuing to recover from a long-term leg injury.

Arteta, meanwhile, said he was "sad" to see rival boss Ruben Amorim sacked by Manchester United on Monday after just 14 months in charge at Old Trafford.

The Portuguese coach's exit followed growing tensions with senior United officials, including director of football Jason Wilcox, over recent days.

United co-owner Jim Ratcliffe had previously suggested Amorim would be given at least three years in charge, citing Arsenal's patience with Arteta as an example to follow.

Appointed in 2019, Arteta endured a rocky start to his time in charge of Arsenal. But they are now a commanding 17 points ahead of sixth-placed United, who won just 25 of 63 games in all competitions under Amorim.

"I can only talk about what I have experienced and it's always sad to see a colleague losing his job, obviously," said Arteta.

"We know where we are and I think you need support from the ownership, from your staff, from players. At the end of the day, you need to win a lot of football matches if you want to stay in the job, and that's the reality and the nature of our job."

WTT CHAMPIONS DOHA

Nayeong pulls off stunning comeback to enter last 16



Kim Nayeong in action at the Lusail Sports Arena yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The highly anticipated opening round of WTT Champions Doha 2026, the first WTT Series event of the new season, got off to a blistering start at Lusail Sports Arena, with Kim Nayeong pulling off a miraculous comeback to progress to the round of 16 (7-11, 8-11, 11-6, 12-10, 11-9).

South Korea's Kim was dominated in the early proceedings by Singaporean player Zeng Jian in the first match, but there was a feeling that the tie could go either way, as both players engaged in long rallies, and benefited from net hits and flicking the end of the table. Trailing 2-4 and two games down, Kim finally found her rhythm and fired off three consecutive points.

As the tie progressed, the Korean's backhand started to score more and more, and she was clearly setting it up as she tried everything to get back into the match. She took game point again by utilising that powerful backhand.

Deep into the fourth game, the two showed no signs of slowing down, long rallies with pinging shots decorated a game where the two kept trading leads. Zeng saved game point once before Kim eventually recovered the overall score to 2-2. Kim snatched victory from the jaws of defeat to become the first player into the round of 16 in Doha.

One of the biggest matches in the women's draw saw 17-year-old Miwa Harimoto once again get one over on Korea's Shin Yubin (11-8, 11-8, 11-8). The duo met three times on the WTT stage last year, with Harimoto winning all three of those encounters. Harimoto came out the aggressor in the early stages, hitting hard spinning balls at Shin to go 8-3 up within minutes.

Styles make matches, and these two started game two by cannoning off shots and trying to move each other across the table. As was the case in the first game, the pair shared the points in the opening exchanges before Harimoto established a four-point lead, speaking volumes to the teenager's ability to adjust to the game state.

In the third and final game, Harimoto was in a league of her own. Her 3-0 lead forced Shin to call a time out, but that wasn't much help, as Harimoto scored straight away and didn't slow down as her lead stretched to 6-2. With nothing to lose, Shin threw everything after her Japanese opponent and managed to get within touching distance at 8-7, but was unable to stop a straight games defeat.

Elsewhere, World No 10 Dang Qiu got a convincing 3-0 win over Oh Junsung (11-9, 11-8, 13-11). The women's World No 10, Hina Hayata, could have also recorded a straight games victory, but saw Xiaoxin Yang save four game points. In the end, she got the job done in four (11-8, 15-17, 11-2, 12-10).

FOCUS

Liverpool can still do 'special things': Slot

AFP
London

Liverpool manager Arne Slot insists his reigning English champions can still do "special things" this season as they prepare to face Premier League leaders Arsenal following a faltering start to their title defence.

Slot's men head to the Emirates for today's clash in fourth place in the table, but 14 points adrift of the Gunners. However, following on from a run of nine defeats in 12 games in all competitions, Liverpool are unbeaten in their last nine – although that sequence includes four draws.

Those draws include a goalless stalemate against Leeds and a 2-2 share of the spoils with Fulham in their first two Premier League fixtures of 2026. "It is nine games unbeaten but we have definitely had two draws too many," Slot said.

Slot, who guided Liverpool to an impressive title triumph in his first season in charge at Anfield after succeeding Jurgen Klopp, added: "Where are we? I think I've said so many times that the answer to that question is we aren't where we want to be, but I feel we have a very talented squad. If everyone's available and ready, then I think we can do special things."

They certainly gave that impression earlier in the season when Liverpool beat Arsenal 1-0 at Anfield in August. However, a crisis up front, in terms of personnel, casts doubt over their achievement of the double over the Gunners.

Hugo Ekitike is a major doubt after missing the Fulham draw because of a hamstring problem. The Reds are also without Alexander Isak through injury, while Mohamed Salah remains at the Africa Cup of Nations with Egypt.

Slot said he hoped his side would become more consistent.

"We haven't had the consistency but we've already beaten some very good teams, so that tells you



the talent is definitely there but the consistency isn't," he said.

They have recorded some notable victories, home successes against Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid and a 5-1 romp away to Eintracht Frankfurt in the Champions League.

But on the flip side, Liverpool have suffered three-goal defeats at home three times this season, against Crystal Palace, Nottingham Forest and PSV Eindhoven.

"This club has shown so many times that when they don't have the greatest form in the league, they are still able to win other trophies," said Slot. "We just haven't had consistency against the clubs where we would usually win which adds to the fact that we are now 14 points behind Arsenal."

They now face a renewed test of their form against the Gunners, with Arsenal bidding to be crowned champions of England for the first time in more than 20 years.

"There's a lot of importance on this match because we still have a lot to play for in the Premier League," said Slot.

"We are also in the FA Cup and the Champions League, which are knockout games and games where you face teams like Arsenal, so it will be a chance for us to see where we are in a one-off game. We are going up against a very, very good Arsenal team."

The Dutchman said the daunting thing for his side is Arsenal are the "complete package". "For that reason, in my opinion, they deserve to be on top this season."

Vinicius will bounce back from 'blank spell': Real's Bellingham

Jeddah: Real Madrid midfielder Jude Bellingham backed team-mate Vinicius Junior to overcome his goal drought ahead of the Spanish Super Cup semi-final clash against Atletico Madrid.

Xabi Alonso's Los Blancos face Atletico in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, today, bidding to reach Sunday's final against Barcelona or Athletic Bilbao. Vinicius has failed to score in his last 15 appearances for Real Madrid across all competitions, with his last goals coming in October. The Brazilian forward has not penned an extension to his contract, which expires in June 2027, and has been linked with a possible departure in the summer. "I think that Vini is under a huge amount of pressure as a player and as a person," Bellingham told a news conference.

Vinicius has at times shown his frustration on the field, with angry outbursts when substituted as well as remonstrating with

officials, opponents and occasionally rival fans. "All of the stuff that he does on the pitch is through pure emotion and sometimes you forget to look that it's a human doing those things," said Bellingham. "I think that does add to the pressure of a bit of a block of form maybe, in front of goal. For me, when I play with him I still see an electric player that I can give the ball to and (who) can create something out of nothing. I think goals probably don't tell the full story."

Bellingham said he and Real Madrid's other players had to rally around the 25-year-old winger, who came second in the Ballon d'Or rankings in 2024. "When he's at his best we're a much better team and he's a frightening player. In any way we can try and support him – that's our job as teammates and I'm sure he'll get back to his best, 100 percent," he said.

Bellingham said if he felt Vinicius was doing something which was not benefiting Madrid, he would have a word with the forward. "He's no bad influence on the team, he's no bad influence on anything productive that we're trying to do," said the England international.

"I have a great relationship with Vini... If I felt like there was some-

where that he was hurting us as a team and hurting our ambition as a squad, then I'd pull him and tell him. But I don't think there is at all. He's had a bit of a blank spell in front of goal but like I said, I'm sure he'll return to his best level on the team with a bit of confidence that we can all give him."

Bellingham said the squad also supported coach Alonso, who came close to the sack towards the end of 2025 amid a run of shaky results.

Atletico Madrid captain Koke backed striker Julian Alvarez,

despite a similarly poor run of form to Vinicius. Argentina international Alvarez, a key player for the Rojiblanco, has scored just twice in his last 10 games across all competitions.

"The big players all demand a lot from themselves, obviously we don't have to demand a lot only from Julian but from all of us, to achieve the objectives that we want," Koke told a news conference. "Big players like Julian appear when you need them most, tomorrow is an important day."

Koke recalled Alvarez's superb display in the 5-2 win over Real in September, in which the forward netted twice. "I hope he has the luck, like he did in the previous game at the Metropolitano, where he had an incredible game."

"I'm certain that when we need him most, he will be at 100 percent."

Alvarez joined Atletico in August 2024 from Manchester City.

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar lose to UAE in U-23 Asian Cup opener

By Sports Reporter
Jeddah

United Arab Emirates emerged 2-0 winners against Qatar to get their UAE U-23 Asian Cup campaign off to a fine start yesterday in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The result means UAE join Japan as the early pacemakers in Group B with the latter having beaten Syria 5-0 in an earlier match.

Qatar spurned the chance to take the lead as the third minute when Alhashmi Mhialdin's penalty was saved by Khaled Tawhid.

Ali Ghulais was also called into action at the other end, the UAE custodian's outstretched leg denying Junior Ndiaye after the Montpellier forward had been put through by Ali al-Memari. Ndiaye's threat brought about UAE's opener in the 21st minute when the forward's strike from outside the box bounced off Ghulais, with the rebound smashed into the bottom corner by al-Memari.

A sweeping move in the 37th minute doubled UAE's lead, Richard Akonnor exchanging passes with al-Memari to glide into space on the left with his cutback then swept home by Ndiaye. Ildio Vale rang the changes for Qatar for the start of the second half with a tri-

ple change, bringing on Moath Taha, Mobarak Hamza and Rashid al-Abdulla as the Portuguese tactician looked to find a way back into the game. A couple of long range efforts from Qatar highlighted their improved performance with Anas Abwany and Taha forcing Tawhid to make fine saves.

Despite being put under more pressure in the second half, UAE – led by the impressive Leonard Amesimeku in defence – comfortably kept Qatar at arm's length to claim the points.

UAE will next face Japan while Qatar take on Syria with both matches to be played on Saturday.



Qatar's Marwan Sherif (right) and UAE's Hazem Abbas vie for the ball in Jeddah.