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**CRICKET | Page 2**

India's Gill calls it 'destiny' after shock T20 World Cup snub



**FOOTBALL | Page 4**

Osimhen leads Nigeria past Algeria into AFCON semis



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# GULF TIMES

## SPORT



**TENNIS**

Sabalenka into third straight Brisbane final ahead of Australian Open

**Page 3**

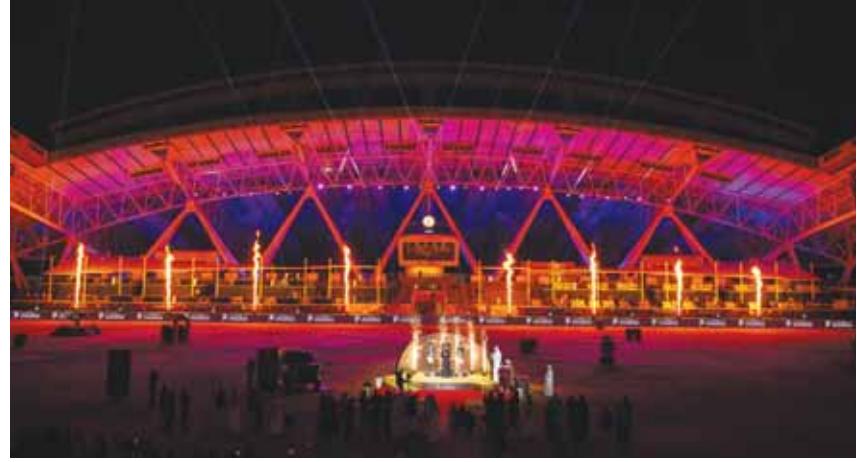
### SHOWJUMPING

## Brash claims CSI5\* feature at HH The Father Amir's Prix

It was a double victory for the British rider, who also won the CSI3\* 1.50m Grand Prix at Al Shaqab



Britain's Scott Brash astride BWP gelding Hello Jefferson clears a rail in the CSI5\* 1.60m Grand Prix at HH The Father Amir's Prix.



The Al Shaqab arena glitters under lights during the HH The Father Amir's Prix.



Qatari riders dominated the CSI1\* Grand Prix 1.30m jump-off, with Hussain Said Haidan clinching top honours, ahead of Saad Ahmed al-Saad and Nasser al-Ghazali.



Britain's Harry Charles claimed the CSI5\* 1.50m Special Two-Phase class aboard Bandit.

**By Sports Reporter**

Doha

**S**cott Brash produced a masterclass performance to clinch the CSI5\* 1.60m Grand Prix at Tour 2 of the HH The Father Amir's Prix at Al Shaqab yesterday. Nine horse-and-rider combinations progressed to the jump-off, where Brash guided the BWP gelding Hello Jefferson to victory. The British rider stopped the clock at 42.66 seconds to seal the title and collect €97,500.

Brash finished just ahead of France's Megane Moissonnier, who clocked 42.78 seconds aboard the 14-year-old stallion Crooner Tame to claim second place and €65,000. American rider Eve Jobs completed the podium, piloting the 15-year-old Canto Bruno to third in 43.41 seconds, earning €48,750.

All five riders in the top group delivered faultless rounds in the jump-off. Thailand's Janakabhorn Karunayadhai narrowly missed out on a podium finish in fourth aboard Maxwin Kinmar Bespoke, while Monaco's Anastasia Nielsen rounded out the top five with ESI Rocky.

"Hello Jefferson is an incredible horse," Brash said. "He's 17 now, but he still feels like a young horse. He loves his job, and he's always jumped well here in Doha in the main arena."

Brash had earlier enjoyed success in the CSI3\* 1.50m Grand Prix, guiding Hello Chadora Lady to victory following a seven-horse jump-off. He edged out Belgium's Abdel Said on Wathnan Calvaro to take home €31,800. Germany's Janne Friederike Meyer-Zimmermann finished third with Iron Dames High Level.



Qatari riders dominated the CSI1\* Grand Prix 1.30m jump-off, with Hussain Said Haidan clinching top honours, ahead of Saad Ahmed al-Saad and Nasser al-Ghazali.

Meanwhile, Britain's Harry Charles claimed the CSI5\* 1.50m Special Two-Phase class aboard Bandit. The pair produced faultless round and stopped the clock at 35.10 seconds to secure top honours. Fellow Briton Millie Allen followed closely in second place on Quick Diamant HR with another double-clear effort in 35.41, while Italy's Roberto Previtali completed the podium on I'M Special Mess PS in 36.16.

Charles said: "Bandit is back at five-star level after nearly a year away, so starting with a win is fantastic. He has plenty more in the tank, and as the tour progresses, I hope to build him up to the bigger classes here in Doha."

At the end of Tour 2, Brash has moved into the overall lead in the CSI4\* and CSI5\* provisional rankings with 89 points. Karunayadhai sits second on 66 points, while Jobs has climbed to third on 62. Harry Charles and Anastasia Nielsen are tied on 59, with Moissonnier close behind on 55.

Qatari riders dominated the CSI1\* Grand Prix 1.30m jump-off, with Hussain Said Haidan clinching top honours after producing a double-clear round aboard Tinto de Nuit Z in 70.72.

D Saucedo in 35.79 seconds. He finished ahead of compatriot Saad Ahmed al-Saad, who stopped the clock at 37.10 seconds on Fashion des Douits, while Nasser al-Ghazali completed an all-Qatari podium with a faultless round on Dexter in 37.11.

Italy's Emanuele Gaudiano claimed victory in the CSI3\* 1.40m accumulator, guiding Diarouge Blue PS to a winning score of 65 in 46.13 seconds. Turkey's Hasan Senturk settled for second on Elzas, also finishing on 65 but in a slightly slower time of 46.79 seconds, while Saudi Arabia's Khalid al-Hadi placed third aboard Capoen in 48.34.

Gaudiano praised his mount's consistency in the arena. "Diarouge Blue PS jumped very well today. She has already won three classes here, so I'm happy with how she's feeling in this arena," he said.

France's Jean Francois Rondoux topped the CSI3\* 1.30m faults and time class after steering Inter-Larus to a clear round in 69.13 seconds. Qatari rider Ghanim Nassar al-Qadi finished second on Mukaynis in 70.71, narrowly edging Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Alasaker, who was third aboard Tinto de Nuit Z in 70.72.

In the CSI1\* 1.15m accumulator, Qatar

swept the podium, led by Ali Omar al-Ansari and Nikita Eindeken Z with a winning score of 65 in 43.13 seconds. Abdulla Ahmed al-Khulaifi followed on Quenta van de Corsendonksehoeve, while Abdulla Tamim al-Thani took third aboard Casandra 352.

The CSIY-B and CSIY 1.30m jump-off Group VII series qualifier saw another Qatari success, as Ibrahim Yousif al-Mahmoud emerged victorious on Vito Blue PS with a double-clear effort in 36.42 seconds. Saudi Arabia's Meshal al-Qahtani placed second on Menke, while Yaqoub Nasser al-Mass finished third for Qatar aboard Hammond J.

In the national CSN 1.00m special two-phase class, Iraq's Mariam Abdulkarim Sabri claimed the top spot on Bainha after posting a double-clear round in 35.63 seconds. She was closely followed by Afraa Abdulrahman al-Sulaiti on Molga, with Salman Faisal al-Marri rounding out the podium aboard Goteborg Handyman.

In the overall CSI1\* standings, Haidan extends his lead to 40 points after topping both Tour 1 and Tour 2. Saad Ahmed al-Saad is second on 34 points, while Jordan's Bisher Kayali is third on 19.

### FOOTBALL

## Sailiya, Waab, Kharaitiyat and Markhiya advance into Amir Cup last 16

**By Sports Reporter**

Doha

**Q**atar Stars League side Al Sailiya survived a major scare before edging past Muaiithir 5-4 on penalties to book their place in the round of 16 of the 54th Amir Cup. The teams were locked 1-1 after regulation time in the preliminary round match at the Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium.

Al Waab eventually broke the deadlock in the 40th minute through Osinio Cesar, who created space for himself before firing a low left-footed shot past the Lusail

goalkeeper. The lead was doubled in the second half when Baha Faisal converted from the penalty spot, sealing qualification for Al Waab.

At Hamad bin Khalifa Stadium, Al Kharaitiyat defeated Al Bidaa 2-1 to secure their place in the last 16. It marked the second consecutive season in which Al Kharaitiyat have eliminated their rivals at the same preliminary stage of the Amir Cup.

Al Kharaitiyat went into the break with a two-goal advantage, with Yanis Fathallah opening the scoring two minutes before half-time, followed by Jordan Yuri's strike in stoppage time of the first half. Al Bidaa pulled one back in the 63rd minute when Cristian

Bello converted a penalty, but Al Kharaitiyat held firm to see out the victory.

Al Markhiya completed the list of qualifiers after overcoming Al Mesaimeer 2-1 at Thani bin Jassim Stadium. Al Markhiya made a flying start, opening the scoring in the fifth minute through Hamza al-Sanhaji before Lucas Firmino doubled the advantage from the penalty spot in the 25th minute.

Al Mesaimeer reduced the deficit in the 32nd minute through Mohammed al-Junaidi, but Al Markhiya maintained their lead for the remainder of the match to advance to the next round of the tournament.



Al Markhiya and Mesaimeer players battle for the ball during the Amir Cup.



## CRICKET

# India's Gill calls it 'destiny' after shock T20 World Cup snub

'When you have these two people in your team, it makes your life a lot easier'

**AFP**  
Vadodara, India

**T**est and ODI skipper Shubman Gill yesterday said he respected the Indian selectors' shock decision to drop him from the squad for the T20 World Cup on home soil, calling it "destiny".

The 26-year-old will lead the one-day team in three matches against New Zealand starting today in Vadodara before many of India's players head into a five-match T20 series.

Indian selectors surprisingly axed the batsmen from the T20 squad after he scored only 291 runs in his past 15 matches in the game's shortest format at an average of 24.25.

"Firstly, it is my belief that in my life, I am where I am supposed to be. Whatever is written in my destiny, I will have it," Gill told reporters.

"As a player I want to win games for my team, but having said that, I respect the selectors' decision. I wish the T20 team the very best. I hope that they win the World Cup."

India, led by Suryakumar Yadav, are the defending champions in the T20 World Cup which takes place in India and Sri Lanka between February 7 and March 8.

Before that, India will play 50-over matches against New Zealand with the spotlight on stalwarts Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma.

Kohli and Rohit play only the ODI format since retiring from T20s, following the World Cup triumph in Barbados in 2024, and Test cricket. Gill said the presence of the two greats was invaluable for any captain.

"Definitely when you have these two people in your team, it makes your life a lot easier," said Gill.

"And whenever you are in a tough situation, they have been in those kind of situations and conditions many times in their life,



India captain Shubman Gill and selection committee chairman Ajit Agarkar interact during a practice session. (AFP)

so you can always go to them and see how they are thinking or what they would do.

"And that piece of information is very valuable for any captain."

Gill, who was named India's 50-overs captain in October last year, has largely been out of action since mid-November following a neck injury during the Test series

against South Africa.

Since then, he has only played three Twenty20 internationals against South Africa.

"Obviously, never easy, whenever you get injured, watching your team play and you feel like you are missing out on all those games," Gill said.

"When you have just been

named the captain, there are so many things that you want to do and when you set out, it's definitely very frustrating.

"But at the same time, you just have to focus on what are the things that you need to do in that moment and kind of build on that."

Gill emphasised the importance of using the series to evaluate players ahead of next year's World Cup.

"In any series that we play, I think there is an aim or a goal behind it, keeping the World Cup in mind, so in all the series that we play, it's very important to see the players, where and in which condition they can help us," he said.

India's stalwarts Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma will be back in action after more than a month's break from international cricket and Gill banked on their experience, calling their presence invaluable.

"One is the greatest opener of all time in ODIs and Virat bhai (brother) is one of the greatest ODI batters ever, so definitely when you have these two people in your team, it makes your life a lot more easier," Gill said.

The 37-year-old Kohli and Rohit, 38, have been in top batting form in international and domestic cricket, scoring centuries and runs to turn back the clock.

Meanwhile, New Zealand's ODI captain Michael Bracewell is keen to make the most of the Indian conditions ahead of the T20 World Cup.

"It's always fun coming over and playing here," said Bracewell, a left-hand batter and off-spinner.

"A month before the T20 World Cup, getting used to these conditions. You won't be in the same venue but in general, getting used to the nature of the surfaces that they have."

Bracewell said he will name the playing XI at the toss but confirmed fast bowler Kristian Clarke will make his international debut in the ODI opener.

## HORSE RACING

## Lady De Faust claims Athbah Cup in style

**By Sports Reporter**  
Doha

**L**ady De Faust delivered an emphatic performance to land the Athbah Cup with a win in the Purebred Arabian Premium Maiden over 1,400m feature race at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

Making her 9th career start and second appearance in Qatar, the five-year-old bay mare built on her 4th place finish in the four-year-old PA Oaks in December, asserting her authority with ease.

Under a hands-and-heels ride in the home straight, she powered clear to score by five lengths, completing a double on the evening for owner Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuvari, trainer Julian Smart and jockey Pierre Charles Boudot.

Head of Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Racing Operations Section Rashid Saad Adiba presented the trophies to the winners.

Earlier in the seven-race meeting, Ghafan powered clear to win a Local Thoroughbred Handicap over 1200m by 3 1/4 lengths, producing a strong finish under Jefferson Smith for owner-trainer Ibrahim Khaled Elahmed, with Barq Al Atam and Al Nasr Al Washeek completing the frame.

Khalil Du Croate returned to winning form in a Purebred Arabian Handicap over 2200m, edging out Jalaad Al Shahania by a quarter length, with Farhan finishing third. The gelding was ridden by Boudot for trainer Smart.

In Local Thoroughbred Handicap over 2,100m, Al Gamamah claimed title winning by a head under Tomas Lukasek for owner-trainer Ibrahim Saeed Ibrahim al-Malki. RB Hot Mess produced a decisive late surge over 2,200m in a Purebred Arabian Handicap, scoring by three lengths for owner Yosuf Ahmad

Telfat, trainer Bader al-Balushi and jockey Alberto Sanna, with Dahman Al Shahania and Namar completing the placings.

Al Shafha SK shed her maiden tag in a Local Thoroughbred Handicap over 1,200m, taking the lead in the home straight to win by a length for owner Lekhreib Stud, trainer Abdulla Dhabbit Aldosari, and jockey Salman Fahad al-Hajri.

Meanwhile, Bin La Hoor finally broke his maiden in a Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate over 2,200m, scoring by a length on his tenth career start.

Ridden by Szczepan Mazur for trainer Mohammed Hassan al-Matwi, he produced a strong late surge to claim victory, with Agshar and Al Qaws completing a tight finish.

## RESULTS

## 35th Al Uqda Race Meeting -

## Athbah Cup

**WINNERS:** (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

## 1 - Athbah Cup, Purebred Arabian Premium Maidens

Lady De Faust, Julian Smart, Pierre Charles Boudot

## 2 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (55-60)

Ghafan, Ibrahim Khaled Elahmed, Jefferson Smith

## 3 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (75-95)

Khalil Du Croate, Julian Smart, Pierre Charles Boudot

## 4 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (45-65)

Al Gamamah, Ibrahim Saeed Ibrahim al-Malki, Tomas Lukasek

## 5 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (45-65)

RB Hot Mess, Bader al-Balushi, Alberto Sanna

## 6 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (0-45)

Al Shafha SK, Abdulla Dhabbit Aldosari, Salman Fahad al-Hajri

## 7 - Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate

Bin La Hoor, Mohammed Hassan al-Matwi, Szczepan Mazur



Jockey Pierre Charles Boudot guided Lady De Faust to the Athbah Cup win at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. **PICTURE:** Juhaim

## GOLF

## Koepka applies for PGA Tour reinstatement: reports

**AFP**  
New York

**B**rooks Koepka, a five-time major winner who left the PGA Tour for LIV Golf in 2022 but quit the Saudi-backed series last month, has applied for PGA reinstatement, ESPN and Golf Channel reported.

The 35-year-old American, a nine-time PGA Tour champion and five-time LIV winner, departed LIV with a year remaining on his contract, but it was unclear when he might be allowed to return to the PGA Tour, according to the reports. ESPN reported that the PGA Tour will begin a reinstatement and disciplinary process that includes input from players on the board of directors.

Koepka, a two-time US Open champion and three-time PGA Championship winner, has not competed in a PGA Tour event since the Valspar Championship in March 2022.

After jumping to LIV Golf, Koepka became the first active LIV golfer to win a major title when



he captured the 2023 PGA at Oak Hill, which has made him eligible to compete in all four majors this year. Koepka won the 2018 US Open at Shinnecock, where this year's US Open will be contested in June. The PGA Tour ban on Koepka did not keep him from playing for the United States in the 2023 Ryder Cup in Italy.

LIV Golf chief executive Scott O'Neil said in December that Koepka and LIV "mutually agreed" to his departure.

Koepka won LIV titles in 2022 at Jeddah, 2023 in Orlando and Jeddah and 2024 at Singapore and Greenbrier. Since leaving the PGA Tour, Koepka has not been critical of the tour and was not among players who filed a lawsuit against

the tour over its ban of defectors to LIV from its tour events.

"Brooks Koepka is a highly accomplished professional and we wish him and his family continued success," the PGA Tour said in a statement when the Koepka-LIV split was announced.

Another LIV star, two-time US Open winner Bryson DeChambeau, is not signed with LIV Golf beyond the 2026 season.

DeChambeau won the 2020 US Open and became the second active LIV player to win a major when he captured the 2024 US Open at Pinehurst.

DeChambeau has won nine times of the PGA Tour and three times in LIV Golf, including last year's South Korea event.

Rory McIlroy, who completed a career Grand Slam by winning last year's Masters, spoke on the subject of players returning to the PGA Tour from LIV in the "Stick to Football" podcast.

"They've made the money, but they've paid their consequence in terms of the reputation and some of the things they've lost by going over there," McIlroy said of PGA defectors to LIV.

## FOOTBALL

## Roma beat Sassuolo to close in on Serie A leaders Inter

**AFP**  
Rome

**R**oma moved three points behind Serie A leaders Inter Milan yesterday after a hard-fought 2-0 win over Sassuolo in Rome.

Down to the bare bones due to a clutch of injuries and players away at the Africa Cup of Nations, Roma moved into third thanks to quickfire late goals from Manu Kone and Matias Soule which broke Sassuolo's brave resistance. Kone thumped home the opener with his head from Soule's pinpoint cross in the 77th minute to spark delirium in the Stadio Olimpico.

And fans were sure of the three points for their team two minutes later when Soule calmly rolled home Stephan El Shaarawy's delicate flick at the end of a flowing passing move.

Argentine forward Soule told DAZN he would buy El Shaarawy

"a bottle of wine" in front of his grinning veteran teammate who in stoppage time hit the bar and had a goal ruled out for off-side.

"Thankfully the second half was played in a difference spirit to the first, matches get more open as they go on... all we can do is carry on going as we are," said Soule. Roma, who had seven players out of action and five academy players on the bench, are level on 39 points with second-placed AC Milan who play at Fiorentina on Tuesday.

Gian Piero Gasperini's team were a completely different proposition in the second half after a drab opening period in which Sassuolo - 12th and 10 points above the relegation zone - held their own. "There was more intensity in the second half but above all there was more quality," said Gasperini.

"I started seeing what I see in training: good play in tight situations and the ability to create



Roma's Matias Soule (left) celebrates after scoring his team's second goal with team-mate Manu Kone during the Serie A match against Sassuolo at the Olympic stadium in Rome yesterday. (AFP)

## PGA Tour unveils fall slate with Japan, Mexico, Bermuda stops

Two events in Mexico and stops in Japan and Bermuda highlight the US PGA Tour's eight-tournament fall schedule announced yesterday. The tournaments, conducted after the Tour Championship, are aimed at players trying to solidify their spots in next year's tour lineup. The FedEx Cup Fall lineup also includes the 16th Presidents Cup matches between the United States and non-European Internationals on September 24-27 at Medinah Country Club near Chicago. "Fans can expect rich storylines to unfold across the FedEx Cup Fall as players look to secure or improve their status for the following season," PGA Tour chief

competitions officer Tyler Dennis said. The autumn campaign begins with the Biltmore Championship at Asheville, North Carolina on September 17-20. The Bank of Utah Championship on October 1-4 will be followed by the Baycurrent Classic the next week at Yokohama Country Club in Japan and the October 21-25 Bermuda Championship at Port Royal Golf Course in Southampton. The Mexico Open, to be played October 29-November 1 in Vallarta, moves from the spring and is followed by the World Wide Technology Championship on November 5-8 at Tiger Woods-designed El Cardonal at Diamante in Los Cabos.

## SPOTLIGHT

# Qatar impress against Brazil in King's Cup

By Sports Reporter  
Sao Paulo, Brazil

**Q**atar team came close to pulling off a major upset by eliminating the defending champions and host nation Brazil after delivering a strong and thrilling performance that ended in a narrow defeat in the second round of the King's Cup, currently taking place in the city of Sao Paulo.

Despite the defeat of all four Arab teams in the second round, the national teams of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Morocco maintained their chances of progressing, benefiting from their victories in the opening round.

All four teams will now head into the decisive third round of the group stage, scheduled for the end of this week.

In one of the most exciting matches of the tournament so far, the Qatari team put in an impressive performance against Brazil, who played in front of strong



home support and in the presence of several global football icons. Former Brazilian star Kaká scored the 'President's Kick' in the first half amid wide celebrations from the crowd, while Neymar was present on the bench to support the host team.

Earlier in the match, Qatar's captain and content creator Abo-

Flah successfully converted his first 'President's Kick' of the tournament, giving his team a significant morale boost.

By the 36th minute, with the game entering 'Matchball Mode', Qatar took a 6-4 lead, leaving them just one goal away from eliminating Brazil, who had lost their opening match to Spain.



However, the hosts mounted a comeback in the closing minutes and managed to turn the score around, netting the winning goal in the 48th minute through striker Libâo Pinheiro. Brazil thus secured the victory, while Qatar exited the match disappointed despite a brave and eye-catching performance.

**Arab teams suffer second-round losses**

The second round also witnessed other Arab defeats, as Chile defeated Morocco 6-1 in Group One, despite Morocco's strong start to the tournament. Player Nader Louah scored the Atlas Lions' only goal, shifting Morocco's focus to their third match against the

Netherlands, a crucial opportunity to recover and keep qualification hopes alive. In Group Three, the match between Algeria and France ended in a 5-5 draw before France secured the win through penalty shootouts. Saudi Arabia also lost to Indonesia on penalties after a 3-3 draw in regular time. Despite the loss, group results and standings indicate that Saudi Arabia holds a relative advantage among the Arab teams to qualify for the quarter-finals.

They face India in the third round, boosted by the return of their captain and content creator Drabha, who continues to provide strong technical and leadership influence. The top team from each group will qualify directly for the knockout stages, while second-placed teams and the best third-placed teams will compete in the 'Last Chance' round.

Arab fans are eagerly anticipating these decisive fixtures, hoping their teams will continue their journey into the advanced stages of the tournament.

## TENNIS

# Sabalenka into third straight Brisbane final

SABALENKA WILL DEFEND TITLE AGAINST UKRAINE'S KOSTYUK

AFP  
Brisbane

**A**ryna Sabalenka beat Karolina Muchova in straight sets to reach her third Brisbane International final in a row yesterday, a week before the Australian Open.

Sabalenka looked in great touch against the tricky Czech, who had won their last three meetings and went into the match as one of the few players with a winning record over the world number one.

But Sabalenka showed her class and power as she broke Muchova once in each set to take the semi-final 6-3, 6-4 in 89 minutes and will face Ukraine's Marta Kostyuk in today's women's final.

Former world number one Daniil Medvedev will take on unseeded American Brandon Nakashima in the men's final.

"I struggled against her a couple of times in the past," Sabalenka, the defending champion, said of Muchova.

"I'm happy that today I was focused from the beginning and I was able to show such great tennis and put her under so much pressure and get the win in straight sets."

The 27-year-old Belarusian said she could feel her level getting better with every match in Brisbane, where she is yet to drop a set.

She said that with seven of the world's top 10 having entered, it was ideal preparation for the Australian Open, which begins in Melbourne on January 18.

Sabalenka is aiming to win a third Australian Open in four years. "I definitely feel that com-



Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus reacts during her semi-final against Karolina Muchova of Czech Republic at the Brisbane International yesterday. (AFP)

pared to the first match here, I'm playing better and better," she said. "That's really important heading to Melbourne, to build that level, and to play some great matches against great opponents."

"So I'm super happy with the performance so far and cannot wait to play my final match here."

Kostyuk, who entered the week ranked 26th in the world, swept past world number six Jessica

Pegula 6-0, 6-3 in just 55 minutes in a stunning display of power and aggression. Kostyuk's demolition of the American made it three wins over top 10 players in succession. She beat world number three Amanda Anisimova in the third round and ninth-ranked Mirra Andreeva in the quarter-finals.

"I think it was one of those days today when everything you touch turns into gold," Kostyuk said.

"Personally, I didn't have many matches like this in my career, especially against top-10 players, so it's a great bonus to have such a match because it's not easy conditions in Brisbane. It's very hot, very humid."

Kostyuk has never beaten Sabalenka in four previous meetings but said the pressure was all on her opponent. "The pressure is not on me - I want to go out there and put on a good show for the crowd," she said.

"I really have nothing to lose."

In the men's draw, top seed Medvedev beat Alex Michelsen of the United States 6-4, 6-2 while Nakashima defeated another American in Aleksandar Kovacevic, 7-6 (7/4), 6-4.

In the Auckland Classic, Filipina Alexandra Eala squandered a match point to allow China's Wang Xinyu to secure a 5-7 7-5 6-4 win. Up next for Wang is Elina Svitolina, who beat Iva Jovic 7-6 (5) 6-2 in the second semi-final.

Top seed Lorenzo Musetti reached the final of the Hong Kong Open, beating Andrey Rublev 6-7(3) 7-5 6-4 in a last-four clash. Alexander Bublik beat Marcos Giron 3-6 6-4 6-2 in the second semi-final, setting up a title clash with Musetti.

## FOCUS

## Poland stun US to set up United Cup summit clash with Switzerland

Reuters  
Sydney

**P**oland exacted revenge for their loss to the United States in last year's final, beating the defending champions in their last-four tie at the United Cup to set up a title clash with Switzerland, who beat Belgium in their semi-final yesterday.

Hubert Hurkacz stunned world number nine Taylor Fritz in the men's singles to give Poland the lead, before Coco Gauff beat Iga Swiatek to level the tie. But Poland prevailed in the mixed doubles decider, where Katarzyna Kawa and Jan Zieliński beat Gauff and Christian Harrison. Hurkacz, ranked 83rd in the world, avenged his loss to Fritz in last year's final in a 7-6(1) 7-6(2) win, after taking the lead in both tiebreaks with well-placed backhand passing shots to beat his second top-10 ranked opponent this week.

"Definitely pleasantly surprised... in seven months, (this is) my first tournament. So coming back from such a long period the first time in my life, you never know what to expect," said Hurkacz, who also beat world number three Alexander Zverev on Monday when he returned from an injury layoff.

World number four Gauff got the US back in the game, beating Swiatek 6-4 6-2, as the American's powerful shots forced the world number two to stay near the baseline and make mistakes with her backhand returns. Gauff, however, could not complete her team's comeback, as Kawa and Zieliński won 7-6(5) 7-6(3) in the mixed doubles, ensuring Poland's progress to today's final.

"I'm so proud of our team... I gave everything that I had. It means a lot, it's a great victory for us," Kawa said.

**BENCIC STEERS SWITZERLAND TO VICTORY**

Belinda Bencic led Switzerland to their first United Cup final, beating Elise Mertens in the singles before returning alongside Jakub Paul to clinch a dou-



Poland's Hubert Hurkacz celebrates after defeating USA's Taylor Fritz in the semi-final match at the United Cup in Sydney yesterday. (AFP)

bles win. In the deciding mixed doubles match, the Swiss duo claimed a 6-3 0-6 10-5 win over Mertens and Zizou Bergs in an hour and 17 minutes. Bencic and Paul coasted through the first set but won a total of just 12 points in the second set as the match went into a tiebreak.

The Swiss pair did well to shake off their collapse and re-focus, taking five points in a row to give themselves a 9-4 lead and then crossing the finish line when Bergs netted a return.

"It's easy to find the energy with this team. It's just great to play with Belinda. I mean, just hats off to her to play almost three hours and then come out again for the doubles," Paul said.

The tie was played in gruelling conditions as temperatures hovered around 40C (104F).

Earlier, Bergs needed an energy-sapping two-and-a-half hours on court to beat Stan Wawrinka 6-3 6-7(4) 6-3. Bergs took the first set with ease but was pushed hard in the second as the Swiss captain rallied to level the match.

Bergs found himself down 40-0 on Wawrinka's serve at 4-3 in the third set, but the Belgian clawed his way back and claimed a decisive break.

In the tie's first match, Bencic kept alive her undefeated run at the tournament as she beat Elise Mertens 6-3 4-6 7-6(0) and put Switzerland in front. Bencic has won all four singles and all four mixed doubles matches during the United Cup.

## BOTTOMLINE

## Alcaraz beats Sinner in South Korea exhibition match

Reuters  
Incheon, South Korea

**C**arlos Alcaraz beat his great rival Jannik Sinner 7-5 7-6(8) to win their Hyundai Card Super Match exhibition event in Incheon, South Korea, yesterday that marked the start of the season for the world's top two men's tennis players.

There was little to separate the two during the entertaining clash, with world number one Alcaraz squeaking ahead towards the end of both sets to clinch the win.

"We all need the support from the fans. So having the support and feeling the love from the people was necessary for me to per-

form my best and play great tennis like I did today," Alcaraz said.

In their press conference on Friday, Sinner said the match would not be a true indicator of their levels heading into the new season and that both players would focus on entertaining spectators.

It was a promise they lived up to, as the largely light-hearted hit-around unsurprisingly lacked the intensity that has characterised their previous meetings on the sport's biggest stages.

The pair mixed up their game with an array of trick shots and engaged in a number of memorable rallies to keep fans at the Inspire Arena on the edge of their seats, with Sinner allowing a child in the stands to play a point for him in the second set.

**EXHIBITION EVENTS**

It was an entertaining display from both players, who are no strangers to putting on a show at exhibition events. Sinner and Alcaraz competed in the Six Kings Slam exhibition tournament in Riyadh in 2024 and 2025, with the Italian winning in the final on both occasions.

Alcaraz has defended his decision to play in such lucrative events despite previously saying he would consider skipping ATP Tour events to prioritise his health in a crowded schedule, saying they provide relief from the grind of the tour. The Spaniard has also admitted there are considerable financial incentives to playing exhibition events, saying last year the prize money on offer was a motivation for playing in the Six Kings

Slam. With the exhibition match wrapped up, the serious business starts for Sinner and Alcaraz, who will now shift their attention to the Australian Open.

The two have much at stake in the season's opening Grand Slam, which begins at Melbourne Park on January 18, with Sinner looking to win a third straight Australian Open title and Alcaraz chasing a career Grand Slam.

"It was an entertaining match, that's why we came here and obviously now the main goal is in Australia," Sinner said.

"At the end of the day, exhibition matches are different, you are a bit more relaxed and also entertaining the crowd a little bit more with different shots and different actions on court."



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz hits a return to Italy's Jannik Sinner during their exhibition tennis match at Inspire Arena in Incheon yesterday. (AFP)

## FOOTBALL

# Osimhen leads Nigeria past Algeria into AFCON semis

Last edition's runners-up face hosts Morocco in the last four

**AFP**  
Marrakesh, Morocco

**V**ictor Osimhen scored one goal and set up another as Nigeria beat Algeria 2-0 in their Africa Cup of Nations quarter-final to set up a last-four showdown with hosts Morocco.

Nigeria dominated the first half in Marrakesh without scoring before getting the breakthrough within two minutes of the restart as Osimhen headed in. The 2023 African player of the year then turned provider for the second goal just before the hour mark, setting up Akor Adams to put the Super Eagles out of sight.

"A very big congratulations to the whole team for the kind of performance they put in against a very good Algeria team," said Osimhen after collecting the man-of-the-match trophy.

"For me I just did my job. I tried to fight for the team and to get goals or assists, but the whole squad deserves praise."

Runners-up at the last AFCON two years ago in Ivory Coast, Nigeria came to Morocco still smarting from their failure to qualify for the upcoming World Cup but are dreaming of winning a fourth continental title here. They were not intimidated by a Marrakesh crowd of 32,452 which was almost entirely given over to the Algerian cause, but the atmosphere is likely to be far more hostile for Wednesday's semi-final in Rabat.

Algeria had beaten Nigeria en route to winning their last Cup of Nations title in Egypt in 2019 and this has been by far their best campaign at the tournament since then. Their large support which descended on a stadium set against the backdrop of the Atlas Mountains was full of optimism after Vladimir Petkovic's side had impressed in the group stage and edged out the Democratic Republic of Congo in the last 16.

Yet a team featuring a formidable front three of Riyad Mahrez, Ibrahim Maza and Mohamed Amoua failed to muster a single shot in the first half and were lucky to be level at half-time. Nigeria almost scored just before the half-hour mark, when 'keeper Luca Zidane



Nigeria's Victor Osimhen scores against Algeria in Marrakesh, Morocco. (Reuters)



got nowhere near an Ademola Lookman free-kick delivery and Calvin Bassey turned the ball towards goal.

However, Ramy Bensebaini got there just in time to hook it away from the line. They then should certainly have scored in the 37th minute as Adams found himself clean through but blazed his shot over the bar.

However, Eric Chelle's half-time team-talk clearly worked as his Nigeria side wasted no time getting their noses in front at the start of the second half. Alex Iwobi found Bruno Onyemaechi on the left and his deep cross to the back post was headed low into the net by Osimhen for the opener.

The masked Galatasaray striker had gone

seven Cup of Nations matches without finding the net before scoring against Tunisia in the group stage. He now has four in his last four matches.

Nigeria are also the tournament's top scorers overall with 14 goals in total after Adams made it 2-0 - Osimhen was released in behind and unselfishly squared for the Sevilla striker to round Zidane and finish for his second goal in as many games.

Adams could have had another as he headed off the post when Osimhen held the ball up for him from the line, while Algeria never really looked coming back. Tensions spilled over between the teams on the pitch at full-time, but it is next stop Rabat for the Super Eagles.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Qatar lose to Syria, exit U-23 Asian Cup



Qatar and Syria players vie for the ball at the Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Sports City Stadium in Jeddah yesterday.

**By Sports Reporter**  
Jeddah

**M**ahmoud Alaswad's late penalty earned Syria a 1-0 win against Qatar in their AFC U-23 Asian Cup B match at Jeddah's Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Sports City Stadium yesterday.

The result took Syria level on three points with United Arab Emirates, who they meet on Tuesday to decide who advances together with defending champions Japan to the quarter-finals. The second straight defeat ended Qatar's chances of advancing in the tournament.

The match endured a lukewarm start before a lapse in concentration by Mohamed Khaled saw him robbed of possession inside his own box but the Qatari forward recovered to block Muhammed Fadel's attempt in the 20th minute.

Syria were given another opportunity when Alhashmi Mohialdin's poor pass out from defence was intercepted by Dahlan but the midfielder's strike from distance was

straight at Qatar custodian Amir Katoul.

Qatar's only chance of the opening half came in the 33rd minute when Rashid al-Abdulla used his strength to power into the box but his shot from an acute angle was parried away by Maksim Sarraf. After the interval, Syria stepped up their intensity with Katoul forced to make a diving save to his right to deny a low Mahmoud al-Aswad shot from the edge of the box.

Such was Syria's dominance of the game that head coach Ildio Vale tried to get the Qatar midfield up and running by replacing Abdulaziz Hasan and Anas Abweny with Mahdi Almejaba and Jassem Alsharshani just before the hour mark. Despite the changes, it was Syria who continued to find the openings, with Mohammad al-Mustafa twice producing curling efforts from inside the box only to see them go agonisingly wide. The breakthrough finally came in the 85th minute through al-Aswad's penalty after Ayoub Aloui brought down al-Mustafa in the box, with the Qatari defender also given his marching orders for the foul.

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## FOCUS

## Holders Palace suffer biggest ever FA Cup shock, Man City hit 10 against Exeter

**AFP**  
London

**H**olders Crystal Palace succumbed to the biggest shock in FA Cup history with a 2-1 defeat at sixth-tier Macclesfield as Antoine Semenyo started his Manchester City career by scoring in a 10-1 rout of Exeter. Tottenham boss Thomas Frank's future was plunged into doubt after a 2-1 home loss to Aston Villa, while Newcastle beat Bournemouth on penalties after a thrilling 3-3 draw.

In their last FA Cup outing at Wembley in May, Palace made history by beating City to win the club's first ever major trophy. They entered the record books for the wrong reasons this time at Moss Rose as captain Paul Dawson and Isaac Buckley-Ricketts scored either side of half-time for the side managed by John Rooney, the younger brother of former England captain Wayne Rooney.

The 117 places that separate Premier League outfit Palace from Macclesfield of the National League North in the English football pyramid is the most overcome by an underdog in FA Cup history. "I can't believe it, we never thought we would be in this position," said Rooney. "I didn't think it was possible but there is that little bit of hope that anything can happen on the day."

Palace boss Oliver Glasner was furious at what he described as a lack of "pride" and "slapstick" defending by the Eagles, who are now winless in nine games. "I have no explanation for what I have seen today," said the Austrian, who has been linked with the vacant managerial role at Manchester United.

Tottenham have won just three times in their last 14 games as their wait to lift the FA Cup for the first time since 1991 goes on. Villa struck twice in a dominant first half through Emi Buendia and Morgan Rogers.



Macclesfield players celebrate after their win over Crystal Palace in Macclesfield, Britain. (Reuters)

Wilson Odobert pulled a goal back early in the second half, but Spur could not find an equaliser to force extra-time and Frank was roundly booted at the full-time whistle.

Just a day after securing his £65mn move from Bournemouth, Semenyo was among the scorers as City crushed League One Exeter at the Etihad. Erling Haaland started but was remarkably not among the goals and was withdrawn at half-time. Rico Lewis scored twice, while Max Alleyne, Rodri, Rico Lewis, Tijjani Reijnders, Nico O'Riley and Ryan McArdle were also on target for City and Exeter netted two own goals.

Newcastle scored a 95th minute equaliser through Anthony Gordon's penalty to make it 2-2 at St. James Park after 90 minutes. Both sides scored in extra-time as this time

Bournemouth struck in stoppage time through Marcus Tavernier to force penalties. Aaron Ramsdale saved three spot-kicks as the Magpies prevailed 7-6 in a marathon shootout.

Sunderland also needed penalties to beat Everton after a 1-1 draw. Robin Roefs saved all three of the Toffees spot-kicks in the shootout to send the Black Cats into round four.

Premier League strugglers Wolves are now unbeaten in four games after thrashing Shrewsbury 6-1 thanks to a Jorgen Strand Larsen hat-trick. Fulham needed three goals in the final half hour to beat Middlesbrough 3-1 at Craven Cottage, but Burnley found Championship opposition an easier proposition in thrashing Millwall 5-1. Brentford cruised to a 2-0 win at financially stricken Sheffield on Wednesday.

### Undav calls shots as Stuttgart thump Leverkusen

**Berlin:** Deniz Undav set up two goals for Germany teammate Jamie Leweling and grabbed one of his own as Stuttgart cruised to a 4-1 win at Bayer Leverkusen in the German Bundesliga.

Another Germany international, Maximilian Mittelstaedt, converted a first-half penalty for the visitors while Leverkusen's Alejandro

Grimaldo pulled one back from the spot in the second half. The victory took the German Cup holders level on 29 points with third-placed RB Leipzig, but in fifth spot, one behind Leverkusen, on goal difference. Stuttgart arrived in Leverkusen having won just one of the past 31 games in all competitions between the sides dating back to 2010, but were brilliant and led 4-0 at half-time. Freiburg came from a goal down to beat Hamburg 2-1 at home, with the visitors playing most of the second half with 10 men. Tottenham loanee Luka Vuskovic put Hamburg in front just after half-time but Freiburg scored twice through Vincenzo Grifo and Igor Matanovic after Daniel Elfadli picked up a second yellow.