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CRICKET

Australia win final Test to seal 4-1 Ashes triumph over England

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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Sadd beat Qatar SC, climb to second spot

Bottom side Al Shahaniya hold Al Duhail to a goalless draw



Al Sadd's Roberto Firmino scores against Qatar SC at Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Sadd staged an impressive comeback to defeat Qatar SC 3-2 in a thrilling match yesterday at Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium, as the defending champions climbed to second place in the Qatar Stars League.

Qatar SC took an early lead through Joao Pedro in the third minute, before Al Sadd responded when Akram Afif levelled the score in the 32nd minute. The hosts regained the advantage on the stroke of half-time as Niall Mason found the net to send his side into the break leading 2-1. Al Sadd emerged strongly after the restart, with former Liverpool striker Roberto Firmino drawing the visitors level early in the second half. The comeback was completed 10 minutes later when Rafa Mujica scored the decisive third goal, sealing a hard-fought victory for the Wolves.

The win lifted Al Sadd to second place in the standings on 23 points, level with Al Rayyan but ahead on goal difference. Afif, meanwhile, was forced off through injury 10 minutes from

time, despite playing a key role by scoring and creating chances for his side.

Al Sadd extended their winning run to five consecutive league victories, while Qatar SC suffered a fifth straight defeat this season. Qatar SC remained on 17 points and slipped to sixth place in the table.

Meanwhile, bottom side Al Shahaniya held Al Duhail to a goalless draw at Al Khor Stadium. Al Duhail moved 16 points and up to seventh place, while Al Shahaniya climbed to eight points but remained bottom of the standings. The opening stages of the match saw few clear chances, with play largely confined to the midfield as both teams sought control. Al Duhail threatened first when French midfielder Benjamin Bourigeaud fired a powerful free kick from outside the penalty area in the 21st minute, but Al Shahaniya goalkeeper Shehab al-Laithi produced a fine save.

Al Shahaniya responded with a swift counter-attack as Dutchman Pelle van Amersfoort broke into the box and fired towards goal, only for Al Duhail goalkeeper Salah Zakaria to deny him in the 30th minute.

In the second half, Al Shahaniya came close again when Lotfi Madjer drove into the

area and unleashed a strong shot that Zakaria pushed out for a corner in the 56th minute. Al Duhail pressed for a breakthrough, with Krzysztof Piatek narrowly missing the target with a header following a cross from Youssouf Sabaly in the 61st minute.

Another chance fell Al Duhail's way in the 81st minute when Sultan al-Brake delivered a cross into the area, which Sabaly headed goalwards, but al-Laithi intervened once more to divert the ball away from danger.

After the match, Duhail goalkeeper Zakaria expressed his disappointment with the result. "The goalless draw was not satisfactory for us, especially as we entered the match aiming for victory and to collect the three points at the start of the second half of the competition," Zakaria said.

"We had some scoring opportunities but were unable to make full use of them, particularly as the team suffered from significant absences in the attacking line," he added.

Zakaria concluded by stressing the need for improvement, saying: "We must work on correcting our mistakes and learning from the negatives of this match in order to perform better in the upcoming rounds."

WTT CHAMPIONS DOHA

Ovtcharov stuns No 2 seed Calderano

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The men's singles draw has been blown wide open at WTT Champions Doha, with second seed Hugo Calderano falling short in a fiery opening round showdown against Dimitrij Ovtcharov 11-7, 5-11, 11-5, 9-11, 11-9. Having lost out to Calderano in each of their three previous WTT encounters, Ovtcharov's last international win over the Brazilian came back in 2021, and you could see the determination on German's face at the Lusail Sports Arena.

Putting the pedal to the metal, the German player upped the intensity, pulling clear from a 4-4 deadlock to set up six game point opportunities in the opener. Calderano would recover three, but Ovtcharov wouldn't let another slip, finding his conviction at 10-7 to take an unexpected lead.

An instant response in the second would quickly put the odds back in Calderano's favour, and with the game four scoreboard showing 3-5 in the Brazilian's favour, it looked like a return to business as usual. But that's exactly when Ovtcharov threw another curve ball, hammering through the ball to land eight points on the bounce, stealing it 11-5.

Huge momentum swings had dominated the flow in the opening three games, and the drama would continue in the fourth, Calderano denying a comeback charge to send the match to a decider.

Going 7-9 up deep in the seventh, just two more points and the match would be Calderano's.

However, there was a late sting in the tail as Ovtcharov dug deep, showing nerves of steel to flip the script 11-9 at the death.

Fist pumping the air in celebration after the final ball, Ovtcharov breathed a huge sigh of relief. For the first time in five years he had finally got his own back against Calderano. A run of three straight defeats to the Brazilian was now firmly behind him.

"About seven months ago he was in the final of the World Championships, now Hugo is a Top 3 player in the world, maybe even top 2 with the results he has pulled off in the past season. So, of course this victory gives me a big boost for this event, and also the start of the season," Ovtcharov said.

"Of course there's some relief, I had a tough season. I had surgery last year and many tough losses, in the fifth game having Match Points and so on. To win the match today, also doing it 11-9 in the fifth against one of the best players in the world gives me confidence to get back on track," said Ovtcharov. It doesn't get any easier for Ovtcharov as he next faces Lin Yun-Ju, who secured a 8-11, 11-9, 11-6, 11-7 victory over Tomislav Pucar earlier in the day.

Meanwhile, Zhu Yuling and Hana Goda played out an early contender for match of the event. The round of 32 tie was an absolute rollercoaster, with both players trading leads throughout before Zhu won 11-8, 5-11, 15-13, 12-10.

Earlier in the day, Chinese wildcard Zhou Qihao upset An Jaehyun of Korea 7-11, 11-8, 11-6, 11-7. Zhou will face No 4 seed Tomokazu Harimoto in the round of 16, after he beat Xiang Peng 11-4, 11-7, 11-8.



Dimitrij Ovtcharov (right) in action against Hugo Calderano during the WTT Champions Doha at Lusail Sports Arena.

DAKAR RALLY

Al-Attiyah retains second place, Lategan stays top

Agencies
Riyadh

Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah, driving a Dacia, retained second place in the overall standings of the 48th Dakar Rally in Saudi Arabia. Al-Attiyah finished 16th in yesterday's marathon fifth stage, which was dominated by Ford Raptor drivers who claimed the top three positions.

South African Henk Lategan, driving a Toyota, became the first competitor to lead the rally for two consecutive stages, despite finishing 17th in the 371km stage from the Al Ula bivouac to Hail, nearly 13 minutes behind the winner, American Mitch Guthrie. Sweden's Mattias Ekstrom remained third for Ford, five minutes and 38 seconds off the lead.

"It was really, really, really difficult, one of the most difficult stages I've had to open," said Lategan. "There were no bike tracks and a lot of the tracks were really, really small tracks. The rain washed a lot of them away."

After spending the night at the camp without any mechanical assistance, drivers completed the second half of the marathon stage. Guthrie finished 1 minute and 6 seconds ahead of his Ford teammates,



Dacia's Nasser al-Attiyah and his co-driver Fabian Lurquin in action during stage five of the Dakar Rally in Hail, Saudi Arabia. (Reuters)

Spaniard Nani Roma and Czech Martin Prokop, to secure his second stage win of this edition, having also won stage three. He benefited from a one minute and 10 second time penalty imposed on Roma. Ford had four cars in the top six overall,

with Roma fourth ahead of Spain's four-times winner Carlos Sainz in fifth and Guthrie sixth.

Chasing a sixth Dakar title, al-Attiyah ended the stage 12 minutes and 5 seconds behind Guthrie and received a two-minute



Nasser al-Attiyah finished 16th in yesterday's marathon fifth stage.

penalty. Despite this, he remained second overall, three minutes and 17 seconds adrift of Lategan.

Al-Attiyah was satisfied with his effort after completing a marathon stage without incident and is still well positioned for the podium. He said: "It was not an easy stage. From the beginning, we tried to manage without any mistakes or punctures. I think we did a good job. Henk Lategan did a really good run and we just stayed behind him, we didn't really need to pass because it was so risky and the navigation was not really

easy. The marathon day is finished and we are quite happy. I don't know if we have lost time but if it's around ten minutes, then no problem."

In the motorcycle category, Argentine rider Luciano Benavides won the 356km stage on a KTM and moved up to third overall with defending champion and teammate Daniel Sanders finishing third to retake the lead from American Ricky Brabec. The Australian is now two minutes and two seconds clear of Honda's Brabec.

"It was really important to not destroy the tyres... so I just took it easy in the middle part and just got through to the end, really," said Sanders. "I'm just happy to not lose too much time and manage the situation because it could have ended the race today."

Spaniard Tosha Schareina, the overnight leader for the factory Honda team, dropped to fourth overall after collecting a 10-minute penalty for failing to depart the bivouac between marker flags.

The sixth stage, the longest of the rally, gets under way today and will see competitors travel from Hail to Riyadh over a distance of 920km, including 331km of timed stages. The 13-stage rally covers a total distance of 7,994km for cars and 7,906km for motorcycles, with timed sections of 4,480km for cars and 4,748km for motorcycles.

CRICKET

Australia win final Test to seal 4-1 Ashes triumph

‘They had individuals who stood up. Full credit to them. But we know we could have done better’

AFP
Sydney

Australia won the final Ashes Test against England by five wickets yesterday to seal a dominant 4-1 victory after a gruelling series, sending the retiring Usman Khawaja out on a high.

The nervy hosts saw wickets tumble as they chased their 160 target, which they reached after lunch on day five with Cameron Green not-out 22 and Alex Carey on 16 at the Sydney Cricket Ground.

For England it was the final chapter in a miserable series.

“That’s Ashes cricket. Everyone got tense,” said Carey, who hit the winning runs.

“Usman is going to be missed. A great career and a great way to finish.”

Australia lost openers Travis Head (29) and Jake Weatherald (34), along with captain Steve Smith (12) and Khawaja, who made six in his final knock before retirement.

“It means a lot. So much has gone into it. The only thing I wanted was a win, as much as I wanted to hit the winning runs,” said Khawaja, who was almost in tears as he walked off to a standing ovation after being bowled by Josh Tongue.

“The whole Test match I found it hard to control my emotions,” Khawaja added after his 88th and final appearance on the Test stage.

Marnus Labuschagne, dropped on 20, compiled 37 before needlessly running himself out to give Ben Stokes’s men a flicker of hope as they reduced Australia to 121-5.

But victory was never seriously in doubt after England were dismissed for 342 on the back of Jacob Bethell’s stylish 154.



Australia’s captain Steve Smith takes a selfie with teammates as they celebrate with the Waterford Crystal Ashes Trophy at the end of the fifth Ashes Test at Sydney Cricket Ground yesterday. (AFP)

“Australia are an incredible team,” said Stokes, whose side were outplayed over the course of the series.

“They had individuals who stood up. Full credit to them. But we know we could have done better.”

England horror show
Defeat ended a long tour for the

visitors that quickly turned into a horror show when they lost the opening two Tests in Perth and Brisbane by eight wickets and the third at Adelaide by 82 runs.

Stokes’s side had arrived confident they could win their first series in Australia since 2010-11 amid taunts about the hosts having their worst side in 15 years.

Facing heavy criticism over their

preparations, discipline and ultra-aggressive “Bazball” style of cricket, they rallied to pull off a stunning four-wicket comeback win in the fourth Test in Melbourne. It was their first victory in 18 Tests on Australian soil and restored some pride, but another loss in Sydney, albeit close, will see them face a tough inquisition on their return home with coach Brendon Mc-

Cullum’s job on the line. “Time for reflection is not right now,” said Stokes.

“We’ve got a long time away to reflect on it. Come June when we next play, hopefully we can put the wrongs right.”

Australia achieved their success despite being without pace spearhead Josh Hazlewood for the series and skipper Pat Cummins for

all but one Test, while veteran spin king Nathan Lyon played a limited role.

Nearly 860,000 fans watched the series with a record 211,032 through the turnstiles in Sydney.

More Snicko trouble

Tempers flared earlier on day five when Weatherald survived a review for caught behind on 16 despite the controversial Snicko technology, which has been unreliable all series, appearing to indicate a faint murmur.

An angry Brydon Carse had to be pulled away from complaining to the on-field umpire by Stokes and the bowler exchanged heated words with Weatherald.

England finally got their reward when Head swiped Tongue to Carse at midwicket and Weatherald top-edged the same bowler to Matthew Potts.

Smith was bamboozled by a turning ball by spinner Will Jacks and Khawaja, after being given a guard of honour by England when he walked out for the final time, played on.

England resumed on 302-8 with a 119-run advantage and added 40. Precocious number three Bethell, trumpeted as the future of English cricket, padded up on 142 with Potts yet to score.

He reached 150 before edging Mitchell Starc to wicketkeeper Carey to end a breakthrough innings, with his marathon 265-ball stay including 15 fours.

Tongue was the last man out for six, again to Starc, with Potts unbeaten on 18.

It was Starc’s 31st wicket of the series, more than any other bowler.

Australia were all out for 567 in their first innings on Wednesday on the back of centuries from Head and Smith in reply to the tourists’ 384, built on Joe Root’s 160.

England to stick with Stokes and McCullum

England will limp home from Australia after a humbling 4-1 Ashes defeat but appear likely to stick with the regime of Ben Stokes and Brendon McCullum, who have vowed to learn lessons from a painful tour.

The tourists arrived in November with genuine hopes of a first Ashes series win in Australia since 2010-11 but were 3-0 down inside 11 days of action, with only pride left to play for. Despite their humiliation, it appears director of cricket Rob Key, coach McCullum and skipper Stokes are all set to stay in their posts. Getting rid of McCullum would be especially complicated as he is also in charge of England’s white-ball teams, with the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka starting next month. England do not play Test cricket again until they host New Zealand in June.

Stokes, speaking after England lost the fifth and final Test in Sydney by five wickets yesterday, said he wanted to carry on as captain, while accepting there were “wrongs to put right”.

McCullum agreed there were “areas to improve” but said he would not be told what to do. The extent to which the former New Zealand captain is prepared to alter his ultra-attacking approach could be key to his long-term future.

England have come under fire for perceived inadequate preparation, a lack of specialist coaching and their off-field behaviour.

As soon as the series was over, England and Wales Cricket Board chief executive Richard Gould announced a “thorough review” had been launched to get to the bottom of the Ashes debacle. The brutal truth is that England’s aggressive “Bazball” style was exposed by a far-from-vintage Australia, who were able to field injured skipper Pat Cummins for just one match while fellow fast bowler Josh Hazlewood missed the whole series.

Few England players will return home with their reputations enhanced after numerous batting collapses, embarrassing failures in the field and some toothless bowling. England great Geoffrey Boycott, an Ashes-winning opening batsman in Australia, was scathing about England’s approach.

“Brendon McCullum, Rob Key and Ben Stokes sold a lie for three years,” Boycott wrote in his Daily Telegraph column.

Boycott added: “McCullum’s philosophy is



England’s Ben Stokes signs autographs for fans after the fifth Ashes Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground yesterday. (AFP)

do your own thing. Play without a care in the world. Express yourselves and if you get out, no problem, it’s not your fault. “Nobody tells them off, there is no accountability, and nobody gets dropped so they just keep doing the same daft things.”

England set out for Australia armed with a pace attack they believed could seriously unsettle the opposition. But part-time off-spinner Will Jacks played as many Tests in the series as injury-prone fast bowlers Mark Wood and Jofra Archer combined.

Fledgling off-spinner Shoaib Bashir, groomed to feature in the Ashes, did not play a single Test. Jacob Bethell’s superb hundred - his first in first-class cricket - in Sydney was a sign of both the benefits and drawbacks of England’s approach.

Plucked from relative obscurity for an impressive debut campaign in New Zealand two years ago, the Warwickshire all-rounder was denied valuable development time by being repeated-

ly rested by England during the 2025 domestic season. Nevertheless, the 22-year-old left-hander - only selected for the last two Ashes Tests - demonstrated a maturity far beyond several of his more experienced team-mates with a masterful 154 in Sydney.

“That is entertainment,” Justin Langer, a former Australia opener and coach, told TNT Sports. “Not running down and hitting it up in the air and saying ‘That’s how we play.’”

When they joined forces in 2022, McCullum and Stokes revived an England side that had been struggling, winning 10 of their first 11 Tests at the helm. But yesterday’s loss was England’s 14th defeat in their past 28 Tests. They have not won a major five-match series against Australia or India, home or away, since 2018.

“We’ve started losing more, we’ve not won the big series we want to,” admitted Stokes.

“This one in particular, I think we’ve got to be very honest with ourselves as a team, that we have done a bit of damage to ourselves.”



Australia’s Usman Khawaja poses with his family at the end of the final day of the fifth Ashes Test at the SCG yesterday. (AFP)

England’s Brook apologises for altercation with bouncer

Harry Brook has apologised for an altercation in New Zealand during the team’s white-ball tour late last year after a report yesterday said the England batsman was struck by a nightclub bouncer after being denied entry to the venue.

The Daily Telegraph report said the incident occurred on October 31, the night before England’s third one-day international against the hosts. England went on to lose the match, ensuring a 3-0 series sweep for New Zealand, with white-ball captain Brook scoring just six runs in the ODI.

The news is the latest setback for England’s board (ECB), which is dealing with the fallout from a 4-1 Ashes series defeat in Australia and is looking into reports that players drank excessively during a break between Tests.

“I want to apologise for my actions,” said Brook, who was the third-highest scorer during the Ashes series with 358 runs, in statement to British media. “I fully accept that my behaviour

was wrong and brought embarrassment to both myself and the England team.

“I am determined to learn from this mistake and to rebuild trust through my future actions, both on and off the field. I apologise unreservedly and will work hard to ensure this does not happen again.”

The ECB said it was aware of the incident and that it had been dealt with through a formal and confidential disciplinary process. “The player involved has apologised and acknowledged their conduct fell below expectations on this occasion,” it added in a statement.

ECB CEO Richard Gould said the governing body had already begun a “thorough review” of their Ashes campaign, which ended yesterday with defeat in the fifth Test in Sydney.

“This will cover tour planning and preparation, individual performance and behaviours, and our ability to adapt and respond effectively as circumstances require,” he added.

WOODS’ BIRTHDAY BASH TO INCLUDE JON BON JOVI, MASTERS-THEMED MENU

Tiger Woods officially turned 50 on December 30. So, what do you get the golfer who, well, pretty much has it all? That will be the task at hand when the celebrities visit The Breakers in Palm Beach, Florida, on January 14 to celebrate the 15-time major champion’s half-century on the planet.

Per Front Office Sports, the party even has a title sponsor: “RED: Celebrating Legacy presented by EY (Ernst & Young) US.” Three hundred exclusively invited guests will be on the guest list - namely golfer Justin Thomas, long-time caddie Joe LaCava and Pro Football Hall of Famer/TV per-

sonality Michael Strahan among others - as well as a performance by decorated musician Jon Bon Jovi. Those guests also will be served a menu based on the dinners served at Augusta National after Woods’ five Masters wins. The event will be hosted by Woods’ TGR Foundation and is

doubling as the official launch of the nonprofit organisation’s 30th anniversary campaign. “It’s a lot more than a birthday party, and it’s a lot more than an event,” TGR Foundation CEO Cyndi Court told Front Office Sports. “It’s an event that’s culminating a year of work, and then launching a

year of hard work going forward, and what we’re going to do as we expand and grow. “We definitely could have made it bigger, but we also wanted it to be intimate so that we could celebrate people that throughout the years have made tremendous commitments to Tiger’s vision

of what could be possible in the future.” A “touch of red” is requested in the dress code. It’s a colour that has been synonymous with the 82-time PGA Tour winner in the final rounds of golf tournaments, in addition to his Sun Day Red apparel brand.

HORSE RACING

Studio City clinches Lisha Cup in style

By Sport Reporter
Doha

Studio City produced an authoritative performance to claim the day's feature, the 2,000m Thoroughbred Handicap and the Lisha Cup, at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

Drawn in barrier two, the six-year-old chestnut tracked prominently in third before launching a decisive run in the home straight, surging past rivals to win by 3¼ lengths.

The victory extended his impressive campaign, marking his second win from three starts alongside a runner-up finish for owner Faleh Suwayed al-Ajami.

Trainer Mohammed al-Ghazali celebrated his third winner of the evening, while jockey Lukas Delozier completed a double.

Head of Racing Operations at Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club Rashid Saed Adiba presented the Lisha Cup trophies to the connections.

Earlier, Weissmuller, trained by Hamad al-Jehani and ridden by

Pierre Charles Boudot, won the Thoroughbred Handicap (85-105) by a head.

In the Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (75-95), Alberto Sanna rode Jassim al-Ghazali-trained Al-Yaseen Zakhir to win.

In other race, Samsa Al Shahania crossed the line 2¼ lengths clear in the Purebred Arabian Novice Plate, trained by Rudy Nerbonne with Delozier in the saddle.

Temple Of Hera claimed the Thoroughbred Handicap (55-75) under Nayef Batal al-Otibi's training, with Salman Fahad al-Hajri riding.

Noble Patron, trained by Mohammed Balasim al-Jumaili and partnered with Szczepan Mazur, won the Thoroughbred Handicap (55-75).

In the Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (0-65), Taimoor, trained by Mohammed Hassan al-Matwi, prevailed with Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi up, while al-Ghazali-trained Dance Acclaim, secured the Thoroughbred Handicap (0-60) under al-Otaibi.

My George, also trained by al-

Ghazali and partnered with Soufiane Saadi, finished fastest in the Thoroughbred Maiden Plate for three-year-olds.

RESULTS 34th Al Uqda Race Meeting - Lisha Cup

WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

1 - Lisha Cup - Thoroughbred Handicap 70-90

Studio City, Mohammed al-Ghazali, Lukas Delozier

2 - Thoroughbred Handicap (85-105)

Weissmuller, Hamad al-Jehani, Pierre Charles Boudot

3 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (75-95)

Al-Yaseen Zakhir, Jassim al-Ghazali, Alberto Sanna

4 - Purebred Arabian Novice Plate

Samsa Al Shahania, Rudy Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier

5: Thoroughbred Handicap (55-75)

Temple Of Hera, Nayef Batal al-Otibi, Salman Fahad al-Hajri

6 - Thoroughbred Handicap (55-75), 3YO+, 1300m, Div. 1



Jockey Lukas Delozier rides Studio City to Lisha Cup victory at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. **PICTURE: Juhaim**

Noble Patron, Mohammed Balasim al-Jumaili, Szczepan Mazur
7 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (0-65)

Taimoor, Mohammed Hassan al-Matwi, Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi
8 - Thoroughbred Handicap (0-60)
Dance Acclaim, Mohammed al-

Ghazali, Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi
9 - Thoroughbred Maiden Plate, 3YOs
My George, Mohammed al-Ghazali, Soufiane Saadi

TENNIS

Sabalenka enters quarter-finals of Brisbane event

‘I think there is always room to improve, and I’m definitely not at my peak’

AFP
Brisbane

World number one Aryna Sabalenka said she still had room for improvement after a second dominant win in the Brisbane International yesterday.

Sabalenka was pushed at times by 36-year-old Sorana Cirstea but was never really troubled by the Romanian as she notched a 6-3, 6-3 win to reach the quarter-finals of the season-opening tournament.

The Belarusian will next play Madison Keys, the American who beat her in last year's Australian Open final.

Keys came back from a set and a break down to overcome Russia's Diana Shnaider in a three-hour marathon 6-7 (5/7), 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/4).

There was a shock in the last of the night's matches when Ukraine's Marta Kostyuk stunned world number three Amanda Anisimova 4-6, 6-3 in a high-quality match on centre court.

Sabalenka said she aimed to get better as she targets a third Australian Open title in four years when the first Grand Slam of the year begins in Melbourne on January 18.

"I think there is always room to improve, and I'm definitely not at my peak," Sabalenka said.

"Of course I prefer to win every match 6-0, 6-0, like everyone probably prefers, but at the end of the day you only get better when someone pushes you and you have to deal with moments under pressure."



Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus hits a return during her match against Sorana Cirstea of Romania at the Brisbane International yesterday. (AFP)

Sabalenka said tournaments such as Brisbane, which features seven of the top 10 women, were perfect preparation for a Grand Slam.

"I think it's important to have quality matches before heading to the big event, just so you're preparing yourself mentally for fights, for battles," she said.

"And playing against top players is definitely a huge help heading into the Grand Slam tournament."

Keys, who won her first Grand Slam title in Melbourne over

Sabalenka, was in trouble against 21-year-old Shnaider but was able to stay in the contest and edge ahead in the last two tiebreaks.

"That had a little bit of everything - it's good to start the year with a little bit of drama, so I'm glad we got that out of the way," Keys said.

Kostyuk played the match of her life to down Anisimova, who reached the finals of Wimbledon and the US Open in 2025.

"I practised with Amanda a week ago and she absolutely destroyed me," Kostyuk said.

"I think I played really, really good. I had an amazing preparation and tactically I think I played really good."

Former Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina reached the quarter-finals with a 6-3, 6-2 win over Spain's Paula Badosa.

World number five Rybakina took control at 3-3 in the first set, winning nine of the next 11 games to seal victory.

Fourth seed Jessica Pegula also came back from a set down beat Ukraine's Dayana Yastremska 5-7, 6-2, 6-3.

FOOTBALL

Morocco coach Regragui aims to shift pressure to Cameroon before AFCON clash

AFP
Rabat

Morocco coach **Walid Regragui** sought to remove some of the pressure on his team as he suggested Cameroon had more to lose in the Africa Cup of Nations quarter-final between the sides.

The tournament hosts are the favourites to win the competition given their home advantage as well as the fact they are Africa's leading side in the FIFA world rankings. But the expectation on them brings an enormous weight of pressure that is in contrast to Cameroon, who have reached the last eight despite a chaotic build-up to the Cup of Nations which saw them appoint a new coach weeks before their opening game.

There is also a historical precedent: the last time Morocco hosted the Cup of Nations was in 1988, when their dream of winning the title was ended in defeat by Roger Milla's Indomitable Lions in the semi-finals in Casablanca.

"The reality is that Cameroon have generally been Morocco's bete noire. They have often come here and won. But that was in the past. We are the new Morocco so what happened then no longer matters," Regragui said on the eve of today's clash.

He then suggested that Cameroon's failure to qualify for the upcoming World Cup means they have more to lose than a Moroccan team desperate to win the continental title in front of their fans, half a century after their sole Cup of Nations triumph to date.

"The reality now is that Cameroon are on form, and this is their competition because they have everything to lose," Regragui insisted.

"If they go no further they will have to wait two or three more years for another major tournament.



ment. We also have something to lose because we are at home but in four months we have the World Cup so we have another competition to play. That is why Cameroon will be motivated, more than usual. There is pressure on us but on them too."

The Morocco coach was also full of praise for his Cameroonian counterpart David Pagou, whose calm demeanour has helped a young side progress from their group and then eliminate South Africa in the last 16.

"We are playing the host nation, a top side who have really good individuals as well as a collective that works well together," admitted Pagou.

"And also, not that I am a historian but Morocco have not lost at home in a very long time. So that is an extra source of motivation."

For Morocco, the Lille striker Hamza Igamane is fit again after injury but Regragui acknowledged that midfield lynchpin Sofyan Amrabat is still struggling with an ankle problem while veteran defender Romain Saiss is also not fully fit.

However, captain Achraf Hakimi is set to start again after doing so for the first time in the tournament in the narrow last 16 win against Tanzania.

"Achraf hadn't played 90 minutes in almost two months. He played very well against Tanzania but we have not yet seen Achraf at his best. Hopefully we will tomorrow," Regragui said of the African player of the year, who suffered an ankle injury with Paris Saint-Germain in early November.

OLYMPIC CHAMP ZHENG OUT OF AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Olympic champion **Zheng Qinwen** announced yesterday that she was withdrawing from the Australian Open later this month due to a lack of physical conditioning. The Chinese player is a former finalist at the year's opening Grand Slam, losing to current world number one Aryna Sabalenka 6-3, 6-2 in 2024.

Zheng underwent surgery on her elbow following a first round defeat at Wimbledon in July before returning to the WTA Tour in September. However, she pulled out in the third round of the China Open in Beijing after admitting that she had rushed her return to competitive action. "After careful evaluation by my team and following medical advice, unfortunately I will

be withdrawing from the 2026 Australian Open," Zheng wrote on Instagram. "Although my recovery is progressing well and my off-season has gone smoothly, to play a Grand Slam requires players to maintain an extreme competitive condition. "Currently, I have not yet reached my best condition that I have set for myself."

The Australian Open, which begins on January 18, was where Zheng recorded her first Grand Slam victory and also her best Grand Slam result, although last year she was knocked out in the second round. The 23-year-old had a stand-out 2024, beating Donna Vekic 6-2, 6-3 to claim Olympic gold in Paris and also reaching the final of WTA Finals, losing to Coco Gauff in a deciding set tiebreak.



ATP ANNOUNCES REDUCTION IN OBLIGATORY EVENTS

The ATP yesterday announced a slight compromise with disgruntled players by reducing the number of obligatory tournaments they must play each year in an ever more packed schedule. Wimbledon champion Jannik Sinner and world number one Carlos Alcaraz are amongst the top male players to have complained about the heavy workload, with an increasing number of players succumbing to injury and burn-out.

The ATP said it was reducing the number of ATP 500 events players must take part in each year from five to four, and also cutting back the maximum number of events used to calculate ranking points, from 19 to 18. The ATP said this was done "to create more scheduling flexibility".

Top 30 ATP players are obliged, unless injured, to compete in the four Grand Slams, the nine Masters 1000 tournaments, the ATP Finals (if they qualify) and four ATP 500 events. Alcaraz played 80 matches in 2025, winning 71 of them, while Sinner played 79 matches in both 2023 and 2024, when he won 73 of those. Another compromise announced by the ATP to alleviate the pressure on players is that anyone who pulls out of an ongoing tournament due to the birth or adoption of a child will now keep the ranking points they have gained up until then, meaning they would not have to play in an extra tournament to gain ranking points for the ATP Finals.

SHOWJUMPING

Steiner soars to victory at HH The Father Amir's Prix

Qatar's al-Baker guides Dukhan 3 to victory in CSI5* Two Phases 1.40m at Al Shaqab

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Swiss rider Nadja Peter Steiner stole the spotlight on the opening day of second tour of HH The Father Amir's Prix at Al Shaqab yesterday, clinching victory in the CSI5* 1.50m Faults and Time class with a superb clear round aboard Nice Van'T Zorgvliet. Steiner guided the BWP mare to the fastest time of 59.30 seconds to claim the top prize of €14,250.

Italy's Emanuele Gaudiano finished a close second with Esteban de Hus after also jumping clear in 59.54 seconds, while Saudi Arabia's Abdulrahman Alrajhi completed the podium with a faultless round on Ventago in 60.35 seconds. Germany's Philipp Weishaupt took fourth place with Chaquitos PS in 61.59 seconds, and Qatar's Sheikh Ali Khalid al-Thani rounded out the top five with Marco Monet after stopping the clock at 61.61 seconds.

There was success for Qatar in the CSI5* Two Phases 1.40m, as Mohammed al-Baker guided Dukhan 3 to victory. After a clear opening phase, al-Baker produced a rapid second phase in 23.68 seconds. Fellow Qatari Ghanim Nasser al-Qadi followed in second with Isis in 24.61 seconds, while France's Megane Moissonnier finished third aboard Chacarja PS in 24.86 seconds. Rashid Towaim Ali al-Marri ensured another home presence in fourth with Navaronne in 24.97 seconds, and American rider Eve Jobs completed the top five with Kannandillo in 25.32 seconds.

"Winning here at Al Shaqab means a lot," said al-Baker. "Riding at home, you really feel the support from the crowd, and Dukhan 3 was with me all the way today. We stayed focused in both phases, and I'm pleased with how he responded and how the round came together."

At CSI3* level, Emanuele Gaudiano dominated the Two Phases 1.40m class, taking first and third place. The Italian topped aboard Diarouge Blue PS with a double-clear round in 24.35 seconds, while he finishing third with Equine America Ivanhoe GPH in 25.83 seconds. Compatriot Roberto Previtali on Diasandro Blue cams second in 25.79 seconds.

The CSI3* Special Two-Phase saw Egypt's Ismail Osama El Borai take top



Switzerland's Nadja Peter Steiner guided the BWP mare Nice Van'T Zorgvliet to the fastest time of 59.30 seconds to win the CSI5* 1.50m Faults and Time class at HH The Father Amir's Prix at Al Shaqab yesterday.

honours on Incredible Z after posting a clear second phase in 26.86 seconds. Fellow Egyptian Mustafa Saed followed in second with Kalliope LVP Z in 28.69 seconds, while Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Alasaker finished third aboard Scoobylen-sky Theyss in 29.19 seconds.

El Borai said the victory marked a breakthrough. "Last week I was very close, but something always went wrong, so to start this weekend with a win in the first competition feels amazing. It was also my first five-star class this evening, so it's a positive start. Incredible Z was excellent today – he's a very careful horse and very quick, so when we put in a good round, we're usually right there on the podium."

Saudi riders led the CSI3* Faults and Time 1.25m, with Bader Alfard taking first place aboard Kimberly in 58.61 seconds. Mohammed Alasaker followed closely in second with Tinto de Nuit Z in 58.77 seconds, while Qatar's Suhaim Hamad al-Yafei secured third place on Flash du Puits in 59.31 seconds.

In the CSI1* Special Two-Phase, Qatar's Ali Omar al-Ansari claimed victory aboard Nikita Eindeken Z in 28.48 seconds. Prince Mohamed al-Saud finished second for Saudi Arabia with Haroon in 30.12 seconds, and Salem Balharith completed the podium on Lovina in 30.94 seconds.

Egypt's Abdallah Haitham topped the CSI1* Faults and Time 1.20m, after pro-



There was success for Qatar in the CSI5* Two Phases 1.40m, as Mohammed al-Baker guided Dukhan 3 to victory.



Qatar's Ali Omar al-Ansari claimed CSI1* Special Two-Phase win aboard Nikita Eindeken Z.

ducing a clear round on Consagros in 54.53 seconds. Qatar's Ibrahim Yousuf al-Mahmoud finished second with Perle Van Dorperheide in 55.87 seconds, while Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Aldalaan claimed third aboard Sarina Del Valle in 56.31 seconds.

In the National Competition Optimum Time 0.60m, Qatar's Almaha Mansoor al-Sulaitin took first place with Brooklyn, finishing just 0.09 seconds inside the optimum time. Shamma al-Hitmi followed in second on Zorro Z with a 0.31-second dif-

ference, while Abdullah Bahamdan placed third with Irbal at 0.32 seconds.

Competition continues today across all arenas as the programme builds toward two major highlights: the CSI5* 1.55m class with a jump-off and the first CSI5* Six Bars class of the Tour, a crowd-favourite format expected to draw strong interest. The Tour concludes tomorrow with Grand Prix Day across categories, featuring the CSI5* 1.60m Grand Prix, the CSI3* 1.50m Grand Prix and the CSI1* 1.30m Grand Prix, all decided by jump-off.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Guardiola downbeat about Man City's faltering title bid

AFP
Manchester

Pep Guardiola admitted Manchester City cannot think about catching Arsenal in the Premier League title race after their winless run extended to three matches.

Guardiola's side wasted a chance to put pressure on Arsenal as they were held to a 1-1 draw by Brighton at the Etihad Stadium on Wednesday. Erling Haaland drilled in his 150th goal for City with a penalty late in the first half, but the Norwegian striker was guilty of several misses, with Bernardo Silva and Rayan Cherki also squandering opportunities.

Hampered by injuries to several defenders, City cracked in the second half as Kaoru Mitoma's first goal since September dealt a huge blow to their title hopes.

Second-placed City are five points behind leaders Arsenal, who can extend the gap to eight points if they beat Liverpool at the Emirates Stadium in late match last night. "Of course if you don't win games we cannot think about these things," Guardiola said when asked if City were still in the title hunt.

Guardiola bemoaned City's wasted chances as Brighton joined Chelsea and Sunderland in successfully frustrating the Spaniard over the last three matches. "The result is the result. I'm not a person who believes what we have done isn't fair. One point for them, one point for us. That is what it is," he said.

"I love a lot the way we played, we did many good things, but we don't score goals. There are too many clear chances. It is not just one or two players, it is all the players up front who create a lot. Unfortunately we couldn't score and scoring goals is part of the job. That is the reason why we could not win the games."

Guardiola was booked during



Manchester City's manager Pep Guardiola reacts during the Premier League match against Brighton at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester. (AFP)

the game for his angry reaction when the penalty decision initially went against City. The spot-kick, for a foul on Jeremy Doku by Diego Gomez, was only awarded following a VAR review.

Guardiola, who argued with Brighton boss Fabian Hurseler on the touchline during the penalty controversy, said: "I was complaining, why it was no penalty. And I was right."

Hurseler played down the incident, saying: "I think when it's a tight game it's always emotional and everyone shares their opinion.

That's football. I have huge respect for everyone from City and everyone from the staff. Emotions are part of the football game so everything is fine."

City are poised to sign Ghana forward Antoine Semenyo from Bournemouth this week after reportedly meeting his £65mn release clause. Guardiola refused to confirm the deal, which will add a much-needed threat to City's inconsistent attack. "I don't know. I don't know what is going to happen in the transfer window," he said.

SPOTLIGHT

Captain Romero apologises for Spurs slump as crisis deepens

AFP
London

Cristian Romero added to the mounting crisis at Tottenham as the Argentinian appeared to take a swipe at the club's hierarchy after apologising for their latest dismal defeat. Thomas Frank's side were beaten 3-2 at Bournemouth on Wednesday to leave them with just two wins from their last 12 Premier League matches.

Tottenham are languishing in 14th place, with pressure building on Frank as he struggles to turn the tide in his first season in charge after arriving from Brentford. With fans growing increasingly angry – some were seen arguing with players after the Bournemouth loss – Tottenham captain Romero took to social media to say sorry for his team's plight. The volatile centre-back also hinted that Frank and the players should be backed publicly by the club's powerbrokers.

Writing on Instagram, he said "other people" should be coming out to speak and added that they "only show up when things are going well, to tell a few lies".



The 27-year-old later deleted that post but his replacement post was almost identical, omitting the lies comment but still seeming to take aim at Tottenham's board. Daniel Levy left his role as chairman in September and chief executive Vinai Venkatesham was only appointed in April. Tottenham co-sporting director Johan Lange has been in place since 2023, while majority owners ENIC, run by the Lewis family trust, have rarely made public statements.

Romero previously defended Frank's predecessor Ange Postecoglou in another social media post last year. Postecoglou was sacked despite winning the Europa League last season to end the club's 17-

year trophy drought. Romero appeared to support the Australian as he highlighted "many obstacles that always existed and always will exist" at the club.

Spurs manager Frank later said he and Lange had spoken to Romero. "I said it when I named him the captain that even though he's an experienced player, he's tried a lot, he's still a young leader. And I think a lot of the things he's done well on and off the pitch, I'm happy with," said Frank.

"But also when you're a young leader sometimes you make a mistake, of course it's good to keep it internally. Johan and I had a good conversation with him this morning about everything, which we of course keep internally."

Tottenham's injury crisis, meanwhile, continues to increase with Rodrigo Bentancur suffering a hamstring injury at Bournemouth and Lucas Bergvall also forced off. Frank, already without Mohammed Kudus and Dejan Kulusevski, told a press conference Thursday: "Kudus is a bigger one, to the tendon and quad, and don't expect him back until after the March international break."

Tragedy-ridden Leeds great Yorath dies aged 75

London: Former Leeds United and Wales great Terry Yorath, whose life on and off the pitch was marred by tragedy, has died at the age of 75 following a short illness, his family announced.

BBC Sport presenter Gabby Logan, one of Yorath's children, left part-way through Wednesday's Match of the Day programme to be replaced by Mark Chapman, who confirmed it was due to "a family emergency".

Yorath was part of the outstanding Leeds side managed by Don Revie and then Jimmy Armfield, winning the league title

in 1974, and runners-up medals in the FA Cup, European Cup and Cup Winners Cup. Capped 59 times by Wales, skipping them on 42 occasions, he also took them to the brink of the 1994 World Cup finals as coach – which would have been their first appearance since 1958. "To most he was a revered footballing hero, but to us he was dad; a quiet, kind and gentle man," Yorath's family, including his four children, said in a statement. "Our hearts are broken but we take comfort knowing that he will be reunited with our brother, Daniel."

Yorath's life was marked by two tragedies. In 1992, his son Daniel died aged 15 from the genetic heart condition hypertrophic cardiomyopathy while playing football at home with Yorath. "You don't expect to outlive your children," Yorath said in 2005. Yorath never got over the loss – "no one can tell you how to grieve", he said in 2017 – and drank heavily. He narrowly avoided prison in 2004 after he struck a young girl while driving well over the alcohol limit. However, he was saved from prison as he was considered a suicide risk.