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# GULF TIMES

## SPORT



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DAKAR RALLY

Reuters  
Riyadh

**S**tephane Variawa won the eighth stage of the Dakar Rally in a South African one-two with Henk Lategan yesterday as Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah saw his overall lead cut to four minutes in the Saudi Arabian desert.

Dacia Sandriders driver al-Attiyah finished fifth and one minute and 10 seconds behind 20-year-old Toyota SA driver Variawa, who beat factory entry Lategan by three seconds on the 483km loop around the southern city of Wadi Ad Dawasir.

The Qatari's closest rival Mattias Ekstrom was third for Ford in the longest stage of the 48th edition of the rally.

Last year's Dakar runner-up Lategan moved up to third overall, six minutes and eight seconds off the lead with five stages remaining before Saturday's finish in the Red Sea port of Yanbu.

The one-two was the fourth ever by South African drivers in the car category. Ford's Nani Roma and Carlos Sainz were fourth and fifth respectively. "We made a little mistake close to the finish and we lost around three minutes," said al-Attiyah, a five times Dakar winner. "But OK, I am really happy from the performance. We don't lose a lot of time. I think we did a good job."

Predictions that this year's Dakar would be the closest battle yet were backed up by the top five in the standings, from three



Toyota Gazoo Racing W2RC's South African driver Henk Lategan and South African co-pilot Brett Cummings compete in stage eight of the 48th edition of the Dakar Rally in Wadi Ad Dawasir, Saudi Arabia. (AFP)

different teams, being separated by 10 minutes and 39 seconds.

Sixth-placed Sebastien Loeb, the nine-times world rally champion driving for Dacia, remained in contention and was within 17 minutes of his leading teammate. Reigning Dakar champion Yazeed al-Rajhi of Saudi Arabia withdrew last week.

In the motorcycle category, Argentina's Luciano Benavides took his third stage win in four days and seized the overall lead for the first time in his career from Australian KTM teammate and defending champion Daniel Sanders.

Benavides, who had started the day nearly five minutes adrift, leads Sanders by 10 seconds with American Honda rider Ricky Brabec third and four minutes 47 seconds off the pace. "These last two stages were a little bit faster and in these conditions I feel really good, I can read the roadbook super well and take really good decisions," said Benavides.



Qatar's Nasser al-Attiyah saw his overall lead cut to four minutes.

The Dakar began in 1978 as a race from Paris across the Sahara to the Senegalese capital but switched to South America in 2009 for security reasons.

It moved to Saudi Arabia in 2020. The race is the first round of the World Rally-Raid Championship (W2RC) season.

HORSE RACING

# Top-class horses to feature at Sheikh Joaan Rifle Day

The ten-race card will be run on the turf track at Al Rayyan Racecourse on January 17

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**Q**atar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC) will organise HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al Thani Rifle Day on January 17. The ten-race card will be run on the turf track at Al Rayyan Racecourse, with strong participation from owners, trainers and jockeys, all eager to secure top honours in what is regarded as one of the major fixtures of the current domestic racing season.

The meeting comes just weeks ahead of the highly anticipated HH The Amir Sword Festival, scheduled to take place from February 11-14. For the first time, the prestigious festival will be staged over four days, in a new initiative aimed at further developing the event and reinforcing its position on the international racing calendar in line with the highest global organisational standards.

Saturday's programme comprises ten races over varying distances and categories. The opener is run for the Na'amah Trophy for local Purebred Arabian fillies and mares over 1,750m, offering \$100,000. The following contest is the Desert Rose Cup for local Thoroughbred fillies and mares over the same distance, also valued at \$100,000.

The next event on the programme is the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al Thani Sprint Trophy for Thoroughbreds over 1,200m, with \$50,000 on offer. It is followed by another HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al Thani Trophy, restricted to three-year-old Thoroughbreds over 1,400m, carrying \$50,000. The mid-card contest is the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al Thani Trophy for local Thoroughbreds over 1,750m, worth \$55,000. A later supporting race is the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al Thani Trophy for Thoroughbreds over 1,400m, offering \$50,000. Attention then turns to the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al Thani Trophy for Purebred Arabians over 1,750m, with \$50,000 available, followed by the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al Thani Trophy for Purebred Arabians restricted to four-year-olds over the same distance, valued at \$100,000.

The penultimate race on the card is an international contest, the HE Sheikh Joaan



The HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al Thani Rifle Day comes just weeks ahead of the highly anticipated HH The Amir Sword Festival, scheduled to take place from February 11-14.



Last season, the feature race was won by Aafoor, while Wathnan Racing's Abbes claimed the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al Thani Trophy for Purebred Arabians. Bin Hamad Al Thani Trophy for Purebred Arabians (Class 1 – Group 3 PA) over 2,200m, with a purse of \$100,000.

for the Shalfa race at the HH The Amir Sword Festival next month.

### AAFOOR LAST SEASON'S RIFLE WINNER

Last season's renewal of this meeting was staged at Al Uqda Racecourse for the first time, rather than at Al Rayyan as is cus-



tomary. The feature race, run for the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al Thani Rifle, was won by Aafoor, owned by Al Jeryan Stud, in the Class 1 contest for Thoroughbreds aged four years and above over 2,200m. The winner was trained by M H K al-Attiyah and ridden by Szczepan Mazur. Earlier in the programme, Abbes deliv-

ered another highlight when the Wathnan Racing runner claimed the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al Thani Trophy for Purebred Arabians, the four-year-old international contest over 2,200m, extending his winning streak in the Group 3 PA race to a third consecutive success under James Doyle for trainer Alban de Mieulle.



## CRICKET

# At 37, Kohli reinvents himself to extend ODI domination

KOHLI SURPASSES SANGAKKARA AS SECOND-HIGHEST SCORER IN INTERNATIONAL CRICKET

Reuters  
New Delhi

**V**irat Kohli has tweaked his approach to counter-attack early in his innings and put bowlers under pressure to flip the momentum for India, the batting stalwart said after his match-winning knock in Sunday's one day international against New Zealand.

The number three batter crafted 93 off 91 balls as India chased down a target of 301 with one over to spare en route to a four-wicket victory in the opener in Vadodara.

After opener Rohit Sharma fell for 26 in the ninth over, Kohli refused to retreat into a defensive shell. Instead, he took the initiative in match-defining 118-run stand with skipper Shubman Gill (56), using controlled aggression to force New Zealand's attack onto the back foot.

"Well, the basic idea is I bat at No 3," Kohli said after winning the player of the match award.

"So if the situation is a bit tricky, I back myself to counter-attack now rather than just trying to play the situation in because some ball has your name on it."

Batting great Kohli is active internationally only in the 50-overs format. His masterclass on Sunday was the 37-year-old's fifth consecutive 50-plus score in ODIs.

In his 17th year in international cricket, he continues to reinvent himself and said he now aims to make the most of the first 20 deliveries after coming in at first

*Reynold*  
GULFTIMES  
13-01-2026



drop. "There's no point waiting around for too long. But at the same time, you don't play outrageous shots. You still stick to your strengths, but you back yourself enough to put the opposition on the back foot," he said.

"I just felt like if I push hard now in the first 20 balls, then we can probably string in a partnership straight after a wicket like Rohit's where the opposition is going to go on the back foot.

"That actually ended up being

the difference in the game."

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

The top-order batter has 28,068 runs in Test, ODI and T20 cricket since he made his debut for India in an ODI in Sri Lanka in 2008.

"If I am being brutally honest, the way I'm playing right now, I'm not thinking about milestones at

all," the former captain said. "If we were batting first, I probably would've gone harder. But in a chase, with a total on the board, I had to play the situation. I felt like hitting more boundaries, but experience kicks in."

"The only thing on my mind was getting the team into a position where we could win comfortably."

India take on New Zealand in the second ODI of the three-match series in Indore on Sunday.

## Sundar ruled out of NZ ODI series with injury ahead of T20 World Cup

India were hit with an injury scare ahead of their Twenty20 World Cup title defence next month after all-rounder **Washington Sundar** was ruled out of the remaining one day internationals against New Zealand due to rib discomfort.

Sundar complained of the issue affecting his left lower rib while bowling in Sunday's opening ODI, which the hosts won by four wickets, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) said in a statement.

"He will undergo further scans, following which the BCCI medical team will seek expert opinion," the statement read.

Spin-bowling all-rounder Sundar is part of a 15-man squad for the World Cup beginning on Febru-

ary 7, which India is co-hosting with Sri Lanka.

Sundar's replacement **Ayush Badoni** will link up with the ODI

squad in Rajkot ahead of the sec-

ond match against New Zealand on Sunday.

Earlier, **Rishabh Pant** has been ruled out of the three one-day internationals against New Zealand because of a side strain sustained in training. The wicketkeeper-batsman was replaced in the squad by **Dhruv Jurel**.

"Pant has been diagnosed with a side strain (oblique muscle tear) and is subsequently ruled out of the ODI Series," said the Board of Control for Cricket in India.

Pant, back-up wicketkeeper in the ODI squad to **K L Rahul**, is not in India's T20 World Cup squad.



## FOCUS

## Canada's Lee claims LIV Golf Promotions event



Anthony Kim (left), Richard T Lee and Bjorn Hellgren (right) celebrate after taking the top three spots in the LIV Golf Black Diamond Ranch Promotions at Black Diamond Ranch. (Jeff Swinger-Imagn Images)

Reuters  
New York

**R**ichard T Lee of Canada, Bjorn Hellgren of Sweden and former wunderkind Anthony Kim earned wild-card spots for the 2026 LIV Golf season by placing on the LIV Golf Promotions podium Sunday in Lecanto, Florida.

Lee sailed to a five-shot win over the field by following Saturday's 64 with a 65 to land at 11-under 129. Hellgren had the round of the day Sunday, a 6-under 64 with eight birdies, to get to second place at 6 under. The biggest name at the event, though, was Kim, who retired from golf for about 12 years before signing with LIV in 2024 for his comeback.

A wild card for two years, Kim was relegated after the 2025 season and had to qualify to regain his place in the league.

After he made the cut on the number Friday at Black Diamond Ranch, the scores reset and Kim went 66-69 on the weekend to place third at 5 under par.

It marks an eye-catching turnaround for the 40-year-old from California. Kim also went

through rehab for drug and alcohol addiction and has said before that doctors had given him grave warnings about his health. "There's a ton of satisfaction. A ton," Kim said.

"I'm sure I'll understand that all that work has really shown this week, maybe later tonight when I'm drinking an iced tea. But yeah, it means a lot to me because three years ago, doctors had told me that I potentially had two weeks to live. So just to be here standing in front of you guys is a blessing."

Kim had room to spare when he bogeyed his last hole Sunday. He finished two shots ahead of a four-way tie for fourth.

As for Lee, he was the best golfer on the property all week. He shot a 64 Thursday in the opening "play-in round," which Hellgren, Kim and other were exempted from. Lee finished the week with a six-birdie, one-booby trip around the course.

"(The course layout) just really fits the fade shots that I have and the low fade shots just to keep it in the fairway," Lee said. "The greens definitely helped me out a lot. I was very comfortable on the greens this week."

Lee, 35, is a longtime Asian Tour player who made the cut on

the PGA Tour's Canadian Open last season with a 67-64 start. He's also the first Canadian player to become a member of LIV Golf. "I think more Canadians should come in and we should make a team," Lee said.

Hellgren, 35, has wins on the Asian Tour, Swedish Golf Tour and Nordic Golf League. He birdied four of his last six holes, including at the par-3 17th and par-4 18th, to reach the top three.

"A kind of shows to all the guys, too, that are in my position back home that you might not be playing on the PGA Tour, but we're travelling the world and grinding it out," Hellgren said. "A few good weeks and then you're in it. That's pretty amazing."

The top 10 players plus ties at LIV Golf Promotions also received an exemption into the Asian Tour's International Series events. In addition to the top three finishers, those players include Denmark's Lucas Bjerregaard, South Korea's Jeunghun Wang, Thailand's Sarit Suwannarut and Zimbabwe's Kieran Vincent (3-under 137), and South Africa's Oliver Bekker, Thailand's Jazz Janewattananond, Japan's Takanori Konishi and Australians Matt Jones, Cory Crawford and Christopher Wood (2-under 138).

## BASKETBALL

## Mini World Cup second round from today as school teams chase title

**A**s appetisers go for FIBA Basketball World Cups, the first-ever Mini World Cup in Qatar is a big hit. Thirty-two secondary school teams have already squared off on the hardwood in the first round, aiming to become the champion of the inaugural competition. The second round gets underway today.

"It's been wonderful," said Mohammad Mishal al-Khuzai of the Hassan Bin Thabit School.

"It's a new experience for me. I really loved the idea of making a World Cup for schools in Qatar. It's a new idea never seen before. I hope other countries implement the same idea."

Garib Adonis of the Philippine School said: "The Mini World Cup tournament has been exciting and challenging because my team and I get to go against different teams and experience different levels of competition."

The Mini World Cup is part of the School Olympic Program and is being organised under the supervision of FIBA in partnership with the Qatar Basketball Federation. The 32 secondary schools from across Qatar are competing under their official school names.

The league mirrors the competition format of the FIBA Basketball World Cup 2027, allowing players to create a connection to next year's big event that will feature the best national teams

from Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas.

Dhiyato Tarawi of Al Maahad Addine Boys Preparatory School raved about "the organisation, the competitive spirit, and the overall atmosphere" of the league while Rayan Al Khoury of the Lebanese school said, "we're having fun competing against other schools."

The tournament will culminate in a grand final in May 2026 at Aspire Dome. That will not be the end of the Mini World Cup, however. There will also be a second season (2026-27), when schools will represent the official national teams that qualify for the FIBA Basketball World Cup.

The World Cup field will be complete once the last of the qualifiers are played on March 1, 2027. "I'm so excited to watch the 2027 World Cup in Qatar, knowing that the competition is going to be amazing and to watch big name players compete with their countries," al-Khoury said. There will be a lot of enthusiasm around the national team of Qatar, which will be making its first World Cup appearance since 2006, when it competed in Hamamatsu, Japan.

Qatar, assured of a spot in the World Cup as hosts, are still taking part in the qualifiers. In the first window, it played in two thrilling wire-to-wire encounters against Lebanon, losing the first at home and winning the second at the Cedars.

"I'm extremely excited to see Qatar participating in the World Cup as we're the hosts," Mohammad Mishal al-Khuzai said.

"And Qatar is known for being an amazing host. I wish all the best to Qatar!"

Adonis echoed his thoughts, saying: "I'm really excited about the possibility of watching Qatar play in the 2027 World Cup. The idea of seeing the national team compete on home soil feels amazing. Just thinking about the energy of the crowd and the pride of supporting our team live makes me look forward to it even more."

Dhiyato Tarawi is pumped up about having the best teams in the world come to Qatar. "I am very excited about the prospect of watching my national team compete at the World Cup in Qatar in 2027," he said. "It would be an exceptional and meaningful opportunity to witness such an important global event taking place in my home country."

Meanwhile, the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qualifiers are set to resume at the end of next month. The second international window games will be played in Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas from February 27 through March 2.

Qatar will play twice at home at Lusail Multipurpose Hall in Doha, facing India on February 27 and Saudi Arabia on March 2. (FIBA)



The Mini World Cup is part of the School Olympic Program and is being organised under the supervision of FIBA in partnership with the Qatar Basketball Federation.

## TENNIS

# Swiatek insists 'everything is fine' after back-to-back defeats

'Just super sore. I guess first tournament of the year, it costs the body a bit differently than during the season'

AFP  
Sydney

Iga Swiatek insists "everything is fine" despite back-to-back losses in the lead-up to the Australian Open, with the world number two "super sore" but confident of recovering for the season-opening Grand Slam.

The Polish star crashed 3-6, 6-0, 6-3 to Switzerland's Belinda Bencic in the mixed-teams United Cup final in Sydney on Sunday, which came on the back of a lustre 6-4, 6-2 defeat to Coco Gauff in the semi-finals.

A shellshocked Swiatek lost seven games in a row against Bencic, including a rare set to love, with a racquet toss and tears at the end of the match summing up her frustration.

It was uncharacteristic for the six-time Grand Slam winner, who rarely loses consecutive matches.

She most recently did so at the WTA Finals in Riyadh in November, falling to Elena Rybakina and Amanda Anisimova. Before that, her previous back-to-back defeats were in 2021.

"Everything is fine," she said after the final, which Poland won 2-1 courtesy of Katarzyna Kawa and Jan Zielinski clinching the deciding mixed doubles.

"Just super sore. I guess first

tournament of the year, it costs the body a bit differently than during the season. But I had similar experience last year also.

"I'll just get good recovery, couple days off."

"Also I know these team events. I love them but they really take a lot of energy from you. I still need to figure out how to balance that maybe in the future."

Swiatek, who picked up solid wins over Eva Lys, Suzan Lamens and Maya Jant before meeting Gauff and Bencic, admitted she physically was not in the second set against the Swiss.

"I think it was a mix of me losing the intensity, and I wasn't feeling so sharp with movements and with my legs. I wasn't so precise any more physically I would say," she said.

With the Australian Open starting at Melbourne Park on Sunday, Swiatek has little time to iron out her technical issues after 36 unforced errors to Bencic's 10 on Sunday. "We're going to work now to improve some elements that didn't work this week," she said.

"Still not a lot of time for that if I also want to have some recovery days. This is how tennis is. You got to go with the flow. We'll see."

The Australian Open is the only Grand Slam title to evade the 24-year-old, who has made the semi-finals twice but never gone



Team Poland's Iga Swiatek poses with the United Cup trophy in front of the Sydney Opera House yesterday. (AFP)

further. She lost in the last four in 2025 to eventual champion Madison Keys.

**In-form Bencic back in top 10 for first time since having baby**

Belinda Bencic powered back into

the top 10 yesterday for the first time since having a baby, with the in-form Swiss brimming with confidence ahead of the Australian Open.

The 28-year-old won all five singles matches at the season-

opening United Cup in Perth and Sydney, including victories over world number two Iga Swiatek and seventh-ranked Jasmine Paolini.

She finished 9-1 for the tournament, with her only defeat coming in the final mixed-doubles de-

cider against Poland on Sunday. It earned Bencic the event's most valuable player award and propelled her inside the world's top 10, somewhere she has not been since giving birth to daughter Bella in April 2024. "Of course, a big confidence booster," she said of her form ahead of the opening Grand Slam of the year in Melbourne, starting on Sunday.

"You start the year, and you're just trying to get matches in. Obviously it's been great playing match after match, but being pushed so much from everyone."

"Also super happy to be in the top 10 now. It's been a huge goal, a huge ride after the whole comeback, to come back and prove this to myself, that it's possible."

Bencic was ranked 421 at the start of the 2025 season, but making the last 16 at the Australian Open a year ago convinced her she could return to the upper echelons of tennis.

Titles in Abu Dhabi and Tokyo saw her race up the rankings to finish the season at world number 11, with another crack at an elusive Grand Slam title now her focus.

"I'm always serious about the Australian Open," said the 2021 Tokyo Olympic gold medalist, who reached a career-high number four in February 2020.

"Just super excited to play the first Slam."

## SPOTLIGHT

## Canada's former world No 3 Raonic hangs up his racket

Reuters  
Toronto

Canada's former world number three Milos Raonic announced his retirement from tennis at the age of 35 on Sunday after winning eight ATP tour titles and more than \$20 million in prize money over a decade and a half on the circuit.

Notable for a powerful serve which earned him the nickname "Missile", Raonic's career peaked in 2016 when he reached the semi-finals of the Australian Open and the final at Wimbledon, losing to Andy Murray in both contests.

"This is a moment you know will come one day, but somehow you never feel ready for it. This is as ready as I will ever be. Tennis has been my love and obsession for most of my life," Raonic wrote in a post on social media platform X.

"I have been the luckiest person to get to live out and fulfil my dreams. I got to show up every day and focus on just getting better,"

seeing where that will take me."

Born in former Yugoslavia during the violent breakup of the country in the early 1990s, Raonic and his family moved to Canada when he was three.

He turned professional in 2008 and won his first ATP title at the Pacific Coast Championships three years later, beating Fernando Verdasco in the final.

Raonic played in four Masters 1000 finals from 2013-2020 and lost them all, the first at the Canadian Open to Rafa Nadal and the other three to Novak Djokovic.

His loss to Djokovic at the 2020 Cincinnati Masters was his last trip to an ATP final and his last tour-level event was his first-round loss to German Dominik Koepfer at the 2024 Paris Olympics.

"What's next? I won't be slowing down," Raonic added in his social media post.

"There is so much more life to live, and I am as motivated and hungry as I was in 2011, when I broke through on tour."



## FOOTBALL

## Teenage super sub Mbaye could prove decisive for Senegal

Reuters  
Tangiers, Morocco

Senegal's 17-year-old Ibrahim Mbaye has emerged as a potential future star for African football, and his role as a super substitute at the Africa Cup of Nations could yet prove decisive for his team.

One of a number of exciting new players on display over the last three weeks at the tournament in Morocco, Mbaye has made the biggest impact, featuring in each of Senegal's matches off the bench.

As they prepare to face Egypt in tomorrow's semi-final in Tangiers, his impact will be part of the planning as Senegal look to advance to Sunday's final. His powerful and pacy running, dribbling skills, and a sharp nose for goal have given Senegal a serious addition to their already much-vaunted attack.

"He's a gem, and we need to nurture him," said coach Pape Bouna Thiaw. "We know what he can bring to this team, and we will do everything we can to ensure he thrives and is at his best."

Mbaye netted in Senegal's 3-1 win over Sudan in the round of 16, officially becoming, at 17 years, 11 months, and 11 days, the second youngest scorer in tournament history. The youngest is Chiva Nzigu of Gabon, who was allegedly 16 when he scored in the 2000 finals, but has since admitted being an age cheat, although the record is not expunged.

**Mbaye won his first cap in November, in a friendly against Brazil, having one month previously played for France's under-19 team**

Mbaye, who turns 18 this month, was close to a goal in Senegal's second group game against the Democratic Republic of Congo when he was brought on a minute after the Congolese took the lead in Tangiers. Eight minutes later, a surging run down the right led to a shot that the goalkeeper could not hold, allowing Sadio Mane to equalise.

"He has this spark within him. He's young, but you don't notice that on the pitch. Every time he comes on, he brings something

extra," said Senegal teammate Krepin Diatta. Mbaye won his first cap in November, in a friendly against Brazil, having one month previously played for France's under-19 team, with Thiaw visiting him at Paris St Germain to persuade him to switch allegiance.

"It was easy to convince the player. Ibrahim wanted to play for Senegal," said the coach.

They had been tracking him from last season when PSG used him as a starter for their opening match of the Ligue 1 campaign. He was an unused substitute in the Champions League final against Inter Milan in May and this season has started eight times for the French giants, including October's Champions League win at Barcelona.

Thiaw says the experience of rubbing shoulders with Senegal's top players will be beneficial for Mbaye.

"He is in a squad where he has the chance to work with players like Sadio Mane, who has won everything and can guide him, like Kalidou Koulibaly and Gana Gueye, who are familiar with the highest level. Now, we need to protect him properly," added the coach.



## LA LIGA

# Alonso leaves Real Madrid, Arbeloa named as coach

Alonso's tenure marred by poor results and internal discord

AFP  
Madrid

**R**eal Madrid said that coach Xabi Alonso has left the Spanish giants by mutual consent, to be replaced by Alvaro Arbeloa. A day after the team lost the Spanish Super Cup final against Barcelona, the club parted ways with the Basque coach eight months after his arrival and immediately appointed former Madrid player Arbeloa, who was coaching the reserve side.

"Real Madrid announces that, by mutual agreement between the club and Xabi Alonso, it has been decided to bring his tenure as first-team coach to an end," said the Los Blancos in a statement.

In a separate statement Madrid then announced Arbeloa would take Alonso's place, without specifying the length of the 42-year-old's contract. "Arbeloa has been the coach of Castilla since June 2025 and has developed his entire coaching career in Real Madrid's academy since 2020," said Los Blancos.

Arbeloa's first match at the helm is a Copa del Rey last-16 visit to face second-tier Albacete tomorrow. The Spaniard played 238 times for Madrid between 2009-2016, winning two Champions League titles and La Liga once, among other silverware.

Arbeloa also lifted the World Cup with Spain in 2010, as well as the European Championship in 2008 and 2012, playing alongside Alonso for club and country. Alonso joined in June, replacing veteran Carlo Ancelotti, but Madrid struggled to find consistency under the Basque coach and are second in La Liga, four points behind Barcelona.

Los Blancos were outplayed in a 3-2 defeat in Saudi Arabia on Sunday by Hansi Flick's side, the 44-year-old's last at the helm. Alonso was close to the sack towards the end of 2025 but a run of five consecutive wins kept him in his position, until the Super Cup defeat.

Alonso had signed a three-season deal at the Bernabeu after leaving German side Bayer Leverkusen, with whom he won the Bundesliga in 2024. Real Madrid were thrashed 4-0 by Paris Saint-Germain in July in the Club World Cup semi-finals, which was an early setback for the coach.

A 5-2 drubbing by Atletico Madrid in September was another blow for Alonso, although it was the team's only league defeat until December. Despite a Clasico win over Barcelona in October, it appeared president Florentino Perez had not fully warmed to Alonso, who had intended to bring a modern coaching ap-



Xabi Alonso, who was handed a three-year Real Madrid contract in May after an impressive stint with Bayer Leverkusen, saw his tenure at the Santiago Bernabeu quickly unravel. (AFP)



Alvaro Arbeloa played 238 times for Madrid between 2009-2016, winning two Champions League titles and La Liga once.

proach to the team. While Ancelotti, who led Madrid to three Champions League wins across two spells in charge, was hailed for his man-management, Alonso was appointed for

his tactical nous. Early on during his time in charge Alonso said the "rock'n'roll" was about to begin, but it never came, with few entertaining attacking displays, despite the superb output of French superstar Kylian Mbappe, La Liga's top scorer.

Madrid struggled through a run of poor form amid an injury crisis, losing at home against Celta Vigo, and away at Liverpool in Europe, as well as drawing several domestic games. In that period many of the tactical ideas Alonso had tried to implement, including high pressing, faded away, amid reports some star players had fallen out with him.

Brazilian wingers Vinicius Junior and Rodrygo Goes dropped out of form, going several months without finding the net. Spanish media also said Alonso would be ousted if they failed to beat Manchester City in the Champions League in December.

Madrid lost against Pep Guardiola's side but the performance enough of an improvement that Alonso was given more time to try and save his job. However, the defeat by Barca in Jeddah was the final straw for Madrid, who agreed a deal with Alonso for him to depart.

## French coach and football pundit Courbis dies at 72

**Paris:** Rolland Courbis, a former French player and coach often called in to rescue teams from relegation who became an outspoken media pundit, has died aged 72. Courbis won the French title three times as a player, with Marseille in 1972 and then Monaco in 1978 and 1982.

He spent two years as coach of Marseille during a colourful career in which he coached for more than 500 games in Ligue 1 and went to jail twice over financial issues at his club at the time. Courbis also managed Toulon, Toulouse, Bordeaux and Montpellier, ending his coaching career at Caen in 2019.

By then he had become a well-established media commentator on French radio and television for RMC with an opinionated style that broke the mould in France. France coach Didier Deschamps said French football had lost "an endearing, warm personality with a strong character," a "true enthusiast" who had "chosen to share his passion in recent years, behind a microphone, with a unique way of expressing himself".

Marseille paid tribute to Courbis in a statement calling him "an emblematic coach and a key personality in French football".

### SIMEONE APOLOGISES TO VINICIUS AFTER SUPER CUP ROW

Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone apologised to Real Madrid winger Vinicius Junior after the pair squared off in the Spanish Super Cup. Simeone bickered with Vinicius both during Atletico's 2-1 semi-final defeat on Thursday and after the Brazilian was substituted.

The Argentine coach also said sorry to Real Madrid president Florentino Perez, after appearing to tell Vinicius that the Los



As a player, Rolland Courbis won the French title three times, with Marseille in 1972 and then Monaco in 1978 and 1982.

Blancos chief would kick him out of the club. "I would like to apologise to Mr Florentino and Mr Vinicius for the episode we saw," Simeone told a news conference ahead of Atletico's Copa del Rey last 16 visit to face Deportivo La Coruna today. "It was not good of me to put myself in that position and I accept I didn't do the right thing. Beyond that the team that deserved to win went through, they deserved it."

Vinicius scored a fine solo goal in the Spanish Super Cup final but Madrid lost 3-2 against Barcelona. The winger's contract expires in June 2027 and as of yet he has not agreed a new deal with Real Madrid.

### ABERDEEN FAN JAILED FOR THROWING SEAT THAT INJURED PLAYER

An Aberdeen fan who permanently disfigured one of the club's players after throwing

part of a seat was jailed for 18 months.

David Gowans, 32, hurled the object onto the pitch following Aberdeen's 2-1 loss away to Dundee United at Tannadice on May 17 last year.

It struck Aberdeen defender Jack MacKenzie, who was thanking travelling Dons fans for their support in the Scottish Premiership fixture. MacKenzie suffered a deep laceration to his left eyebrow and an abrasion below his eye.

Gowans, who had been a member of the Aberdeen ultras supporters' group, admitted culpable and reckless conduct in October. Gowans was sentenced to 18 months in prison and handed a banning order, barring him from attending football matches for 10 years.

He had already received a lifetime ban from Aberdeen Football Club.

## FOCUS

# Rosenior plots long Chelsea stay as Arsenal loom in League Cup

AFP  
London

**N**ew Chelsea boss Liam Rosenior said he would love to be at the club for six years or longer as he prepares for a blockbuster League Cup semi-final against Arsenal.

The Englishman, who swapped Strasbourg for Stamford Bridge last week, took charge of his first game on Saturday – a 5-1 FA Cup win at Charlton.

But tomorrow he faces a challenge of a different order when he comes up against Premier League leaders Arsenal in the first leg of the League Cup semi-final.

Rosenior last week replaced Enzo Maresca, who became the fourth permanent manager to leave Chelsea since the American-backed BlueCo consortium took control in May 2022. The Italian won the UEFA Conference League and Club World Cup in his only full season in charge.

Rosenior, who has signed a six-and-a-half year deal with the London club, told his pre-match press conference that he would like



to be given time, as Mikel Arteta has been at Arsenal. But the 41-year-old knows he must hit the ground running at a club that has become renowned for hiring and firing its managers.

"I'd love to be here for six years and longer," said. "I'd be here as long as possible. But I'm aware in order for that to happen, I need to win. It's as simple as that. I understand every club has a different project. This word project comes out a lot now in football. But the idea in any project is that every game you play, you're trying to win it."

Rosenior said he believed Chelsea were strong enough to make an impact this season. "I've got ideas about what I want the team to look like in a year's time, two years, three years' time," he said. "But I think I've got enough resources and enough tools with me now... I've made that clear to the players. We're going to give it our best shot on Wednesday."

Rosenior was questioned whether the clash at Stamford Bridge would be one of the biggest games of his brief managerial career, which included a spell at English second-tier club Hull before his time at Strasbourg.

"I don't see it that way," he said. "I think every session that I take, every meeting that I take, every game that we play is the most important thing. I live in the now. So it is the most important game because it's the next one. I mean that. If you start to prioritise games or think something's more important than the other, then you're not focused."

Newcastle take on Manchester City in the other League Cup semi-final, with the final taking place at Wembley on March 22.

## Guardiola downplays trophy talk as he focuses on Man City growth

**London:** Pep Guardiola says he cares more about how Manchester City "grow up" than winning trophies as he prepares his side for the first leg of their League Cup semi-final away to Newcastle today. City ended last season without a major trophy for the first time in eight years, though they did lift the Community Shield at

the start of the campaign, beating Manchester United on penalties.

Guardiola, asked at his pre-match press conference if he felt extra pressure after missing out on the big prizes last season, insisted he was not focused on silverware. "It's not about winning or not winning trophies, it's about how the team grows up, how the team is

better," the City manager said.

City won the League Cup for four seasons in a row from 2018, with the competition proving a launchpad for a decade of dominance under Guardiola. Last season they were dethroned as Premier League champions by Liverpool and they trail leaders Arsenal by six points in the current campaign.