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SPOTLIGHT

Qatar’s al-Attiyah wins stage six, retakes Dakar lead

Reuters
Riyadh

Qatar’s **Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah** will lead the Dakar Rally into its second and final week after winning the sixth stage in the Saudi Arabian desert yesterday to take over at the top from South African rival Henk Lategan.

Al-Attiyah, a five times Dakar winner now competing for the Dacia Sandriders, had been second overnight but turned a deficit of more than three minutes into a six-minute-and-10-second advantage over the 326km timed stage between Hail and Riyadh.

Today is a rest day before the rally resumes in Riyadh tomorrow with seven more stages to the finish in Yanbu on the Red Sea coast on January 17. Al-Attiyah won yesterday’s stage by two minutes and 58 seconds from teammate and nine times world rally champion Sebastien Loeb, Dacia’s first Dakar one-two, with Toyota’s American Seth Quintero third. Overall, three different manufacturers filled the podium positions with Toyota’s Lategan second and Ford’s Nani Roma third Oū his first time on the virtual podium since 2019.

Al-Attiyah, 55, has now completed 19 succes-



sive Dakars with at least one stage win every time. Yesterday was his career 49th stage win in the car category – one off the record held jointly by Ari Vatanen and ‘Mr Dakar’ Stephane Peterhansel.

“I worked a lot today. The first five days were not always easy but today we tried to push. The car is working very, very well and I’m really happy,” said al-Attiyah. “It’s fantastic to have the lead at the rest day. We need to follow this strategy for next week also. The first week was

not easy, but we always tried to manage to not have any problems, we just had a few punctures. The last three days and the marathon stage were not easy. We tried to open on the second day of the marathon, but we are quite happy”.

Spaniard Carlos Sainz, father of the Formula One driver and a four times Dakar winner still racing hard at the age of 63, was in fourth place for Ford with teammate Mattias Ekstrom fifth and Loeb sixth. American Mitch Guthrie, stage winner on Thursday for Ford, dropped to seventh from sixth.

In the motorcycle category there was no change at the top, although leader and defending champion Daniel Sanders was handed a six-minute penalty for riding at 98kph in a zone limited to 50kph.

KTM rider Sanders now leads Honda’s American Ricky Brabec, the stage winner after the Australian’s penalty, by 45 seconds with Argentine rider Luciano Benavides more than 10 minutes behind in third.

“It was an emotional rollercoaster all day. Unfortunately, I got a speeding penalty, so that will set me back a bit,” said Sanders. “I just pushed as much as I could today but it’s hard to do good in the sand, especially opening. I did the best I could and I’ve got to stop making silly mistakes. I haven’t pieced this first week together so well.”



Qatar’s Nasser al-Attiyah and his co-driver Fabian Lurquin in action during stage 6 of the Dakar Rally in Riyadh. (Reuters)

SHOWJUMPING

Kuhner wins CSI5* Jump-Off at HH The Father Amir’s Prix

Austrian rider tops a competitive jump-off involving 10 riders, edging out Meyer-Zimmermann

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Austria’s Max Kuhner claimed the feature CSI5* Jump-Off (1.55m) title on the second tour of the HH The Father Amir’s Prix at Al Shaqab yesterday, producing a blistering round aboard EIC Quantum Robin V to take home the top prize of €26,500.

Kuhner topped a competitive jump-off involving 10 riders, edging out Germany’s Janne Friederike Meyer-Zimmermann by just one-tenth of a second. Meyer-Zimmermann finished second with the 11-year-old Cellagon Cascais, while Ireland’s Neal Fearon completed the podium on the BWP mare Derrygle Obsidian. Switzerland’s Nadja Peter Steiner, winner of Thursday’s 1.50m class, finished fourth with Mila, ahead of Austria’s Gerfried Puck on Equitron Naxcel V in fifth.

Another highlight of the day was the CSI5* Six Bars 1.50m, a crowd-favourite test of scope and bravery. France’s Megane Moissonnier emerged victorious with a flawless performance aboard Chacaraja PS. Italy’s Roberto Previtali finished second on Chaquano PS after four faults in the final round, while Portugal’s Duarte Seabra placed third with Fernhill Leonardo after withdrawing in the last round.

Great Britain’s Millie Allen dominated the CSI5* 1.45m (Faults and Time) class, clocking 59.58 seconds on Quick Diamant HR to secure first place. She finished ahead of Eve Jobs of the United States on Kanandillo and Denmark’s Caroline Rehoff Pedersen riding Chacball. Allen said: “Quick Diamant HR loves this arena and she’s a real pleasure to ride. I’m very grateful to get to ride on her.”

In the CSI3* 1.45m, Germany’s Philipp Weishaupt claimed victory aboard Karaldo, stopping the clock at 58.47 seconds. Qatar’s Faris Saad al-Qahtani impressed with a second-place finish on Com du Rouet Z, while Saudi Arabia’s Kamal Abdullah Bahamdan placed third with Kwikly. “I felt amazing today, I had a super feeling on Karaldo,” Weishaupt said. “He’s a very quick horse. I was a touch slow early on, but I made the difference in the turns and the split time towards the end, so I’m very happy to take this CSI3* 1.45m victory.”

Turkiye’s Hasan Senturk dominated the CSI3* 1.40m Immediate Jump-Off by taking both first and second places aboard Elzas and Diams Brimbelles Z respectively, while Jordan’s Bisher Kayali finished third with Wilfredo.

Egypt’s Ismail Osama El Borai topped



Austria’s Max Kuhner aboard EIC Quantum Robin V in action during the CSI5* Jump-Off (1.55m) at HH The Father Amir’s Prix at Al Shaqab yesterday.



A spectacular view of the Al Shaqab arena.

the CSI3* 1.30m Special Two-Phase with Incredible Z, finishing ahead of Jordan’s Ibrahim Hani Bisharat on Corona Irw and Saudi Arabia’s Khalid al-Hadi riding Ca-

poen. El Borai said: “It was a very smooth course today. The second phase felt quick before I went in, so I knew I had to ride a bit faster and it all came together. Yesterday



In the CSI5* Six Bars 1.50m, France’s Megane Moissonnier emerged victorious with a flawless performance aboard Chacaraja PS.

was a strong, confidence-building start for my mare, and it gives us a good platform for what’s next.”

At CSI1* level, Egypt’s Fatima Mohanad Alkishawi won the 1.25m Faults and Time class with Quintalou, followed by compatriot Saif Faisal Arafa on Lennard B and Qatar’s Mohammed Eisa al-Bukhari with Steve Jobs.

Qatar enjoyed another productive day overall, recording two wins at CSI1* and youth level, a CSI3* runner-up finish, and several top-five placings across categories.

Ali Omar al-Ansari led a Qatari one-two in the CSI1* 1.15m aboard Nikita Eindeken Z, finishing ahead of Abdulla Ahmed al-Khulaifi on Quenta van de Corsendonkse-

hoeve, while Saudi Arabia’s Salem Balharith placed third with Lovina.

In the CSIY-B 1.25m Special Two-Phase, Qatar’s Abdulla Khalid al-Julan-dani claimed victory with Nuance van het Groeshof, followed by Saudi Arabia’s Meshal al-Qahtani and Qatar’s Ibrahim Yusuf al-Mahmoud.

In the National Competition Optimum Time 0.80m, Khalifa Abdulla al-Sulaiti topped the standings aboard Guedzanotte.

The second tour of the four legs concludes today with Grand Prix Day across categories, highlighted by the CSI5* 1.60m Grand Prix and the CSI3* 1.50m Grand Prix, alongside the CSI2* 1.30m Grand Prix, all run under jump-off format.

CRICKET

Age no barrier for rampant Aussies but future uncertain

‘I THINK AT TIMES THROUGH THIS SERIES THAT EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN A REALLY GOOD THING’

AFP
Sydney

Ashes hero Mitchell Starc insists age is just a number after Australia's 4-1 thumping of England, but the future of the "Dad's Army" is uncertain with a core of players in their mid-30s.

Man-of-the-series Starc, 35, was exceptional in leading the home attack in all five Tests, bowling 153 overs and bagging 31 wickets - more than anyone else.

He was ably supported by ever-reliable fellow seamer Scott Boland aged 36 while Steve Smith, 35, scored a 13th Ashes century and led them to victory as stand-in captain.

Fast bowler Michael Neser, 35, also played a key role, as did Travis Head (32) and Alex Carey (34).

It made a mockery of English taunts that Australia's "Dad's Army" - as they were branded before a ball was bowled - was over the hill. Starc said after their five-wicket win in the final Test in Sydney on Thursday that "there's so much made about (the team's) age profile".

"I think at times through this series that experience has been a really good thing," he said.

"We've seen guys prove that if you're still playing your role or if you're still good enough, it shouldn't matter how old you are.

"Our group do that really well and tailor programmes or preparation for that. And we've seen the results this year."

But with the bulk of Australia's triumphant Ashes squad on the wrong side of 30, what happens next for some of their biggest stars

is unclear. Opener Usman Khawaja saw the writing on the wall after being dropped mid-series aged 39 and announced his retirement, while injury clouds have circled fellow stalwarts Josh Hazlewood, Nathan Lyon and Pat Cummins.

Hazlewood (hamstring and Achilles) missed the entire series, Cummins (back) managed just one Test and veteran spinner Lyon (hamstring) played only a bit-part role, dropped for the second Test and injured in the third.

Australia's next Tests are not until August, when they host Bangladesh, but none of the ageing core has given any indication they plan to up stumps anytime soon.

There are question marks about the quality of the talent coming through after them.

After that is a busy period culminating in a five-Test tour of India from late January 2027, then the 150th anniversary Test against England in Melbourne, before a return Ashes series later that year.

ONE MORE ASHES?

Playing India away and winning a first Test series in England since 2001 is a bucket-list item for players such as Starc and Smith.

"I'd love to go... but we've got plenty of cricket before then," Starc said, adding: "Part of the reason I gave away the T20 stuff was trying to prolong my Test career."

If fit, Cummins is a near-certainty to return as captain and lead the team to India and England while Lyon has indicated he too wants to be part of another Ashes, when he will be 39.

Head and Carey are in the form of their lives and going nowhere,



Australia's Mitchell Starc (centre) celebrates with teammates after dismissing England's Zak Crawley on day four of the fifth Ashes Test at the SCG in Sydney on Wednesday. (AFP)

while Marnus Labuschagne is another sure to keep going.

Smith is taking a series-by-series approach.

"I'm sure everyone's excited to go there and try and win the Ashes," Smith said.

"It's something that I certainly haven't done in my career and something I'd like to tick off. Whether I get there or not, it's a different question."

While most of the team contributed to what Smith said was

"a collective effort" in winning the Ashes, questions will be asked over the future of underperforming opener Jake Weatherald and allrounder Cameron Green.

Looking to the future, the likes of Campbell Kellaway, Matt Ren-

shaw and Nathan McSweeney are other top-order options.

Todd Murphy is Lyon's understudy and young quick Fergus O'Neill could be a fast-bowling contender, along with Jhye Richardson and Lance Morris.

SPOTLIGHT

Head, Smith earn praise as Australian media revel in Ashes triumph



Australia's Steve Smith (left) receives the Waterford Crystal Ashes Trophy from former cricketer Steve Waugh during the award ceremony at the end of the fifth Ashes Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground. (AFP)

Reuters
Sydney

Travis Head's swashbuckling batting and the decision making of stand-in captain Steve Smith were hailed as the keys to Australia's Ashes victory over England as the nation's media revelled in their 4-1 series win.

A five-wicket victory in the fifth test in Sydney on Thursday capped yet another comfortable home series win for the Australians, who maintained their grip on the urn for another 18 months at least.

Fast bowler Mitchell Starc was named Player of the Series but ABC's Dean Bilton felt Head's

performances were pivotal to his team's summer of success.

"It was the series in which he grew out of his cult hero status and fully became Australia's best and most important batter," Bilton wrote on the national broadcaster's website. "That he did it as an impromptu opener just adds to the legend."

The series had kicked off with a win inside two days in Perth for the hosts, and Daniel Brettig said in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the opening victory, featuring a second-innings haul of 123 by Head, set the tone.

"It was a dizzying series in many ways, comprising some moments of champagne cricket but many more of poor stuff that

spoke to England's ramshackle preparation for the task and Australia's numerous vulnerabilities," wrote Brettig.

"Like so many recent series in Australia, the opening round of the bout proved to be definitive.

"At lunch on day two in Perth, England appeared to be set fair for an opening victory that would at least give them a chance, like India last summer, of making this series a contest until its final match.

"But so awful was the subsequent batting collapse, and so outrageous Travis Head's fourth-innings chase after making the impromptu decision to open the innings, that England contrived to lose that first test within four hours of sitting pretty"

FOCUS

Richard leads LIV Golf Promotions event at Black Diamond Ranch

Reuters
Miami

Richard T Lee of Canada fired a 6-under-par 64 to lead the LIV Golf Promotions event after one round at Black Diamond Ranch in Lecanto, Florida.

The top three finishers at the four-round event will be awarded full-season, wild-card spots for the 2026 LIV Golf League season, and each of the top 10 finishers plus ties will be exempt for the 2026 International Series co-sponsored by the Asian Tour.

Lee, 35, is a golfing journeyman seeking to play his way onto the LIV circuit for the first time. Primarily a member of the Asian and Korean tours, Lee also qualified for the RBC Canadian Open on the PGA Tour in 2025 and made the cut with rounds of 67 and 64 before tying for 36th.

Lee was bogey-free on Thursday, with three of his six birdies coming in a row at Nos 4-6 at Black Diamond Ranch.

"Honestly, it's a tough course out there," Lee said. "You've got to hit it really well off the tee box. The greens are very undulated out there. I actually found the fairways pretty well and placed my ball on the greens pretty well and made a few putts out there."

He holds a two-shot lead over five players jockeying for a LIV wild card: Max Kennedy of Ireland, Pablo Ereno of Spain, South Korea's Hongtaek Kim and Thailand's Suteepat Prateepienchai and Sodom Kaewkanjana.

Kennedy recovered from an early bogey by making five bird-



Richard T Lee talking to media persons after his first round of the LIV Golf Black Diamond Ranch golf tournament at Black Diamond Ranch. (Jeff Swinger-Imagn Images)

ies, three on the back nine. Kennedy, 24, said it was his first tournament action in about a month and a half. "I haven't played a tournament in quite a while, so didn't really know what to expect," he said. "But I kept it tidy out there. Very few mistakes, very few bad shots. I was happy with my round."

Ereno, who tied for 22nd at the Open de France last year, carded six birdies along with two bogeys. At 22, he is the youngest player in the field, but he pointed to his four-year collegiate career at UCLA as his foundation.

"So I think I'm really prepared to play with these pros," Ereno said. "It's still new to me to think that I'm a professional golfer, but yeah, I think I'm really prepared, and my golf is good enough to compete with these guys. I think I'm ready, so yeah."

Kaewkanjana has three career wins on the Asian Tour, including the Korea Open in 2025. He's trying to get back on the LIV roster after playing in all eight events of the inaugural 2022 slate.

"I want to get back on LIV Golf because I have a big leap in the world" rankings, Kaewkanjana said. "... I try to get into LIV Golf this year, so that gets me a great experience to play with the greatest players in the world."

Among those tied three off the pace at 3-under 67 is Chase Koepka, the brother of Brooks Koepka, the five-time major champion who announced last month he was leaving LIV Golf. Chase Koepka played on his brother's team, Smash GC, in 2022 and 2023 before being relegated.

The top 20 players plus ties will make the cut and play the weekend.

AUSTRALIA'S HEAD TO SKIP BIG BASH TO PREPARE FOR T20 WORLD CUP

Australia opener Travis Head will skip the Big Bash League (BBL) for a third straight season to rest and prepare for next month's Twenty20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka, Cricket Australia (CA) said yesterday. Head was a key figure in Australia's 4-1 Ashes victory against England, the left-hander finishing as the leading scorer of the series with 629 runs from five Tests. Cameron Green will also be absent from the BBL after playing three tests against England. The all-rounder, who does not

have a BBL contract, is working to return to full fitness ahead of the World Cup after undergoing major back surgery in late 2024. The board did not elaborate on World Cup squad members Pat Cummins (back) and Josh Hazlewood (hamstring) but the recovering pace duo are unlikely to be risked ahead of the global showpiece. "A five-Test match Ashes series is intense," CA general manager, national teams, Ben Oliver said. "We have worked with each player on individual plans to best support

recovery from the Ashes and preparation for upcoming international commitments including the ICC T20 World Cup. "Wherever possible, this includes players representing their clubs in the ongoing BBL season over the coming fortnight." Australia will begin their bid for a second T20 World Cup in a Group B match against Ireland in Colombo on February 11.

India's Varma out for three weeks
India batter Tilak Varma will be out for

nearly three weeks after undergoing surgery for a groin issue, the Indian cricket board (BCCI) said yesterday. Varma has been ruled out of the first three Twenty20 matches against New Zealand between January 21 and 25 after he had surgery on Wednesday, exactly a month before India's opening match in the 20-over World Cup. "He was discharged from the hospital on Thursday morning and is scheduled to fly back to Hyderabad. He is currently stable

and progressing well," the BCCI said in a statement. Varma, 23, has played 40 T20 matches for India, and scored two fifties in his last three matches in the format. His return for the final two T20s in the five-match series against visitors New Zealand, scheduled for January 28 and 31, will depend on his progress, the BCCI added. Varma was not named in India's squad for the three 50-over matches against New Zealand starting on Sunday.

FOCUS

Alcaraz, Sinner tease prospect of teaming up in doubles

AFP
Seoul

Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner teased yesterday the prospect of teaming up for doubles as the world's top two prepare to open their seasons with a lucrative exhibition match in South Korea, a week before the Australian Open.

The pair dominated men's tennis in 2025 and contested all four Grand Slam finals between them, with Spain's Alcaraz winning the French and US Opens and Italy's Sinner triumphing at the Australian Open and Wimbledon.

Speaking on the eve of their match in Incheon, the friends and

rivals floated the idea of pairing up as a formidable team. "I think it would be fun at least one time to share the court in different ways, on the same side," said Sinner, the world number two behind top-ranked Alcaraz.

"Of course the schedule, and we are so focused on singles that it's very difficult because if then you go deep in singles and then you have to play doubles, you don't have the right recovery.

"But for one tournament I think it's great to do it, and we're going to talk about it maybe this year at a certain time where we feel like, or next year."

Alcaraz was also receptive to the idea, saying it had crossed his mind "once or twice".

"At least once would be fun," he said. "I think I'm playing forehand and he's playing backhand."

Alcaraz and Sinner will be on opposite sides of the court when they square off again on Saturday, when they will play their only warm-up before the Australian Open starts on January 18.

The 22-year-old Alcaraz has been critical of tennis's packed schedule and pulled out of the Shanghai Masters in September because of "physical issues".

He said playing in South Korea was "a great way to get ready" for Melbourne, where he is looking to go beyond the quarter-finals for the first time. "I think coming here for two, three days, keep preparing, keep getting yourself ready

for the new season, I think it was a great idea," he said. "I'm just really happy that I'm able to do this event, this match with Jannik."

Their rivalry has drawn comparisons with the "Big Three" of Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic, who ruled tennis for the early part of this century.

Sinner said he and Alcaraz "want to make our own story".

"We need to see how long we can keep up this level," said the 24-year-old, who won six titles last year despite missing three months over a doping ban.

"What the big three has done, we cannot compare ourselves with them, and we also don't want to.

"We are just ourselves and we want to make our own story."



Italy's Jannik Sinner (left) and Spain's Carlos Alcaraz pose during a press conference at Hyundai Card headquarters in Seoul yesterday. (AFP)

BRISBANE INTENATIONAL

Sabalenka gets revenge over Keys, enters semi-finals

RYBAKINA HAS LITTLE HOPE OF CHANGE TO TENNIS SCHEDULE

AFP
Brisbane

World number one Aryna Sabalenka sent an Australian Open warning as she beat Madison Keys yesterday in Brisbane in a repeat of last year's Melbourne final.

Keys stunned Sabalenka nearly 12 months ago but the Belarusian took revenge on the American with a statement 6-3, 6-3 victory to reach the semi-finals.

Keys was playing less than 24 hours after her marathon three-hour win over Russia's Diana Shnaider and had heavy strapping on her thigh. She turned in an uncharacteristically error-strewn performance and struggled on serve as Sabalenka struck a series of superb returns.

Sabalenka, aiming for her third Melbourne title in four years when the Australian Open begins on January 18, said the Brisbane tournament was helping her find form ahead of the first major of the year.

"I'm just trying to bring on court things I have been working on the pre-season, such as coming to the net," she said.

"I was working on my serve and it seems that it's working a little bit better.

"I'm just trying to get some matches, get some wins, get the rhythm going again."

Sabalenka will play Czech surprise package Karolina Muchova in the last four after the 11th seed held her nerve to see off world number five Elena Rybakina 6-2, 2-6, 6-4.

Muchova raced through the first set against an out-of-sorts Rybakina, who eventually found some rhythm to claim the second.

But Muchova broke the former Wimbledon champion once in the third set to get over the line, helped by her opponent's 42 unforced errors.

Muchova has won her past three matches against Sabalenka, although the last was in 2024 at the China Open.

"If it's a year-and-a-half back, we both are different players than



Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus hits a return during her match against Madison Keys of the US at the Brisbane International yesterday. (AFP)

we were before," Muchova said.

"But yeah, these matches before were very long battles, I think always three-setters and could have gone either way."

Rybakina said she agreed with Sabalenka's description of the tennis schedule as "insane" - but does not see it changing.

Speaking after her surprise loss, Rybakina said Sabalenka's criticism of the packed WTA Tour calendar was correct.

WTA rules stipulate that top players must play all four Grand Slams, 10 WTA 1000 events and six WTA 500 tournaments, unless they have a valid reason such as injury.

Players who don't meet these requirements risk being fined.

Sabalenka said that she was prepared to be punished by the WTA in order to rest her body and

not risk injury. "The season is definitely insane," four-time Grand Slam champion Sabalenka said.

Rybakina, who beat Sabalenka to win last year's season-ending WTA Finals, said players should be able to choose their schedules more freely.

"We all want to have more freedom of choosing what to play, what not to play," said the Moscow-born Kazakh, the 2022 Wimbledon winner.

"You're kind of forced to play most of the tournaments, so it is not ideal. You don't need to force anyone to play so many tournaments since it's so tough on the body. It's not easy to show the same good results, be healthy all the time.

"But it's a topic which we have had for a long time, and I don't see much changing."

The WTA told AFP in October that "athlete welfare is always a top priority".

Fourth seed Jessica Pegula moved into the semi-finals with a comfortable 6-3, 7-6 (7/3) win over Russian Liudmila Samsonova.

She will now play Ukraine's Marta Kostyuk for a place in the final after Kostyuk upset rising Russian star Mirra Andrejeva 7-6 (9/7), 6-3.

In the men's draw, former world number one Daniil Medvedev came from a set down to beat Poland's Kamil Majchrzak 6-7 (4/7), 6-3, 6-2 to set up a semi-final against Alex Michelsen of the United States.

The second semi-final will be an all-American clash between Brandon Nakashima and Aleksandar Kovacevic.

UNITED CUP

Swiatek wins in 58 minutes as Poland reach semi-finals

AFP
Sydney

World number two Iga Swiatek defied a partisan crowd to thrash Australian Maya Joint in Sydney yesterday and help take Poland into a United Cup semi-final clash with the USA.

Joint is a talent at age 19 but she was blown away by the six-time Grand Slam champion, Swiatek teaching her a lesson in a 6-1, 6-1 victory in 58 minutes.

The 24-year-old Swiatek will be among the favourites when the Australian Open starts on January 18 and this showed why as she won a third match in a row.

"I think the intensity - the balls get quite heavy so I'm happy that I was always pushing forward," Swiatek said on court.

"I got pretty confident at the end so for sure it was a good match."

Alex de Minaur defeated Hubert Hurkacz 6-4, 4-6, 6-4 in the men's singles to level the quarter-final at 1-1 and give

the hosts hope. The World No. 6 saved all nine break points he faced across his first four service games - including four in the second game of the match - to keep Australia alive after former World No. 1 Iga Swiatek brushed aside Aussie teen Maya Joint 6-1, 6-1.

"Nights like these... these are just the best," De Minaur said. "I love playing here. The atmosphere from the first ball to the last was amazing.

"I just had to fight him off from the first point to the last. It was a huge mental effort and we're still alive. I'm glad I was able to bounce back after losing that second set. I had some dark thoughts in my head."

However, Poland won the deciding mixed doubles to set up a last-four showdown with reigning champions the United States in a repeat of last year's final.

That tees up Swiatek against world number four Coco Gauff.

The other semi-final today is between Belgium and Switzerland.

The United Cup is a mixed-teams competition featuring 18 countries and serves as build-up to the Australian Open.



Poland's Iga Swiatek hits a return to Australia's Maya Joint during their quarter-final match at the United Cup at Ken Rosewall Arena in Sydney yesterday. (AFP)

Wawrinka gets Melbourne wildcard but Kyrgios to play doubles only

Former champion Stan Wawrinka was handed a wildcard yesterday for the Australian Open in his final season but home favourite Nick Kyrgios will play only doubles.

With Kyrgios saying he was not ready for singles matches after injury, the final three wildcards went to three-time Grand Slam winner Wawrinka and Australians Jordan Thompson and Chris O'Connell.

Switzerland's Wawrinka, 40, is playing his last season before retiring.

He won the first of his majors at Melbourne in 2014, a season during which he peaked at world number three, and reached two other semi-finals.

"To have the chance to play the AO at the beginning of my final year on tour means the world to me," said Wawrinka, now ranked 156.

The 2022 Wimbledon finalist Kyrgios made his comeback after an injury-ravaged three years in Brisbane this week but lost in the opening round to American Aleksandar Kovacevic.

Despite being in the running for a wildcard at his home Grand Slam starting on January 18,

the Australian showman said he was not ready.

"After some good conversations with TA (Tennis Australia) I've made the call to focus on doubles for this year's Australian Open," he said on Instagram.

"I'm fit and back on court but five-setters are a different beast and I'm not quite ready to go the distance yet."

The defeat to Kovacevic was his first singles ATP Tour match since March last year and he conceded afterwards that he would never be the player he once was.

Kyrgios, who has tumbled to 670 in the rankings after reaching a high of 13 in 2016, said he was happy to give the opportunity to someone else.

"This tournament means everything to me but I'd rather give my spot to someone who's ready to make their moment count," Kyrgios said.

While giving singles a miss, Kyrgios will play doubles with fellow Australian Thanasi Kokkinakis.

He has previously committed to playing singles at the Kooyong Classic in Melbourne, which gets under way on Tuesday.

BOTTOMLINE

Controversial wildcard 'should not have been granted'

Tennis Kenya said the controversial wildcard granted to Hajar Abdelkader should not have happened after the young Egyptian's performance at a professional tournament in Nairobi went viral.

The 21-year-old won just three points on her way to a 6-0, 6-0 defeat against German world number 1,026 Lorena Schaeudel.

Videos shared on social media showed the Egyptian struggling to serve and position herself on the court. While the practice of favouring local players when awarding wildcards is widespread, including in Grand Slam and WTA tournaments, Abdelkader's level

of play has raised question marks about the wisdom of awarding her a place in a tournament sanctioned by the International Tennis Federation (ITF). In a statement released on Thursday, Tennis Kenya said: "Ms Abdelkader was granted a wildcard for Week Two of the event after submitting a formal request", following a "short notice withdrawal by the originally intended recipient".

"At the time, Ms Abdelkader was the only other player who had requested a wildcard", the federation added, which was therefore granted to her based on the "information provided" by the player "and in the interest of maintaining a full and balanced draw while

supporting the development of tennis in Africa.

"In hindsight, Tennis Kenya acknowledges that this wildcard should not have been granted. The federation has taken note of this experience and will ensure that such an extremely rare occurrence never happen again," the statement added. When contacted by AFP, the ITF said the decision to grant invitations for the Nairobi tournament was the responsibility of Tennis Kenya. In a statement published on Facebook, the Egyptian Tennis Federation also denied having played any role in awarding the wildcard to Abdelkader. "She is not registered with the Egyptian Tennis Federation and is not listed on

any of our official player rosters," it said in a statement. According to the player's profile on the ITF website, the Egyptian played the first professional match of her career in Nairobi. Tennis Kenya said it was mindful of the impact the media coverage and social media comments might have on both the players involved in the match.

"This is a young person and given the extent and nature of coverage of this match, Tennis Kenya and the ITF recognise the need to keep the wellbeing of both players as a primary consideration," Tennis Kenya said in a statement.

"Both organisations have reached out to the two players to offer support."

AFCON

Ndiaye takes Senegal past Mali into semis

Mali were dealt a severe blow in first-half added time when Bissouma was sent off

AFP

Tangiers, Morocco

Recalled striker Iliman Ndiaye scored in the first half to give Senegal a 1-0 victory over 10-man Mali in Tangiers in the first Africa Cup of Nations quarter-final.

Mali hopes were dealt a severe blow in first-half added time when Yves Bissouma was sent off after being shown a second yellow card. The only goal followed a blunder by Mali goalkeeper Djigui Diarra, who then made a string of superb saves to prevent Senegal increasing their lead.

Senegal now face defending champions Ivory Coast or record seven-time winners Egypt, who meet today, in the semi-finals.

Malian Lassine Sinayoko appealed for a penalty just three minutes into the first half, alleging he was fouled by Senegal captain Kalidou Koulibaly, who was back after a one-match suspension. However, the South African referee waved play on and VAR confirmed his decision was correct. Big-screen replays showed Sinayoko was guilty of simulation.

Mali captain Bissouma was yellow-carded midway through the half for fouling veteran Senegal striker and twice African player of the year Sadio Mane. Sinayoko then broke clear only to be foiled by superb sliding tackle from fellow French Ligue 1 player Krepin Diatta.

The deadlock was broke after 27 minutes on a cold, cloudy evening in the Mediterranean city thanks to Ndiaye. He was involved three times in a move which ended with goalkeeper Djigui Diarra allowing a Krepin Diarra cross to slip under his body and Ndiaye struck the loose ball into the net.

While the goal was a gift, it gave Senegal a deserved lead as they had dominated possession in only the second AFCON clash



Senegal's Iliman Ndiaye scores against Mali during the Africa Cup of Nations quarter-final in Tangier, Morocco. (Reuters)

between the countries. The first was drawn at the group stage in 2004. Pape Gueye, who scored twice for Senegal in the last-16 victory over Sudan, was just off target with a shot from outside the box.

Then, for the second successive knock-out match, Mali were reduced to 10 men before half-time with Bissouma shown a second yellow card, followed by a red. The Tottenham Hotspur midfielder fouled Id-rissa Gueye in midfield and Malian pleas for the incident to be reviewed by VAR were

rejected. Mali displayed tremendous spirit when reduced to 10 men against Tunisia in the round of 16, and it was evident again against the Senegalese as the second half progressed.

They came close to levelling on 55 minutes when defender Abdoulaye Diaby advanced for a free-kick. His close-range shot brought a reflex save from former Chelsea goalkeeper Edouard Mendy. Diarra atoned for his first-half blunder by making several superb saves to keep alive Malian dreams of

winning a maiden AFCON title.

With 15 minutes of regular time remaining, scorer Ndiaye was substituted. In his place came 17-year-old Paris Saint-Germain forward Ibrahim Mbaye, whose goal sealed victory over Sudan.

Diarra rescued Mali again as time ticked away, blocking a shot from substitute Pathe Ciss, who had broken clear. The Malian goalkeeper made another outstanding save during seven minutes of added time by pushing away a Lamine Camara volley.

Real Madrid's Mbappe fit to play Super Cup final, says Alonso

Jeddah: Real Madrid coach Xabi Alonso said that superstar French striker Kylian Mbappe is fit to play in the Spanish Super Cup final against Barcelona after a knee sprain.

The forward was left out of Madrid's travelling party to Saudi Arabia, with Los Blancos beating city rivals Atletico Madrid 2-1 in the semi-final on Thursday to set up a Clasicco final tomorrow.

"(Mbappe) is a lot better, he is feeling good, and he has the same chance of playing as his team-mates," Alonso told reporters in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Alonso said Mbappe would fly to join the squad on Friday. The 27-year-old is Madrid's top goalscorer with 29 goals this season across all competitions in 24 appearances. Holders Barcelona defeated Athletic Bilbao 5-0 on Wednesday in the first semi-final.

ROMERO HANDED ADDITIONAL 1-MATCH BAN Tottenham Hotspur captain Cristian Romero has been handed a one-match suspension for his reaction to being sent off during last month's 2-1 Premier League loss to Liverpool, the FA said.

The centre back, who received a second yellow card for kicking out at Ibrahima Konate in added time, did not immediately leave the field after being given his marching orders and argued with the referee, leading to the FA charging him for acting in an "improper" manner.

Romero, who served his automatic one-match suspension in Spurs' 1-0 win at Crystal Palace on December 28, now faces an additional game on the sidelines. With Spurs 14th in the table and winless in their last three games, Romero apologised to the club's fans, suggesting it should not be the players having to front up to the supporters. The North London club host Aston Villa in the FA Cup third round today.

SPOTLIGHT

New Chelsea boss Rosenior welcomes weight of pressure

Reuters

London

Liam Rosenior said he was ready to embrace the pressure of managing Chelsea and unlock what he called the club's "limitless" potential as he prepares for his first game in charge of the West London side yesterday.

Rosenior, 41, was confirmed as Chelsea's new head coach on Tuesday on a contract running until 2032, following the departure of Italian Enzo Maresca on New Year's Day. He is Chelsea's fourth permanent boss appointed since Todd Boehly's 2022 takeover.

"I think the (general) turnover of managers now is huge," Rosenior told reporters on Friday ahead of their FA Cup third-round tie at Championship side Charlton Athletic.

"The pressure is there from day one and if I wasn't willing to take on that pressure and privilege I wouldn't be here... If you are scared or fearful there is no point being a coach."

Although relatively inexperienced at the top level, Rosenior's reputation grew after guiding Strasbourg to European qualification with a seventh-placed finish in Ligue 1.

His appointment was aided by the fact that Strasbourg and Chelsea share the same multi-club ownership structure, with Boehly's consortium, BlueCo, taking over the French side in 2023.

"When I went in at Strasbourg I was a joke in the media and they said that my team would finish last," Rosenior said. "I was a nobody from England and we finished three points off the Cham-

pions League places. The noise is just noise.

"I am not promising it, but I am working towards it and I believe strongly we can be very successful here."

Rosenior's first challenge will be to arrest Chelsea's slump after a run of one win in nine Premier League games, which has left them eighth with 31 points from 21 matches.

"It's a tough run, it's a tough league," Rosenior said. "We aren't the only club that'll go through difficult periods, every club does. Sometimes a different voice helps, but we aren't far away and that's really important for the players to know..."

"The potential for this club is limitless, and I won't limit limitlessness."

Rosenior got a quick reality check on Wednesday when he watched Chelsea lose 2-1 at Fulham, with fixing their poor discipline record now high on his to-do list.

Television cameras showed Rosenior sitting high in the stands, stony-faced, as left back Marc Cucurella was sent off for a foul on Harry Wilson 22 minutes into the game.

The dismissal was Chelsea's fifth red card in the league this season, a major factor in their struggles to live up to expectations following their Club World Cup triumph in July.

"It is one of the few things (disciplinary issues this term) that we can improve on," he said. "I know how we do that. I have spoken to the players about managing setbacks. They show passion and emotion for the shirt. It is making sure in key moments we react positively to setbacks."

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arsenal in 'strong position' despite missed opportunity against Liverpool, says Arteta

AFP

London

Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta said the Gunners have come out of a grueling festive schedule in a stronger position despite the disappointment of being held 0-0 at home to Liverpool on Thursday.

Arteta's men dropped points for the first time since December 6 as five consecutive Premier League wins prior to Liverpool's visit and the faltering form of Manchester City has opened up a six-point lead for Arsenal. "Yes, every time you don't win (it is a missed opportunity)," said Arteta. "I have to really praise the team for what they have done in this Christmas period. To come out of this period with all the issues we had the boys deserve all the credit. We are in a really strong position and we have to go again."

Defending champions Liverpool remain 14 points behind the leaders but have not conceded a goal in two meetings with Arsenal this season. Dominik Szoboszlai's stunning free-kick separated the sides at Anfield back in August as both games have been short on big chances.

Arne Slot's men are now unbeaten in 10 games, but five of those have been draws to leave them languishing fourth in the table. The Liverpool boss was not surprised by his side's ability to dominate possession in the second half against the leaders but was frustrated by a familiar lack of cutting edge in the final third.

"From all that ball possession you are hoping for more chance creation," said Slot. "This is who we are. We can dominate possession but we struggle in a few things. Set pieces and then to find the right pass in the final third, we are still not at the level of some other teams."

Defending champions Liverpool failed to



Arsenal's Gabriel Jesus (left) and Jurrien Timber react after Gabriel Magalhaes missed a chance to score during the Premier League match against Liverpool London. (Reuters)

register a shot on target in a Premier League fixture for the first time since a match against Wigan Athletic in March 2010, bringing a run of 600 league games to an end. Slot said their inability to break teams down had cost them all season.

ARSENAL'S MARTINELLI 'DEEPLY SORRY' FOR SHOVING INJURED BRADLEY

Meanwhile, Arsenal winger Gabriel Martinelli said he had apologised to Conor Bradley for shoving the Liverpool defender off the pitch when badly injured.

Some pundits felt Martinelli should have been sent off after the Brazilian dropped the ball on Bradley as he lay on the turf at the Emirates and then tried to manhandle him off the pitch so the game could quickly resume.

The 22-year-old Bradley left the stadium on

crutches and wearing a supportive brace on his knee. Martinelli was booked but not dismissed following the incident late in the game on Thursday which provoked an angry reaction from Liverpool's players.

In response to the backlash, Martinelli posted on Instagram: "Conor and I have messaged and I've already apologised to him. I really didn't understand he was seriously injured in the heat of the moment. I want to say I'm deeply sorry for reacting. Sending Conor all my best again for a quick recovery."

Prior to Martinelli's apology, Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta had defended the player, calling him "an incredible, lovely guy".

He said that Martinelli would not have pushed Bradley had he known he was badly hurt, a view echoed by Liverpool boss Arne Slot.

Semenyo wants to 'rewrite history again' after joining City

Manchester: Antoine Semenyo said yesterday that he wants to "rewrite history again" at Manchester City after joining from Bournemouth for a reported fee of £65mn.

The 26-year-old, who has scored 10 Premier League goals this season, has signed a five-and-a-half-year deal at the Etihad and will be a major addition to their attacking arsenal.

Liverpool, Manchester United and Tottenham were also interested in the London-born Ghana international, who had a buyout clause that was understood to expire today. The widely trailed transfer is the first major move by Premier League clubs in the January window. "I have watched City over the last decade under Pep Guardiola, and they have been the dominant team in the Premier League as well as achieving amazing things in the Champions League, FA Cup and League Cup," said Semenyo. "They have set the highest of standards and it's a club with world-

class players, world-class facilities and one of the greatest managers ever in Pep."

The winger said he wanted to be part of City's rebuild after a barren season last year and the departure of a number of senior players. "I feel I'm improving but there are so many young players here who I think will be top players," he said. "I want to be part of that, and I want to rewrite history again."

His final act after three years with Bournemouth was scoring a spectacular stoppage-time winner in Wednesday's 3-2 victory against Tottenham. City, dethroned as Premier League champions by Liverpool last season, have signed Semenyo to boost their challenge for silverware on four fronts in 2026. Guardiola's men trail Arsenal by six points at the top of the Premier League and are still involved in the FA Cup, League Cup and Champions League. City's options in wide areas are currently limited, with Savinho out

injured and Omar Marmoush representing Egypt at the Africa Cup of Nations.

Semenyo has enjoyed a meteoric rise since being shipped out on loan multiple times by Bristol City early in his career. He eventually earned his move to the Premier League in 2023 and has blossomed into one of the most potent wingers in the top division under Andoni Iraola. Guardiola confirmed at his pre-match press conference that Semenyo would be in his squad for City's FA Cup clash with third-tier Exeter today. "Everybody knows the qualities (he has) - he was playing extraordinarily at Bournemouth in the last few years and can play both sides," said the City boss.

City are also in the market to boost their defensive options after losing Ruben Dias and Josko Gvardiol to injuries. Crystal Palace captain Marc Guehi, who is out of contract at the end of the season, is reportedly their prime target.

