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GULF TIMES

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India edge New
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MOTOR RACING

Al-Attiyah stays top at Dakar, Ekstrom takes stage seven victory

Reuters
Riyadh

Mattias Ekstrom won stage seven of the Dakar Rally yesterday as the field started the second week in Saudi Arabia with late drama for Toyota's Henk Lategan while Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah stayed top in the car category.

South African Lategan had looked like taking the stage and overall lead but let both slip through his fingers after the day's final checkpoint. Instead Sweden's Ekstrom, winner of the prologue in a Ford Raptor, became the first driver in the top car category to take more than one stage this year.

Lategan had led Ekstrom after 417 of 459km from Riyadh to Wadi Ad Dawasir

but finished eight minutes and 35 seconds behind the winner after having to stop for 10 minutes at the 428km mark.

Ekstrom moved up to second overall, four minutes and 47 seconds behind Dacia Sandriders' five-times Dakar winner al-Attiyah with Lategan third. Al-Attiyah only had a slight idea of how the stage had won, but he was happy with his performance. He was not expecting to win the first special after the rest day.

"I think we did a good job. We are quite happy with the performance and we're waiting for the rest of the drivers. We'll see how much we lost. The stage was tricky, a lot of sand from the beginning, a lot of navigation, stony places, trees... But it's okay, we're quite happy," he said.

Spaniard Nani Roma was fourth for Ford after being reinstated by stewards late on Saturday's rest day as winner of stage five

and having a one minute and 10 second penalty rescinded.

In the motorcycle category, Australian Daniel Sanders extended his lead over American rival Ricky Brabec to four minutes and 25 seconds with Argentine rider Luciano Benavides a further 15 seconds adrift. Sanders had been a mere 45 seconds clear after Friday's sixth stage but Honda's Brabec finished the 459km stage 10th to the Australian's fourth.

Argentine Benavides won the stage, his second triumph of the event, in a one-two for the Red Bull KTM factory team with Spaniard Edgar Canet, while Honda's French challenger Adrien Van Beveren was third.

Today's 481km stage eight is the longest of the race with riders and drivers navigating canyons and dunes around Wadi Ad Dawasir.



Dacia's Nasser al-Attiyah and his co-driver Fabian Lurquin in action during stage seven of the Dakar Rally from Riyadh-Wadi Ad-Dawasir. (Reuters)

TABLE TENNIS

Zhu fairytale return continues with WTT Champions victory

Lin Yun-Ju wins men's title to end a 798 day wait for silverware

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Macau's former World No 1 Zhu Yuling and Chinese Taipei's Lin Yun-Ju emerged champions at WTT Champions Doha, as the curtain came down on five days of high intensity table tennis at Lusail Sports Arena yesterday. Zhu completed a remarkable comeback by lifting the women's singles trophy, while Lin finally ended a long title drought to claim the men's crown.

Zhu added another inspirational chapter to her comeback story by defeating third seed Chen Xingtong of China 4-2 (5-11, 13-11, 3-11, 11-7, 11-8, 13-11) in a gripping final. The victory earned Zhu her first winner's trophy and continued a stunning return to the sport following a four year absence from international competition.

Chen set the early tone, imposing herself in the opening game and striking first despite late resistance from Zhu. The second game proved pivotal, with both players locked in explosive backhand exchanges that brought the crowd to life. Zhu saved two game points before leveling the match after Chen sent her finisher into the net at 12-11.

Chen responded strongly in the third to regain control, but momentum swung again in the fourth as Zhu forced a decider in what was shaping into a finely balanced contest. The fifth game proved crucial. After seeing her lead reduced, Zhu called a time out and, despite Chen briefly levelling at 8-8, the decision paid off as Zhu reeled off three straight points to move ahead for the first time.

The sixth game delivered the final twist. Chen threatened to force a seventh after moving 10-9 ahead, but a fortunate edge of the table brought Zhu back to 10-10. Chen had one last chance to extend the match, but sent the ball long at 12-11, sealing the title for Zhu.

Holding her arms aloft, Zhu celebrated a hard-earned triumph. "I am feeling relatively calm since I haven't come out of the match yet. I played two matches today, which is the first time after I came back. It's a big test for my physical and mental strength," Zhu said. "I don't know whether I am already reaching the end of my table tennis career. If I want to carry on, I'd treat every match, every day and every experience as the last one to compete and leave no regrets."

The title marked Zhu's first appearance in a WTT Champions final and provided the perfect start to her 2026 campaign. For Chen, winner in Yokohama last season, the wait for a second WTT Champions title continues.

In the men's final, Lin Yun-Ju ended a 798 day wait for silverware with a commanding straight games victory over surprise finalist Jang Woojin of South Korea, winning 11-7, 11-9, 11-9, 13-11 at Infinity Arena.



Macau's Zhu Yuling (right) and Chinese Taipei's Lin Yun-Ju pose with their trophies after winning the WTT Champions at Lusail Sports Arena yesterday. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil



Zhu Yuling celebrates after her win over third seed Chen Xingtong in the final.

Lin last lifted a trophy at WTT Champions Frankfurt 2023 and had come close on several occasions since. This time, the 22-year-old showed no intention of letting the opportunity slip, producing a composed and ruthless performance to secure his fourth WTT Series singles title.

The triumph adds to Lin's previous suc-

cesses at WTT Champions Frankfurt 2023, WTT Contender Zagreb 2022 and WTT Contender Almaty 2023, and signals a timely return to form for the player known as the 'silent assassin'.

Attention now turns to WTT Star Contender Doha, which will be held at the Lusail Sports Arena from January 13-18.

FOOTBALL

Tickets for Qatar-UAE Super Cup now on sale

The Organising Committee of Qatar-UAE Super Cup yesterday announced the release of tickets for the tournament's third edition, which will be held from January 22-25.

The competition will see Qatari and UAE teams compete for four titles - Super Cup, Challenge Shield, Super Shield and Challenge Cup. The competition kicks off on January 22 with the Super Cup match between Al Gharafa and Sharjah at Thani Bin Jassim Stadium in Doha (kick-off 7pm).

On January 23, Abu Dhabi will host the Challenge Shield match between Al Wahda and Al Duhail at Al Nahyan Stadium (kick-off 7pm).

The third, Super Shield, will be a highly-anticipated clash between Al Sadd and Shabab Al Ahli at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha on January 24 (kick-off 7pm). The event concludes on January 25 with the Challenge Cup match between Al Jazira and Al Ahli at Mohammed Bin Zayed Stadium in Abu Dhabi (kick-off 7pm).

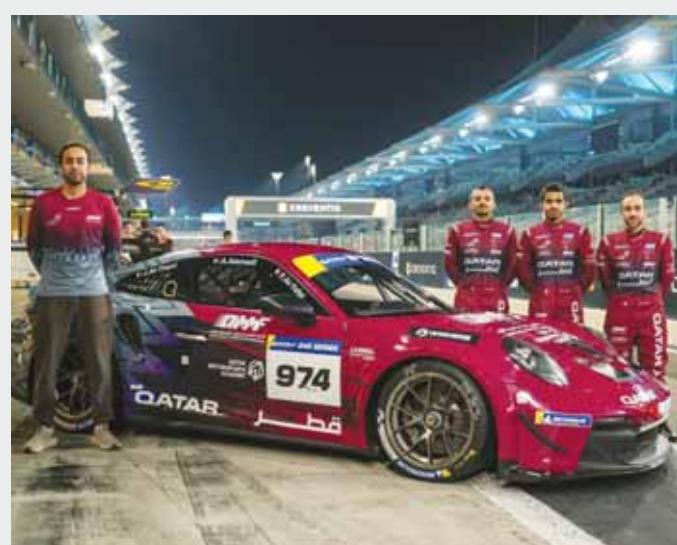
Team QMMF claims double victory at 6 Hours of Abu Dhabi



Doha: Team Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) kicked off their 2026 campaign in spectacular fashion, claiming a double victory at the 6 Hours of Abu Dhabi, the opening round of the 24H Series ME-Trophy by Creventic on Saturday.

The newly assembled QMMF driver line-up of Sheikh Jassim al-Thani, Faisal al-Yafei, and Ahmed al-Emadi dominated the Porsche 992 Cup category, securing both the overall class victory and first place in the 992 AM division at the demanding endurance event.

The QMMF drivers displayed remarkable consistency throughout the six-hour race, combining strong pace with perfect execution and smart race strategy. Their performance in the highly competitive Porsche 992 Cup field demonstrated both individual talent and exceptional teamwork, allowing them to control the race and ultimately claim the top step of the podium in both categories.





TWENTY20

Sri Lanka seal gritty win over Pakistan to level series

AFP

Dambulla, Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka eked out a hard-fought 14-run victory over Pakistan in the third T20 at rain-hit Dambulla yesterday, easing their batting jitters and squaring the three-match series 1-1.

The series, a warm-up for the T20 World Cup with Pakistan set to play all their matches in Sri Lanka due to political tensions with nuclear-armed neighbours India, saw the visitors clinch the opener by six wickets before rain washed out the second game.

"We were a bit worried about our batting and I'm glad we addressed that today," said Wanindu Hasaranga, who walked away with both Player of the Match and Player of the Series honours.

"The bowlers did a good job

too. The ball was wet and it wasn't easy. We tried to bowl wide and slow and asked them to take risks."

Hasaranga took four wickets in the game and in the process completed 150 wickets in T20Is.

In a contest trimmed to 12 overs a side, Sri Lanka muscled their way to a competitive 160 before choking Pakistan to 146-8.

Having been bowled out inside 20 overs in the series opener, Sri Lanka needed a statement with the bat and duly ticked every box after being put in. The top order laid the platform and the middle order applied the finishing touches.

Wicket-keeper Kusal Mendis made hay under the Power Play, blasting 30 off 16 balls while Dhananjaya de Silva (22 off 15) and Charith Asalanka (21 off 13) kept the scoreboard ticking.

Skipper Dasun Shanaka then swung the momentum decisively,

clubbing 34 off just nine deliveries, peppered with five towering sixes. The sixth-wicket stand between Shanaka and Janith Liyanage produced 52 runs in just 15 balls and proved the turning point, shifting the game firmly Sri Lanka's way.

Pakistan came out swinging in reply, racing to 50 in just 19 balls with captain Salman Agha hammering 45 off 12 balls, including five fours and three sixes.

But once the field spread, Sri Lanka tightened the screws, applied the choke and forced the asking rate to spiral.

"It was a good game of cricket," Agha said. "We conceded too many runs, but our batting effort was good. Unfortunately, we fell short. We know we are going to play all our World Cup games in Sri Lanka and it's important that we played in similar conditions," he added.



Sri Lanka's Kusal Mendis plays a shot during the third Twenty20 match against Pakistan at the Rangiri Dambulla International Stadium in Dambulla yesterday. (AFP)

CRICKET

Kohli hits 93 as India edge NZ in ODI series opener

"My journey has been nothing short of a dream-come-true for me"

AFP

Vadodara, India

Virat Kohli hit 93 to help India chase down 301 in a tense four-wicket win over New Zealand in the first one-day international yesterday.

The in-form Kohli struck his 77th ODI half-century as he became the second leading run-scorer in international cricket with a total of 28,068 runs.

With his dismissal, India slipped from 234-2 to 242-5 before they reached their target with six balls to spare in Vadodara.

Skipper Shubman Gill made 56 in a 118-run second wicket stand with Kohli, who shared another strong partnership with Shreyas Iyer, who made 49.

Late cameos by Harshit Rana (29) and wicketkeeper-batter KL Rahul, who made an unbeaten 29 including the winning six, secured an Indian lead in the three-match series 1-0. New Zealand pace spearhead Kyle Jamieson stood out with figures of 4-41.

Kohli led the chase as he went past Sri Lanka's Kumar Sangakkara (28,016 runs) to move second in the list of leading run-scorers in the international game, behind fellow Indian Sachin Tendulkar (34,357).

"My journey has been nothing short of a dream-come-true for me," Kohli said after being named man of the match.

"I look at my journey with grace and gratitude. With the way I am playing at the moment, I am not looking at milestones. Only thing in my mind was to help the team win."

The 37-year-old Kohli only plays the ODI format after he and fellow stalwart Rohit Sharma, 38, retired from T20 and Test cricket.

Rohit started strongly in his



India's Virat Kohli plays a shot during the first ODI against New Zealand at the Kotambi Stadium in Vadodara yesterday. (AFP)

brisk 26 before he fell to New Zealand's Jamieson. The packed crowd welcomed Kohli with a huge roar as the star batter joined Gill at the crease to take the attack to the opposition.

He was ably supported by Gill, who has returned from an injury and a snub by the selectors from the T20 World Cup squad. Gill started slowly before he gained pace to raise his 16th ODI fifty but soon fell to rookie leg-spinner Adithya Ashok.

Kohli was denied a ton by Jamieson, who got the batter caught out at mid-off. The former captain walked back to a standing ovation.

Jamieson dismissed Ravindra Jadeja, for four, in the same over and in the next bowled Iyer to raise New Zealand's hopes of a turnaround. India's troubles increased

with injury to Washington Sundar, who suffered a side strain while bowling his off-spin and came out to bat at number eight.

India were helped by a couple of dropped catches by an otherwise brilliant New Zealand fielding team. Rana survived a reprieve on 12 by Daryl Mitchell.

"We can be proud of our effort," said skipper Michael Bracewell.

"Taking the number one team in the world to the last over was a pretty good effort. If we could have got 320-330 then it would have been the difference."

"We talk about match-changing moments in the field, if we had taken those then it would have been different," Bracewell said.

Earlier, New Zealand posted 300-8 after Mitchell hit 84 to defy the Indian bowlers following the

hosts' decision to field first. Openers Devon Conway, who made 56, and Henry Nicholls (62) put on 117 but New Zealand suffered from a lack of major partnerships after their big opening stand.

Pace bowlers Mohammed Siraj, Rana and Prasidh Krishna took two wickets each.

The second match is on Wednesday in Rajkot.

The series will be followed by five T20s ahead of the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka between February 7 and March 8.

BRIEF SCORES: India 306 for 6 (Kohli 93, Gill 56, Iyer 49, Jamieson 4-41) beat New Zealand 300 for 8 (Mitchell 84, Nicholls 62, Conway 56, Siraj 2-40, Prasidh 2-60, Rana 2-65) by four wickets.

FOCUS

Canada's Lee again atop leaderboard at LIV Golf Promotions

Reuters
New York

Canadian Richard T Lee continued to have the sharpest game at the LIV Golf Promotions event, taking a two-shot lead into the final day at Black Diamond Ranch in Lecanto, Florida.

Lee, who led after the first day Thursday before scores were reset for the final 36 holes on Saturday and yesterday, shot a 6-under 64 on Saturday after rounds of 64 and 66. He birdied par-4 holes Nos 2, 7, 12, 14 and 15 as well as the par-5 No 9 in his bogey-free round on Saturday.

"Honestly, I don't think it would be comfortable for any player to have a two-shot lead on the last day," said Lee, who has two eagles, 13 birdies and just one bogey in his 54 competitive holes this week that included advancing out of both the first and second rounds. "I'll just put my hat on and just play my golf."

Lee has carded two eagles, 13 birdies and a lone bogey in 54 holes this week.

A three-way tie for second at 4-under consists of American Anthony Kim, South Africa's Oliver Bekker and Thailand's Jazz Janewattananond. Kim posted the other bogey-free round of the day, which featured birdies at Nos 9, 13, 14 and 16.

Bekker's round included a bogey at 14 and birdies at Nos 3, 9, 13, 16 and 18. Janewattananond bogeyed the par-4 No 3 as well as No 10 but countered with

birdies at Nos 4, 5, 7, 9, 13 and 16.

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.

Lucas Bjerregaard of Denmark carded a 3-under 67 to be alone in fifth. A two-time winner on the DP World Tour, he said earning full-time LIV Golf status would change his career.

"Where I am in my career right now," the 34-year-old said, "it's probably that or retirement. Yeah, that would mean a lot for sure."

Kim was among several players who received an exemption into the second round, while others began Thursday with a play-in round. The former wunderkind from California, now 40, returned from a 12-year hiatus from the game (2012-24) when he competed on the LIV circuit as a wild card in 2024, and again in 2025.

But he was relegated at the end of the 2025 season and is trying to earn his way back.

"I have an opportunity to get one of those spots," said Kim, the only American to advance to the weekend, said on Saturday. "That's what I asked for coming into this week and put myself in good position. Now I've just got to go finish."

Kim made an 8-foot birdie putt on his final hole Friday to make the cut on the number and make the 22-player field for the weekend.



Richard Lee puts on the thirteenth green during the third round of the LIV Golf Black Diamond Ranch tournament at Black Diamond Ranch. PICTURE: (Jeff Swinger-Imagn Images)

SPOTLIGHT

Inaugural Golden Belt Boxing Championship concludes



The Qatar Boxing and Wrestling Federation successfully organised the first edition of the Golden Belt Boxing Championship, held over three days at the Ladies Sports Hall at Aspire Academy, in an atmosphere marked by intense competition and a high standard of organisation.

Staged from January 8-10, 2026, the championship featured a series of thrilling bouts that drew widespread praise from spectators and reflected both strong participation and advanced technical standards. The event highlighted the significant progress being made by boxing at the local and regional levels.

A total of 87 boxers took part in the tournament across three age

categories: Juniors (Under 17), Youth (Under 19), and Men (Over 19). The participants represented 15 sports clubs from four countries: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kazakhstan.

In the Juniors category, Abdulla al-Faqih claimed the gold medal in the 54kg division, while Tamim Louay Ali secured silver in the 75kg category, and Hamad al-Shaibi earned silver in the over 80kg division.

In the Youth category, Abdalaziz Abdul Latif captured gold in the 55kg division, with Yahya Jamal Ali topping the 65kg class. Mousa Rattamah won gold in the 75kg division, while Hashem Daniel took silver in the same weight class.

Abdulrahman Wael claimed

gold in the 80kg division, and Sheikh Fares Ali al-Thani won gold in the over 90kg category.

Sheikh Fahd bin Khalid al-Thani, President of the Qatar Boxing and Wrestling Federation, praised the success of the inaugural edition of the championship, expressing his delight with the high technical standard and outstanding performances delivered by boxers across all age categories.

He emphasised that organising such championships represents a cornerstone in the technical development of the sport, contributing to the expansion of the talent base.

He said the event forms an integral part of the federation's strategic roadmap for preparation toward the 2030 Asian Games,

serving as a vital platform for discovering and nurturing new Qatari talents capable of strengthening the national boxing team and enhancing its presence in upcoming continental and international competitions.

The medal ceremony was led by Sheikh Fahd alongside Sultan Hassan al-Jamali, Secretary-General of the Qatar Boxing and Wrestling Federation; Ghannam Saleh al-Kuwari, Head of the Boxing and Wrestling Department; Mohammed Ali al-Marri, President of Al Salihi Club; and Sultan al-Sheikh, Executive Director of the Saudi Mike Tyson Club; bringing the championship to a close in a manner that reflected its organisational excellence and overall success.

TENNIS

Sabalenka and Medvedev emerge Brisbane champs

'I'M SUPER HAPPY TO SEE THAT THINGS ARE CLICKING TOGETHER'



Aryna Sabalenka and Daniil Medvedev celebrate with their trophies after winning the Brisbane International titles yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Brisbane

World number one Aryna Sabalenka warmed up for a tilt at a third Australian open title in four years in ominous fashion by winning her second successive Brisbane International crown yesterday.

Three-time Australian Open runner-up Daniil Medvedev also warmed up for an assault on this year's opening Grand Slam in perfect fashion by winning men's at the Brisbane final.

Sabalenka scored a dominant 6-4, 6-3 win over Marta Kostyuk in just 78 minutes.

"Every day you go out there and prove your level, and I think this week I did it really well," said Sabalenka after a tournament in which she powered to the title without dropping a set.

Looking ahead to the Australian Open, which begins next Sunday, Sabalenka said: "The only thing I know is that I'll be there, I'll be fighting."

Sabalenka lost in the Melbourne Park final last year to Mad-

ison Keys, having been Australian Open champion in 2023 and 2024.

"I'll do my best to go as far as possible," said Sabalenka. "And do a little bit better than last year. That's my focus."

Kostyuk, the world number 26, had enjoyed a spectacular week, beating three top 10 players on the way.

But she had no answer to the power of Sabalenka and the Ukrainian's serve, so reliable in the early rounds, also went off the boil. Sabalenka was rarely troubled on her own delivery and faced only three break points.

The 27-year-old Belarusian said she had tried to introduce new elements to her game so she wasn't relying just on power, and that had paid off this week.

"I finally found the touch game," she said.

"I figured something and I kind of changed my game style - now I'm not only the aggressive player, I can play at the net, I can be in defence, I can use my slice, I have a good touch."

"I'm super happy to see that things are clicking together."

There has been animosity between the two players in the past.

Like many Ukraine players, Kostyuk refuses to shake hands with Russians or Belarusians because of the war in her homeland.

There was no handshake at the end of the Brisbane final and in her speech at the trophy presentation, Kostyuk brought up the situation in Ukraine.

"I play every day with a pain in my heart and there are thousands of people who are without light and warm water right now," she said.

"It's minus 20 degrees outside and it's very painful to live this reality every day."

Sabalenka said she wasn't concerned by Kostyuk's attitude towards her.

"It's their position, what can I do?" she asked.

"When I go out there, I think about my tennis and the things I have to do to get the win."

"It doesn't matter if it's Marta Kostyuk or Jessica Pegula there. I have nothing to prove. I go there and I just compete as an athlete."

Kostyuk told reporters she was determined to keep what is happening in Ukraine in the public eye. "I think it's important for me to use my platform in the right

way, and my platform is Ukraine, because I represent Ukraine," she said. "So I think it's really important to talk about that."

In the men's section, world number 13 Medvedev was too strong for American Brandon Nakashima and ran out a 6-2, 7-6 (7/1) winner in 96 minutes on Pat Rafter Arena for his 22nd ATP Tour title.

Medvedev broke a shell-shocked Nakashima twice in the first set and looked on course for a quick victory.

Nakashima rallied in the second to force a tiebreak but the towering Russian raced to a 5-0 lead in the breaker and the match was as good as over.

"I started pretty strong but then Brandon found his way back, saved some match points then almost got it to a third set," Medvedev said.

The Australian Open begins in Melbourne next Sunday, January 18. "It's been a great start to the year," said Medvedev, who made the final in Brisbane in 2019.

"I said then that I would try and come back and win it. I came back seven or eight years later and I'm happy to hold the trophy."

FOCUS

Comeback kid Hurkacz inspires Poland to first United Cup title

AFP
Sydney

Hubert Hurkacz capped his injury comeback and earned United Cup redemption as he inspired Poland to a first title with a 2-1 victory in the final against Switzerland in Sydney yesterday.

"He's definitely an inspiration," Hurkacz said of Wawrinka, who is playing his final season on tour before retirement.

"I was growing up watching him play, compete and win so much. Obviously his game style is really powerful."

"The shots that he can pull off sometimes, you can really admire them even when you are on the other side of the net."

Bencic won 12 of the final 15 games against a shell-shocked Swiatek, earning her second victory over the world number two. "To be honest, I felt I was in the match from the very first point," said Bencic, who won all five of her singles matches in the tournament. "I thought I was going great and I was 0-3 down. I was 'OK, what do I have to do?'

"I think I just tried to keep the level and just wait for some chances."

With the title on the line, Ziebinski partnered Kawa to victory over the Swiss pair who had been unbeaten in the tournament, scuppering Bencic's attempt at a perfect 10-0 record in singles and doubles.



Team Poland pose with the trophy after defeating team Switzerland in the final of the United Cup in Sydney yesterday. (AFP)

Svitolina claims 19th WTA title in Auckland

Elina Svitolina was tested by China's Wang Xinyu in the Auckland Open final yesterday but came through 6-3 7-6(6) to kick off her new season with her 19th WTA title. The 31-year-old baseliner was not quite firing on all cylinders as she continued her preparations for the Australian Open after a lengthy break, but had enough quality and experience to get past her aggressive 24-year-old opponent. "It feels amazing to win another title especially after a not great end to last season," said Ukrainian Svitolina. Wang, playing her second WTA final but still seeking her first title, troubled Svitolina early on with some deep groundstrokes and well-executed drop shots but too often allowed the world number 13 off the hook with some simple errors. Svitolina broke for 4-2 on the back of a Wang error and served out with an ace to seal the opening set three games later. Wang had three break points in the fourth game of the second stanza but top seed Svitolina found her first serve when it mattered to get out of trouble. Breaking Wang again proved a tougher task and the match was decided in a tiebreaker.

MOTOPRSPORT

Arabian Drag Racing League opening round concludes



By Sports Reporter
Doha

The opening round of the 2024 Arabian Drag Racing League (ADRL) concluded at Qatar Racing Club (QRC), drawing a large crowd. The three-day event featured over 160 racers from the Gulf, the region and the USA, competing across 11 categories, with qualifying runs followed by single-elimination finals.

The competition is being held under the patronage of QRC Chairman HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani.

The quarter-mile Index classes attracted the largest participation, with fifty racers, the majority competing in the INDEX 9.0 category. In the end, qualifying leader Sulwaiman al-Sanaoui claimed the title after defeating his qualifying runner-up Mohamad Khawari in the final race.

In the INDEX 8.50 category, Abdulrahman Kafoud and Rakan Ali al-Ajmi reached the final race, which ended in Kafoud's favour as he secured his first title of the season. As for the eighth-mile Index classes, three categories were contested, with the strongest being INDEX 4.0. The reigning cham-

pion Badr Khorshid advanced to the final to face qualifying leader Rashid al-Balushi, who went on to claim victory, leaving second place to Khorshid.

Meanwhile, Mubarak al-Awad captured the INDEX 4.50 title after defeating Saeed al-Balushi in the final, while Saeed al-Balushi returned to the podium for the second time this round by winning the INDEX 4.80 category, overcame Nawaf al-Khalidi in the final. This year's championship witnessed the return of competition in the most powerful categories, led by the Pro Mod class, which delivered intense battles starting from

the qualifying runs. The qualifying session saw the American J R Gray, the 2025 NHRA Pro Mod champion, took the top spot with a time of 3.717 seconds, followed by his compatriot Mike Stavrinios in second place, while third place went to another American, Mike Castellana.

After the conclusion of the first round, the event featured a high-calibre semi-final showdown between J R Gray and Castellana, with the latter emerging victorious to advance to the final race, where he faced Stavrinios. Stavrinios managed to prevail and claim the opening round title, leaving

Castellana and Gray in second and third places respectively. In the Super Street Pro category, last season's champion Yousef al-Ali secured his first title of the season after defeating Jaber al-Maghribi.

The final race in the Super Street Outlaw category brought together qualifying leader Turki al-Dhafiri and the second-fastest qualifier Mustafa Atat.

The victory in this showdown went to Atat, who claimed his first title of the season.

The final showdown of the most powerful motorcycle categories, the Pro Bike class, brought together Bradley McCoy and Ahmed

al-Nakhailan, ending with victory for McCoy to record his first win of the event.

The Super Street Bike category also witnessed success for last season's champion Mishari al-Turki, who claimed the title of this round after defeating qualifying leader Mohammed Bourashed in the final race, while Mohammed al-Salem captured the Street Bike category title after beating Dawood al-Sharshani in the final.

QRC Director General Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani honoured the podium winners of the opening round. The second round will begin on Wednesday.



FA CUP

Brighton knock out Man United, Arsenal's Martinelli hits hat-trick

West Ham ease the pressure on Santo after extra-time victory over QPR

AFP
Portsmouth

Manchester United crashed out of the FA Cup with a meek 2-1 home defeat to Brighton yesterday as Gabriel Martinelli's hat-trick fired Arsenal to a 4-1 win at Portsmouth to reach round four.

United interim boss Darren Fletcher could only watch on in horror as the Red Devils' last chance of silverware this season and likely his chances of landing the job until the end of the season went up in smoke at Old Trafford. Fletcher's men were left to rue not making more of a positive start before Brajan Gruda fired the visitors in front on 12 minutes from Danny Welbeck's cross.

The roles were reversed midway through the second half as Welbeck lashed into the top corner against his former club. There were persistent chants targeting United co-owners the Glazer family and British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe as the discontent at Old Trafford grew.

And any hope those in charge of the club had for a bounce following the removal of Ruben Amorim has proved very short-lived. Benjamin Sesko's late header set up a grandstand finish, but it proved too little, too late for Fletcher. A red card for teenager Shea Lacey in stoppage time for dissent rounded off United's miserable afternoon.

Martinelli shrugged off the backlash to his clash with stricken Liverpool defender Conor Bradley as Arsenal reached the fourth round for the first time in three years. Championship side Portsmouth were dreaming of an upset against the Premier League leaders when they went in front after just three minutes through Colby Bishop.

Mikel Arteta had made 10 changes from the side that drew 0-0 with Liverpool on Thursday. Martinelli drew stinging criticism for trying to push Bradley off the pitch in the closing stages after the Northern Irishman hit the ground with a serious knee injury. Liverpool confirmed the right-back



Brighton's Danny Welbeck celebrates with teammates after scoring against Manchester United during the FA Cup third round tie. (AFP)

will need surgery and will miss the rest of the season.

The Brazilian apologised to Bradley after the game and did not seem affected by the furore at Fratton Park. "That's his personality, come in and talk on the pitch," said Arteta. "To play for a big club you need a big personality because it can be that (being at the centre of a controversial incident), it can be an action that you miss, it can be something that costs you a game, and three days later there is a game, so you need to lift yourself up and make it count."

Arsenal could rely on their threat from

set-pieces to turn the tie around. The Pompey lead lasted only five minutes as Andre Dozzell turned into his own net under pressure from Christian Norgaard.

Martinelli then flicked in the first of his three goals before Noni Madueke missed the chance to make it 3-1 from the penalty spot when the England international fired wide. Gabriel Jesus teed up Martinelli to kill the tie off early in the second period before he completed his hat-trick from another Arsenal corner.

West Ham eased the mounting pressure on Nuno Espírito Santo as new signing Taty

Castellanos scored his first goal for the club to beat QPR 2-1 after extra-time. Castellanos has been signed to dig them out of trouble at the bottom of the Premier League and the £26mn arrival from Lazio bulletted home a header from Crysencio Summerville's cross to secure a much-needed win. Leeds needed a second-half fightback to beat Derby County 3-1 and book their place in the fourth round. League One Mansfield held off Sheffield United to book their place in round four with a 4-3 win at Bramall Lane. Norwich, Hull and West Brom also progressed to the last 32.

PSG coach says player contract talk rumours 'fake news'

Paris: Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique dismissed rumours over player contract talks as "fake-news" designed to undermine the French giants. "Right now, people are trying to destabilise us from the outside with fake news," Luis Enrique told a press conference.

PSG have begun contract extension negotiations with Ballon d'Or winner Ousmane Dembele, Bradley Barcola, both out of contract in June, and several other players, according to two sources close to the talks. These discussions "require a lot of thought from the club, the players, the agents, and the families, as they do every year," one of the sources said.

"We know what we want, that's the most important thing. In that sense, we're calm," Enrique said. "It's normal to have negotiations... But it's private and it will remain private. We know what we want - that's the most important thing. In that sense, we're calm," the Spaniard added.

Enrique was speaking on the eve of today's French Cup clash with city rival Paris FC. Dembele was on the mark when PSG beat Paris FC last weekend as the French capital enjoyed its first top-flight derby since 1990.

LIVERPOOL'S BRADLEY OUT FOR THE SEASON WITH 'SIGNIFICANT' KNEE INJURY

Liverpool right-back Conor Bradley is set to undergo surgery on a serious knee injury which will rule him out for the rest of the season. The Northern Ireland international suffered the injury in the closing stages of Thursday's 0-0 draw at Arsenal.

Gunners' forward Gabriel Martinelli apologised after the match for attempting to push Bradley off the field in the mistaken belief he was time-wasting.

The injury is not an anterior cruciate ligament tear but does involve damage to the bone and ligament. Bradley is also a major doubt for the World Cup should Northern Ireland navigate two play-off matches in March, starting with a trip to Italy. His absence is a major blow to both club and country. The 22-year-old was seen as the natural heir to Trent Alexander-Arnold at Anfield when he departed for Real Madrid. But injuries have limited Bradley's impact this season.

BUNDESLIGA

Olise shines as Bayern fire eight past Wolfsburg



Bayern Munich's Michael Olise scores against Wolfsburg. (Reuters)

AFP
Munich

Michael Olise scored twice and set a Bundesliga assist record as Bayern Munich crushed Wolfsburg 8-1 to go 11 points clear at the top of the table.

The Bavarians were ruthless in their return from the winter break, forcing the struggling Wolves into two own goals while Harry Kane, Luis Diaz, Leon Goretzka and Raphael Guerrieri also got on the scoresheet.

Unbeaten Bayern have now dropped just four points in 16 Bundesliga games this season, the best record in Europe's top-five leagues. Olise's two assists brought his tally to 25 in 50 league games, more than any other player to have played a half-century of Bundesliga matches.

The victory extended Bayern's dominant record against Wolfsburg, with 21 wins at two draws in their past 23 games in all competitions dating back to 2015. Bayern's last league defeat against Wolfsburg came in January 2015, when a 23-year-old Kevin de Bruyne scored twice and laid on another in a 4-1 win over Augsburg. six months before

his move to Manchester City. Wolfsburg's hopes of bucking the recent trend took an early hit when Killian Fischer deflected a Diaz cross into his own net. One-time Bayern academy player Dzenan Pejicic pulled one back for the Wolves but their celebrations were short-lived, with Olise assisting Diaz on the half-hour mark.

Bayern continued the rampage early in the second half, with Olise scoring and forcing Wolfsburg's Moritz Jenz into conceding another own goal inside the space of three minutes. Guerreiro, Kane and Olise all scored inside an eight-minute period midway through the second half while Goretzka added another with two minutes remaining to round out the rout.

Goretzka's goal was Bayern's 63rd league goal this season, more than any other side has scored in the first 16 matchdays in Bundesliga history.

Kane's strike was his 20th in the league this campaign, keeping him on track to beat Robert Lewandowski's record of 41 in a Bundesliga season. Earlier on Saturday, Haris Tabakovic bagged a brace as Borussia Moenchengladbach cruised to a 4-0 home win over Augsburg.

SPOTLIGHT

Salah and fellow stars aim to deny hosts Morocco as AFCON reaches semi-final stage

AFP
Marrakesh, Morocco

The Africa Cup of Nations has reached the semi-final stage and a tournament devoid of shocks now offers up two mouthwatering ties with hosts Morocco looking to see off the challenges of their fellow continental heavyweights.

Mohamed Salah's Egypt, Victor Osimhen's Nigeria and Sadio Mane's Senegal all remain in contention to win the trophy in Rabat next Sunday, even if home advantage still makes Morocco favourites.

World Cup semi-finalists in 2022, Morocco are Africa's top-ranked team and approach Wednesday's semi-final against Nigeria in the capital defending an unbeaten record since losing to South Africa at the last AFCON.

Walid Regragui's side have conceded just one goal in five matches here and doubts about their ability to handle the enormous pressure of playing at home were blown away with their performance in beating Cameroon 2-0 in the quarter-finals. Captain and current African player of the year Achraf Hakimi is fit again after injury, and in Real Madrid winger Brahim Diaz - scorer of five goals in five games - they have probably the tournament's outstanding player. "He can become the best player in the world if he wants to," remarked Regragui after the Cameroon game.

Morocco are Africa's leading power right now and, unlike Nigeria, are gearing up for the World Cup. But their Cup of Nations record down the years has been underwhelming. This is their first semi-final since 2004, when they lost the final to Tunisia.

Going further back, Morocco beat Nigeria en route to lifting the trophy in 1976 - half a century on, that remains their only continental title.

Nigeria returned to Morocco with much to prove after a penalty shoot-out defeat by the Democratic Republic of Congo in a November play-off in Rabat ended their hopes of World Cup qualification.

There might be 10 African countries participating at the World Cup and it is remarkable that Nigeria - with its footballing pedigree and the largest population on the continent - will not be among them. However, their performances over the last three weeks have shown that to be an anomaly.

Nigeria were runners-up at the last Cup of Nations in 2024. Led by two former African players of the year in Osimhen and Ademola Lookman, they are this tournament's top scorers with 14 goals.



Mohamed Salah scored as Egypt won 3-2 to dump defending champions Ivory Coast out of the Africa Cup of Nations. (Reuters)

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So what has changed from the failed World

Cup qualifying campaign? "Nothing," said coach Eric Chelle, appointed exactly a year ago. "This is the same team. The difference is just that they have improved because they know what I want."

Shocks have been effectively non-existent at this AFCON but Nigeria's presence means four of the five top-ranked African teams are in the semis - the exception is Algeria, beaten by the Super Eagles on Saturday.

Wednesday's other semi-final in Tangiers between Egypt and Senegal is a repeat of the 2022 final, which the Lions of Teranga won on penalties. Senegal, ranked second in Africa and 19th in the world, were seen as the biggest threat to Morocco before the tournament and stand one game away from a third final appearance in four editions.

They have an experienced side which includes Mane, who will come up against his old Liverpool teammate Salah. Their presence means the last five players to win the African player of the year prize are all in the semi-finals. Salah, who like Osimhen has four goals at the tournament, has never won AFCON, having twice been a losing finalist.

He came to Morocco having fallen from favour at his club but seems to have found happiness again with his national team as he looks to fire Egypt to a record-extending eighth title. "I have won almost every honour, but this is the one I am waiting for," said Salah after the quarter-final win over Ivory Coast, before insisting the Pharaohs are now the outsiders.

"We are coming up against really good teams, most of whose players are based in Europe, which makes it easier for them. We have very good players but most play in Egypt. We have three players playing abroad but all of them are in a difficult situation - none of them are playing for their clubs just now," he added, with a nod to his own problems at Anfield.

AC MILAN SNATCH LATE DRAW AT FIORENTINA

Milan: AC Milan missed the chance to join Inter Milan at the top of Serie A after snatching a late 1-1 draw at Fiorentina, ahead of their local rivals' clash with Scudetto rivals Napoli.

Christopher Nkunku lashed home Milan's leveller in the 90th minute at the Stadio Artemio Franchi to deny Fiorentina just a third win of a troubled season. Fiorentina had looked set for the points after Pietro

Comuzzo headed home the opener in the 66th minute, but Nkunku's late strike left the Tuscans on 14 points in 18th place.

The hosts came close to nabbing all three points twice in stoppage time, with new signing Marco Brescianini hitting the bar from close range and Milan goalkeeper Mike Maignan having to dive at the feet of Moise Kean to stop the Italy striker from netting the

winner. Milan are at risk of falling five points off the title pace as Inter were facing reigning champions Napoli hunting a seventh straight league success.

Antonio Conte's Napoli trail Milan by two points and will take second spot with a win at the San Siro. Fiorentina are two points behind Genoa who sit just outside the relegation zone.