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Casamento leads
Tiding to Khor
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victory



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says Federer

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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

MOTORSPORT

Al Gharafa move eight clear with win over Al Arabi

Goal scorer Joselu sent off following a VAR review for violent conduct

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Gharafa consolidated their position at the top of the Qatar Stars League with a 2-1 victory over Al Arabi at Al Thumama Stadium yesterday.

The Cheetahs made a flying start, taking the lead in just the second minute when Joselu headed home from a Yacine Brahimi assist. Al Arabi battled back and drew level in the 67th minute through Pablo Sarabia, who capitalised on a loose ball inside the area. Al Gharafa regained control late on as Jamal Hamed struck the winner in the 79th minute.

Al Gharafa were reduced to 10 men six minutes from time after Joselu was shown a red card following a VAR review for violent conduct. The win lifted Al Gharafa to 31 points, eight clear of nearest challengers Al Sadd and Al Rayyan, who both have a game in hand. Al Arabi remained fifth on 20 points.

Earlier, Al Duhail recorded a 2-0 win over Al Wakrah at Saoud bin Abdulrahman Stadium. After a scoreless first half, Algeria's Adil Boulbina, returning to the side after his AFCON campaign in Morocco, opened the scoring from the penalty spot in the 64th minute after being fouled by Mohammed Aiash.

Al Wakrah responded with sustained pressure, but it was Al Duhail who struck again in the 83rd minute as Marco Verratti met a Youssef Sabaly cross to double the lead.

The result moved Al Duhail up to sixth on 19 points, while Al Wakrah stayed eighth with 16.

"We secured three points and that's the most important thing," said Boulbina. "Everyone played and made the required effort. God willing, we will make a comeback in the league. After this victory, we will try to win every match to get back in the lead."

Today, defending champions Al Sadd will look to extend their revival when they host Al Ahli at Jassim bin Hamad Stadium. Al Sadd have won four matches in a row, including a dramatic 3-2 victory over Qatar SC last round, to climb to second on 23 points, level with Al Rayyan but ahead on goal difference. Al Ahli come into the match boosted by a 4-2 win over



Al Gharafa's Joselu (right) celebrates with Yacine Brahimi after scoring against Al Arabi during the Qatar Stars League match at the Al Thumama Stadium yesterday.

Al Shamal, which lifted them to ninth on 15 points.

Al Rayyan face Al Shamal tomorrow at Ahmed bin Ali Stadium in another key encounter. Al Rayyan strengthened their title push with a 3-1 win over Al Sailiya to reach 23 points, while Al Shamal slipped to fourth on 21 after their defeat to Al Ahli.

Elsewhere, Umm Salal meet bottom side Al Shahaniya today at Al Khor Stadium, with both teams in urgent need of points. Umm Salal are tenth on nine points, while Al Shahaniya remain last on goal difference despite holding Al Duhail to a draw.



Al Duhail's Adil Boulbina scores from the penalty spot against Al Wakrah.

Al-Attiyah closes on sixth Dakar title as Ekstrom wins stage 11



Dacia Sandriders' Qatari driver Nasser al-Attiyah and Belgian co-driver Fabian Lurquin compete in Stage 11 of the Dakar Rally, between Bisha and Al Henakiyah in Saudi Arabia. (AFP)

Reuters
Riyadh

Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah remained on course for a sixth career Dakar Rally win in the top car category after last year's runner-up Henk Lategan hit more trouble in the Saudi Arabian desert yesterday.

The Qatari, driving for the Dacia Sandriders, finished the stage with an eight minute and 40 second lead over closest rival Nani Roma in a factory Ford.

The 13-stage rally ends tomorrow at Yanbu on the kingdom's Red Sea coast. "Tomorrow, we just need to do the same as today. If we lose two, three or four minutes it's no problem. We just need to finish this Dakar in first place," said al-Attiyah.

Ford's Mattias Ekstrom won yesterday's 346km stage from Bisha to Al Henakiyah, the Swede's third stage win of this year's event. Al-Attiyah had started the day 12 minutes clear of Lategan, who had slipped back after two nightmare days of mechanical misfortune and navigational errors.

On Tuesday the South African had to drive with no power steering and no windscreen, on Wednesday he got lost and ran out of fuel and yesterday he broke the bearing on his rear left wheel and dropped to 23rd. "We saw Lategan stop and

we're sorry for him – it's never nice to see someone who is fighting but has a mechanical issue but it's part of this game," said Roma.

Nine times world rally champion Sebastian Loeb was third overall, but 18 minutes and 37 seconds behind his leading teammate, with Ekstrom fourth. "I really pushed. I think Nani was at a very high pace as well so it's going to be hard to take time back from him," commented Loeb. Ekstrom's teammate and four times Dakar winner Carlos Sainz was third on the stage and fifth overall.

In the motorcycle category, reigning champion Daniel Sanders continued despite a broken collarbone but the Australian has dropped out of contention. American Ricky Brabec relinquished the lead for strategic reasons, the Honda rider and double champion seeking a better start position for Friday's key stage, with Argentina's Luciano Benavides taking over at the top for KTM.

Benavides is 23 seconds clear but will be at a disadvantage in starting Friday ahead of Brabec. "There's only really one day more left to push... I just did a little bit of strategy today and hopefully it pays off tomorrow," said Brabec.

American Skyler Howes won the stage ahead of French Honda teammate Adrien Van Beveren. Benavides was fourth and Brabec sixth.

SPOTLIGHT

Qatari shooters claim three medals at Asian Shotgun Championship



Qatar's women's team comprising Reem al-Sharshani, Sara Mohammed and Hajar Mohammed secured silver in the skeet event at Lusail Shooting Complex.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatari shooters collected three medals, including one gold and two silver, in the skeet events on the fourth day of the Asian Shotgun Championship at the Lusail Shooting Complex.

Qatar struck gold in the men's team skeet, with Rashid Saleh al-Athba, Mohammed Ahmed al-Kuwari and Ali Ahmed al-Ishaq finishing top with a combined score of 352 targets across five rounds. Kuwait settled for silver on 350, while Kazakhstan claimed bronze with 345.

In the women's individual skeet, Qatar's Reem al-Sharshani secured silver after scoring 31 targets in the final. Kazakhstan's Adil Sadakbayeva won gold with a record-breaking 33 out of 36, setting new Asian and world marks, while compatriot Olga Khailova took bronze with 28.

Al-Sharshani was also part of Qatar's women's team that claimed silver alongside Sara Mohammed and Hajar Mohammed, posting a total of 347 targets. Kazakhstan topped the standings with 350 to win gold, while China finished third on 325.

The men's individual skeet final produced two new Asian and world records, with Kuwait's Mohammed



Qatar struck gold in the men's team skeet, with Rashid Saleh al-Athba, Mohammed Ahmed al-Kuwari and Ali Ahmed al-Ishaq finishing top. Kuwait settled for silver, while Kazakhstan claimed bronze.

al-Daihani and Kazakhstan's Eduard Yashchenko both hitting 33 out of 36. Al-Daihani prevailed in the shoot-off to claim gold, with Yashchenko settling for silver. South Korea's Jang-soo Hwang took bronze with 27.

With these results, Qatar's medal haul in the championship rose to five, comprising two gold and three silver medals in the skeet events.

Rashid Saleh al-Athba expressed his delight after the men's team triumph.

Al-Athba said: "Today's competitions were strong and difficult in light of the participation of Asian champions and top-ranked players, but we were able to compete with them and achieve the gold medal. Our female shooters also managed to win two silver medals. We look forward to continuing to win titles tomorrow in the mixed team skeet competition."

Al-Sharshani said she was pleased with her double silver haul. "The

competitions in the championship were very strong among the various shooters in Asia, and the scores were very close, but we were able to win two silver medals despite the difficult atmosphere today.

"However, the encouragement of our fans in the Lusail fields gave us positive energy and motivated us to achieve victory, and we look forward to winning gold medals in the mixed doubles competition," she said.

HORSE RACING

Tiding lands Khor Al Adaid Cup

Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari's Al Fareeq shines in Silver Sword Trial

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Tiding, with Marco Casamento in the saddle, made a swift return to winning form in the 2,800m QA Group 3 contest for Thoroughbreds, claiming the Khor Al Adaid Cup in style at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.

The five-year-old chestnut produced a powerful performance, unleashing an electrifying burst in the home straight to reel in the leader before forging clear to score decisively by 2½ lengths, securing his first Group victory and completing a double on the evening for trainer Jassim al-Ghazali and Casamento. It was his second success from five starts this season.

Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Racing Manager Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi presented the trophy to Sheikh Abdul Rahman Rashid Abdulrahman Mohammed al-Thani, owner of Tiding.

Al-Ghazali and Casamento bagged their first victory during the nine-race meeting when September Leaves topped the Thoroughbred Fillies and Mares.

Meanwhile, Al Fareeq delivered a strong performance to win the Silver Sword Trial for four-year-old Purebred Arabians.

With Faleh Bughenaim in the saddle, the Julian Smart-trained bay filly made a late surge in the 2,000m contest to win by a quarter of a length. Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari received the prize as the owner of the winning filly.

RESULTS
37th Al Rayyan Race Meeting - Khor Al Adaid Cup
WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1 - Khor Al Adaid Cup - Thoroughbred (Class 1 QA-Gr3)
Tiding, Jassim al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento
2 - Silver Sword Trial, 4YO



Tiding ridden by Marco Casamento won the Khor Al Adaid Cup at the Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.



Jockey Faleh Bughenaim guided Al Fareeq to the Silver Sword Trial win yesterday. **PICTURES: Juhaïm**

Purebred Arabians
Al Fareeq, Julian Smart, Faleh Bughenaim
3 - Local Purebred Arabian Conditions
Razy, Alban de Mieulle, Soufiane Saadi
4 - Thoroughbred Fillies and Mares
September Leaves, Jassim al-

Ghazali, Marco Casamento
5 - Thoroughbred Fillies and Mares Handicap
Nano Toro, Debbie Mountain, Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik
6 - Purebred Arabian Handicap
Manjam, Zuhair Mohsen, Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi
7 - Thoroughbred Handicap

Swift Winds, Abdulla al-Mulla, Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi
8 - Thoroughbred Handicap (65-85)
Bailey Gate, Owaida Salem al-Hajri, Fayos Martin Borja
9 - Thoroughbred Handicap (65-85)
Highland Spring, Hamad al-Jehani, Pierre Charles Boudot

FOCUS

Top Bangladesh cricket official sacked amid World Cup row

AFP
Dhaka

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) yesterday sacked a senior official after their leading men's cricketers went on strike, escalating a crisis that has already seen the nation refuse to tour India for next month's T20 World Cup.

The BCB has been in turmoil since ties with India soured, prompting Dhaka to ask the International Cricket Council to shift its group matches to co-host Sri Lanka. The World Cup begins on February 7, with Bangladesh still scheduled to play four games in India.

The row deepened after Najmul Islam, head of the BCB's finance committee, lashed out at the players who demanded compensation from the board if the team were to pull out of the marquee competition.

"We are spending so much money on them, they are not being able to do anything in different places," Najmul said.

"Have we got any international awards? What have we done at any level? Let us now ask them for the money back after every time they can't play. Why should there even be a question of compensating the players?"

In protest against his remarks,

teams pulled out of yesterday's first match of the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), demanding Najmul be ousted within next 48 hours. The BCB had distanced itself from Najmul's remarks and yesterday removed him from the job.

"Following a review of recent developments and in the best interest of the organisation, the BCB President has decided to release Mr. Najmul Islam from his responsibilities as Chairman of the Finance Committee with immediate effect," the BCB said in a statement.

The row erupted on January 3, when the Indian cricket board (BCCI) ordered the Indian Premier League (IPL) franchise Kolkata Knight Riders to release Bangladesh fast bowler Mustafizur Rahman following tensions between the neighbouring nations.

The BCCI did not publicly give a reason for his removal. Mustafizur, who has played in the IPL for other teams in previous editions, was snapped up at auction in December by Kolkata for more than \$1mn.

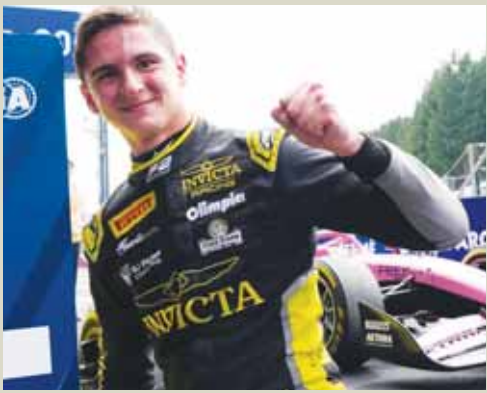
His sacking sparked fury in Dhaka. Bangladesh, led by Litton Das, are placed ninth in the ICC T20 rankings. They have played all the nine editions of the tournament, but have never qualified for the semi-finals.

AFGHANISTAN APPROVE THREE FOREIGN-LEAGUE ANNUAL CAP FOR TOP PLAYERS

Top Afghanistan players such as Rashid Khan can play a maximum of three franchise leagues abroad per year, alongside mandatory availability for a rebooted domestic competition, according to a new policy approved by the Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB). The decision was taken at the board's annual general meeting in Kabul "to protect player fitness and mental well-being," the ACB said in a statement. "This measure aims to manage workload and ensure peak performance for national duties," it added. All players should be available for the five-team Afghanistan Premier League slated to launch around October 2026 in the United Arab Emirates. Star all-rounder Rashid plays franchise cricket in India, the UAE, the United States, South Africa and England. His teammates Noor Ahmad, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, Rahmanullah Gurbaz and teenager A M Ghazanfar also play in multiple leagues across the world. Similar caps exist elsewhere. Pakistan restricts centrally contracted players to two overseas leagues outside the Pakistan Super League, while India does not allow its contracted male players to participate in any league abroad.

McLaren name Fornaroli and O'Ward as reserves

Formula Two champion **Leonardo Fornaroli** and IndyCar racer Pato O'Ward will be McLaren's reserve drivers this season, the reigning Formula One champions said yesterday. Italian Fornaroli, 21, joined McLaren last month in a test and development role and will continue those duties supporting Britain's world champion Lando Norris and Australian teammate Oscar Piastri. Mexican O'Ward, who will continue to race in US-based IndyCars, was also a reserve last season. Dutch driver Richard Verschoor, third in F2 last year, will compete in the European Le Mans series and test for McLaren as the team prepare to enter the hypercar category of the World Endurance Championship in 2027. The Formula One season starts in Australia on March 8.



GOLF

McIlroy takes first-round lead at Dubai Invitational

AFP
Dubai

Rory McIlroy made a bright start to the new year as he fired a five-under par 66 to take a one-shot lead after the first round of the Dubai Invitational yesterday.

The reigning Masters champion made seven birdies, edging to the top of the early leaderboard ahead of Spaniard David Puig and Scot Connor Syme.

McIlroy is targeting his eighth professional title in Dubai after four Dubai Desert Classic victories and three wins in the European Tour's Tour Championship.

The Northern Irishman made six birdies on the back nine after starting on the 10th hole, before grinding his way to the clubhouse. "It was good. I got off to a great start, played a very good first nine," McIlroy said.

"And then the wind got up a little bit and felt like that front nine, which was our second nine, was the trickier one."

McIlroy, who became only the sixth man to complete the career Grand Slam with his Masters tri-



umph last April, said he has been working hard in the close-season and changed his set of irons.

"I like the work. I like the process. I enjoy doing challenging things," he added.

"I think the more and more you do that, the more it just sort of becomes who you are. And I've

done it for so long now that if I didn't do it, it would feel pretty foreign at this point."

McIlroy's 2025 Ryder Cup-winning teammates Shane Lowry and Tommy Fleetwood are three strokes back in a group at two-under, alongside former Masters winner Patrick Reed.

CRICKET

England off-spinner Bashir signs for Derbyshire after Ashes exile

AFP
London

England off-spinner **Shoaib Bashir** has joined Derbyshire on a two-year deal, the County Championship club announced yesterday. Bashir has moved to the Second Division side following the end of his contract with domestic rivals Somerset.

Despite being England's only frontline spinner in their Ashes squad, Bashir did not feature in a recent 4-1 series defeat despite team management repeatedly emphasising his suitability for Australian conditions in the build-up to the tour.

Bashir stayed on the sidelines in Australia, with England preferring all-rounder Will Jacks in a bid to bolster their batting.

It was an all-too familiar situation for Bashir, who had struggled for game time at southwest side Somerset behind left-arm spinner Jack Leach.

The emergence of off-spinning all-rounder Archie Vaughan, the son of former England captain Michael Vaughan, at Somerset further restricted Bashir's chances



at Taunton and led to him having brief loan spells with Worcestershire and Glamorgan in a bid to get more overs under his belt.

But the 22-year-old is now looking to revive his career at Midlands county Derbyshire, where a team under the guidance of former South Africa, Australia and Pakistan coach Mickey Arthur narrowly missed out on promotion to the First Division last season.

"Derbyshire have a really exciting project going on and working with Mickey Arthur, one of the best coaches in the world, is a great opportunity for any young player," said Bashir.

"I'm keen to play more red-ball cricket, continue my development in the white-ball formats

and challenge for promotion with Derbyshire."

Bashir has taken 68 wickets in 19 Tests since his debut in India in February 2024 and became the youngest England bowler to reach 50 dismissals in May last year.

However, he has not featured for England since breaking a finger on his non-bowling hand against India at Lord's in July.

Bashir remains centrally contracted by England until the end of 2026 and Arthur has no doubts about his potential. "To be able to bring in a current England international is really exciting," Arthur said. "He will bring great energy and experience into our dressing room, despite having so much time to still improve his game."

India-origin Bajwa to lead Canada in T20 World Cup

India-born Dilpreet Bajwa will lead Canada at the Twenty20 World Cup next month, the country's cricket board said as it announced a 15-member squad for the competition. Bajwa, 22, who has featured in nine ODIs and 17 T20Is, will make his debut as captain at the global showpiece, which will be co-hosted by India and Sri Lanka from February 7-March 8. Canada, making their second appearance at the tournament, are in Group D alongside South Africa, New Zealand, Afghanistan, and the United Arab Emirates. Their campaign opens against South Africa on February 9 in Ahmedabad, with all their group-stage matches set to be played in India. Bajwa, who has four half-centuries and a strike rate

of 133.22 in T20Is, will be seen alongside power-hitter Yuvraj Samra, former captain Saad Bin Zafar, Dillon Heyliger, Nicholas Kirton and Navneet Dhaliwal among others in the squad. Canada secured their spot in the tournament by winning all six of their matches in the Americas Regional Final. In their previous World Cup appearance, Canada finished fourth in their group, with a single win over Ireland. **SQUAD:** Dilpreet Bajwa (captain), Ajayveer Hundal, Ansh Patel, Dillon Heyliger, Harsh Thaker, Jaskarandeep Buttar, Kaleem Sana, Kanwarpal Tathgur, Navneet Dhaliwal, Nicholas Kirton, Ravinderpal Singh, Saad Bin Zafar, Shivam Sharma, Shreyas Movva, Yuvraj Samra.

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

‘Sincaraz’ rivalry set to dominate men’s draw

Sinner favourite to win third title in succession, Alcaraz looking to become youngest to complete career Grand Slam

Reuters
Melbourne

Defending champion Jannik Sinner is the book-makers’ favourite to win a third successive Australian Open crown as another title showdown looms with world number one Carlos Alcaraz.

The “Sincaraz” duopoly swept all four Grand Slam titles in 2025 and their dominance is expected to continue at Melbourne Park where few in the men’s draw appear equipped to challenge, let alone beat them.

A Sinner victory would mean a fifth Grand Slam title for the 24-year-old Italian and make him the first to lift the Australian Open trophy three years running since Novak Djokovic in 2019-21.

For 22-year-old Alcaraz, a first Australian Open triumph would mean a seventh major trophy and the distinction of being the youngest man to complete the career Grand Slam, eclipsing Don Budge’s long-standing record.

Sinner and Alcaraz have operated in a different stratosphere to hog the sport’s biggest trophies, and even their travel arrangements to Melbourne were a class apart.

As lower-ranked players toiled through stifling heat at warm-up tournaments in Australia, the



Italy’s Jannik Sinner (right) holds the men’s singles trophy, the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup, as he walks with ball girl Peyton Billington carrying the women’s singles trophy, the Daphne Akhurst Memorial Cup, as part of the official draw ceremony in Melbourne yesterday, ahead of the Australian Open. (AFP)

duo flew in on a private jet from a no-pressure exhibition match in Seoul, arriving fresh and unruined for the tournament starting

on Sunday. While Alcaraz finished a career-best season in 2025 with the world’s top ranking, Sinner capped his own terrific year by

successfully defending his ATP Finals title, beating the Spaniard in the decider in front of adoring home fans in Turin.

The Italian, who faces France’s Hugo Gaston in the first round, has worked to add greater unpredictability, particularly on serve, into his game to keep pace with Alcaraz, the sport’s most explosive talent.

Alcaraz is determined to hit back in Melbourne, though, saying he would rather hoist the trophy than claim back-to-back titles at the U.S. and French Open this year.

Though dominant elsewhere, Australia has never seen Alcaraz in full flight, with quarter-final exits in the past two seasons his best results.

This year he arrives following a surprise split with long-time coach Juan Carlos Ferrero, who guided him from prodigy to multiple major champion.

Whether Alcaraz, who meets Australian battler Adam Walton in the first round, can continue to thrive without Ferrero will be one of the tournament’s major plotlines.

Beyond the two young standard-bearers, Djokovic may still be their greatest threat - even at 38. The Serb is chasing a record-extending 11th Australian Open title and a record 25th Grand Slam title overall to move one clear of Margaret Court on the all-time list.

Djokovic upset Alcaraz in last year’s quarter-finals but retired

injured in the semi-finals against Alexander Zverev.

While Djokovic’s mental toughness is without question, the physical wear of a 20-year career is increasingly hard to ignore.

After losing to Alcaraz at the U.S. Open semi-finals, he conceded beating Sinner and Alcaraz may be too hard in best-of-five-set matches at Grand Slams.

Further back, the gap between the top two and the chasing pack appears stark. World number three Zverev reached last year’s final only to be overwhelmed by Sinner and ended 2025 with just one title. Daniil Medvedev, a three-time Australian Open finalist, arrives outside the top 10 but buoyed by early-season form after winning in Brisbane.

Canada’s Felix Auger-Aliassime has shown improvement and unseeded Pole Hubert Hurkacz is in encouraging form after a comeback from a long injury layoff.

But breaking the Sinner-Alcaraz stronghold may be beyond all of them.

If Sinner succeeds, his Australian Open dominance will be reminiscent of Djokovic’s dynasty. If Alcaraz breaks through, he will conquer his final frontier and open the door to a calendar Grand Slam.

Either way, the men’s draw points to the same destination: a new chapter in the Sincaraz era.

PREVIEW

Sabalenka targeting third Australian Open crown

Reuters
Melbourne

Australian Open favourite Aryna Sabalenka headlines a powerful cast of characters at Melbourne Park along with Iga Swiatek and Coco Gauff as they look to shape the early-season narrative at the year’s opening Grand Slam.

While the women’s game has been more open than the men’s in recent years, the trio sparked a shift in momentum by sweeping nine of the last 12 Grand Slams and Sabalenka will head to Melbourne bidding for her third Australian Open crown.

In addition to claiming a fifth Grand Slam title overall, the Belarusian will be looking to make amends for last year’s stunning loss to American Madison Keys in the final.

Sabalenka has already built momentum after reaching her third successive final in Brisbane, where she beat Marta Kostyuk for the title, but the 27-year-old said there is no way to predict what will happen on the Grand Slam stage.

“It’s tennis, it’s sport and that’s why it’s so beautiful because you can’t predict anything,” Sabalenka said when asked about expectations for the season after her Brisbane triumph.

“It’s like every day you go out there and prove your level.

“The only one thing I’m sure of is that I’ll be there, I’ll be fighting... my focus is on my game, on developing myself and making sure that I’m strong and healthy.”

After claiming her first Wimbledon crown last year, Swiatek will now set her sights on the missing piece of her puzzle - an Australian Open title that would complete a career Grand Slam.



Belarus’ Aryna Sabalenka during a practice session in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters)

A strong performance at the tournament could also open up a pathway back towards the world No. 1 ranking but Swiatek, who reached the semi-finals 12 months ago, is not focusing on that or the Grand Slam milestone.

“Both of those things are big goals and hard to achieve,” Swiatek told reporters at the United Cup, which she ended with defeats by Gauff and Belinda Bencic.

“There’s a long way to get there. At a Grand Slam you have to really play great for two weeks, not have any bad days and be consistent.

“Achieving number one is also tough, especially when Aryna has been playing great for the last few years. I’ll just focus on myself because that’s the only way to go.

“I don’t need to choose which one is more important, which one is a priority. I’m still young... I don’t need to put that pressure on myself to do something in the next two weeks.”

BRING THE SWAGGER

Gauff will bring plenty of swagger after her French Open win last year, her second major title after the US Open in 2023, and the tenacious 21-year-old knows the next step is to deliver high-quality performances consistently.

“I would like to go deep in all the Grand Slams this year,” the world No 3 said of her goals for 2026.

“I’d like to touch the number one ranking. That would be cool. But yeah, just being consistent throughout the year.”

Of the other challengers, a fearless, free-swinging Keys found her finest form in Melbourne last year and will be a threat in the draw.

Fellow American Amanda Anisimova could also have a big role to play after making the Wimbledon and US Open finals last year, while Elena Rybakina’s unbeaten run to the WTA Finals title in Riyadh last year marks her out as a contender.

and Keys has been drawn to face Ukraine’s Oleksandra Oliynykova in the first round. After dropping the first set, Keys rallied after twice being a break down in the second to the 19-year-old, before taking it to a deciding third set. But Mboko broke the American twice for a 4-1 lead and won after 1hr 52min. A year ago, Mboko was 337th in the world but she announced herself on the world stage last year by winning the WTA 1000 title in Montreal and the Hong Kong Open.

“There were ups and downs in the match, I had to weather the storm,” Mboko said. “She won here last year so I know coming in this would be a big fight. I’m glad I was able to get it done.” “Madison is a tough player, she didn’t get to where she is without a reason. It’s nice to play a former champion to see what I can do.” Mboko will play a Friday semi-final against Australia’s Kimberly Birrell, who came through a three-hour quarter-final over Romanian Jacqueline Cristian 5-7, 6-1, 7-5.

Alcaraz career Grand Slam at 22 would be crazy, says Federer

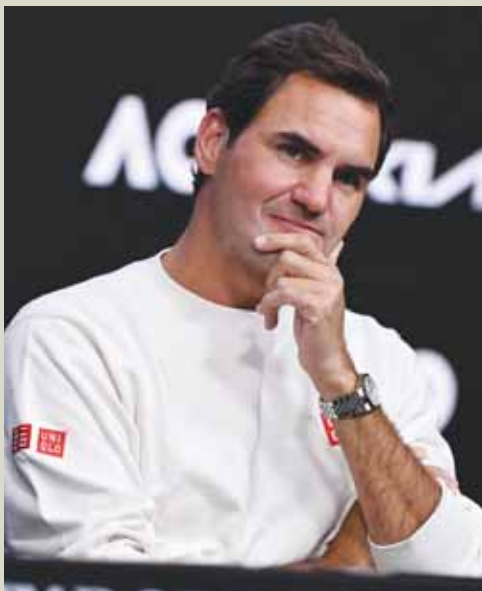
Roger Federer said yesterday that Carlos Alcaraz winning the Australian Open to complete the career Grand Slam aged just 22 would be “crazy”. Spain’s Alcaraz already has six major titles but success on the Melbourne Park hard courts is a glaring hole in his resume. Should the world number one snap his Australia drought at the tournament starting on Sunday, he would become the youngest man to seal a career Grand Slam.

“At his young age to be able to complete the career Grand Slam already would be crazy,” Swiss legend Federer said at Melbourne Park, where he will headline a “Battle of the World No 1s” at the official launch of the 2026 Australian Open on Saturday. “Let’s see if he’s able to do ‘crazy’ this week. I hope he does because for the game that would be an unbelievable and special moment.”

Alcaraz is aiming to surpass retired compatriot Rafael Nadal, who secured all four majors by the age of 24, but the top seed has not made it past the quarter-finals in four previous Australian Opens. Federer, a six-time Melbourne champion, compared Alcaraz’s wait to lift the title there to Rory McIlroy’s agonising attempts to win a first Masters in golf. The Northern Irishman finally did it last year to complete the Grand Slam.

“It’s like Rory going for the Masters. Those things are tough,” said Federer.

Alcaraz faces home hope Adam Walton in the first round. The now-retired Federer was also asked by reporters about Joao Fonseca, an up-and-coming Brazilian tennis talent aged 19. Federer spoke glowingly of the teenager, saying: “What separates him from a lot of the other guys



Former tennis player Roger Federer of Switzerland speaks during a press conference in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

in the draw is just his power - forehand, backhand, serve and just what he’s able to bring point by point.

“He’s exciting, he’s got good aura, he’s a very likeable character as well. I like watching him play. “The sky’s the limit.”

SPOTLIGHT

Ledecky posts second-fastest 1,500m freestyle time ever in Pro Swim win

AFP
Los Angeles

Nine-time Olympic gold medallist Katie Ledecky clocked the second-fastest women’s 1,500m freestyle time in history on Wednesday to launch the US Pro Swim Series event in Austin, Texas, with a dominant victory.

Ledecky was untouchable as she cruised to victory in 15min 23.21sec, more than a minute in front of 16-year-old runner-up Brinkleigh Hansen, who touched in 16:31.31. Becca Mann was third in 16:35.09.

Ledecky didn’t threaten her world record of 15:20.48, set in 2018, but she used a strong late surge to improve on the second-best ever time of 15:24.51 that she had set at the Pro Swim Series in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, last April. Since then she has gone on to win her sixth world title in the event at last year’s world championships in Singapore.

She has won both Olympic gold medals - at Tokyo in 2021



Katie Ledecky competes in the Women’s 1,500m freestyle final during the USA Swimming Pro Swim Series in Austin. (AFP)

and Paris 2024 - since the 1,500m free was made an Olympic event for women. Now 28, the American who won her first Olympic gold in the 800m freestyle at the 2012 London Games is showing no signs of fading as the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics beckon.

Ledecky, the only woman to beat 15:30 for the 1,500m free, did so for the 10th time. She owns the top 12 times ever and 24 of the top 25, with Italian Simon Quadrella’s runner-up finish to Ledecky in 15:31.79 at last year’s world championships now slotting in as the 13th-fastest ever.

Men’s world record-holder

Bobby Finke, Ledecky’s training partner in Florida, won the men’s 1,500m free in 15:01.70. Ireland’s Daniel Wiffen, the reigning 800m Olympic champion, was second in 15:04.98.

Olympic stars Summer McIntosh and Leon Marchand led the way into yesterday’s finals of the 200m individual medley, in which they are both world record-holders.

Canada’s McIntosh, winner of three gold medals at the Paris Games and four world titles in Singapore last year, touched in 2:09.27 to top the semi-final times ahead of Teagan O’Dell (2:13.15). Emma Weyant was third fastest, winning her semi in 2:14.74. France’s Marchand, who won four golds in Paris, topped the men’s 200m medley semi-finals in 2:00.10 ahead of Kieran Smith in 2:00.19 and Carson Foster in 2:00.24.

World record-holder Regan Smith of the United States won the women’s 100m backstroke in 57.98sec, and reigning world champion Anna Elendt of Germany won the women’s 100m breaststroke in 1:06.91.

Error-strewn Keys crashes out to Mboko in Australian Open warm-up

An erratic Madison Keys struck nearly 50 unforced errors yesterday as the Australian Open champion crashed out of her final warm-up for this year’s opening Grand Slam to teenager Victoria Mboko. The Canadian world number 17 withstood a second-set fightback from Keys to win 6-4, 4-6, 6-2 in the quarter-final of the Adelaide International. Keys won the Adelaide tournament 12 months on her way to lifting her maiden Slam title in Melbourne. This year’s Australian Open begins on Sunday

AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

Hosts Morocco and Senegal prepare for final showdown

Salah's dream of winning the title dashed after Egypt lose in semis

AFP
Rabat

Hosts Morocco and Senegal will fight it out in a heavyweight Africa Cup of Nations final this weekend after tense last-four victories on Wednesday, but Mohamed Salah is left wondering if his dream of winning the title will forever remain unfulfilled.

The tournament has delivered a final showdown for the trophy between Africa's two modern footballing powerhouses, the continent's best sides according to the FIFA rankings. For Morocco, winners on penalties against Nigeria following a 0-0 draw in their semi-final in Rabat, their run to this stage feels like a natural progression after Walid Regragui's side became the first African and Arab team to reach the World Cup semi-finals in 2022.

They have not lost since a shock exit from the 2024 AFCON to South Africa in the last 16 and are currently 11th in the world rankings, above Italy. Morocco boast the reigning African player of the year in Paris Saint-Germain's Achraf Hakimi and are looking to add the AFCON title to a list of recent successes: they won the Under-20 World Cup in October and the Arab Cup last month, as well as Olympic bronze in 2024.

They were for a long time African football's big underachievers, with their only Cup of Nations title to date coming in 1976 – since then they have reached just one final, when Regragui was a player in 2004.

The Atlas Lions have not always been a scintillating watch in their home tournament and have even been whistled by their own supporters, while Regragui regularly faces criticism despite his success since being appointed in August 2022.

But the only goal they have conceded in six matches came from a penalty in a group-stage draw with Mali, while in Real Madrid winger Brahim Diaz they have arguably the competition's outstanding player. "Obviously there are higher expectations on us after we got to the World Cup semi-finals and I know I will also be criticised if I lose the final," Regragui accepted as he spoke to media.

His team have also qualified for a third straight World Cup and the country is prepar-



Morocco players celebrate after winning the Africa Cup of Nations semi-finals against Nigeria in the penalty shootout in Rabat, Morocco. (Reuters)

ing to co-host the 2030 edition with Spain and Portugal. "This is the golden age of Moroccan football but we must not forget where we have come from," Regragui added.

It is also a golden age for Senegal, the 2022 African champions who beat Egypt 1-0 in the semis thanks to Sadio Mane's goal in Tangiers. The Lions of Teranga have qualified for a third straight World Cup too, and this is their third final in four editions of AFCON – they lost to Algeria in Cairo in 2019.

Senegal, who are 19th in the world rankings, were considered on paper to be the most obvious threat to Morocco's chances of winning the title on home soil and have also constructed their success here on a strong defence that has conceded just two goals.

However, unlike Morocco this is an ageing team, with 33-year-old Mane saying on Wednesday that this would be his last AFCON. "Let's hope we still have him for a few more

years," insisted Senegal coach Pape Thiaw. "I hope it is not his last final."

Salah, meanwhile, may need time to come to terms with falling short at yet another Cup of Nations. He turns 34 this year and came to Morocco hoping desperately for success with his country at a time when his club future at Liverpool is so uncertain.

Salah's Cup of Nations record is littered with disappointment, with defeats in the final in 2017 and in 2022, and a last-16 exit when Egypt hosted in 2019. His last AFCON, two years ago in Ivory Coast, ended early with a hamstring injury.

Now he has fallen short again, and seven-time champions Egypt are still without a title since 2010. Salah can still look forward to leading the Pharaohs at the World Cup, and he will surely try to rouse himself for at least one more AFCON – the next edition in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda is set for next year after all.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Rosenior refuses to back Sanchez as No. 1

AFP
London

Chelsea boss **Liam Rosenior** has warned every player must earn their place as he refused to confirm goalkeeper Robert Sanchez will remain number one at Stamford Bridge.

The Spaniard's error-strewn performance in Wednesday's 3-2 defeat by Arsenal in the first leg of the Blues' League Cup semi-final has put Sanchez's position in doubt for tomorrow's clash against high-flying Brentford.

Chelsea's chances of giving Rosenior a winning start in his first home match in charge were spoiled as Sanchez was caught out of position for Ben White's opening goal and then



spilled a cross into the path of Viktor Gyokeres for Arsenal's second.

"I'm here to assess every position. I don't have number ones and number twos, it's not how I work," Rosenior said. "At every club there has to be competition. You have to earn your spot in this team. That's the message

to all of the players. I don't have guaranteed number ones (goalkeepers) or guaranteed number nines (strikers)."

One player who looks set to depart Stamford Bridge due to a lack of first-team action is Facuendo Buonanotte. The Argentine's loan deal from Brighton will reportedly be cut short to allow him to join Leeds.

Cole Palmer and Reece James have not played yet in Rosenior's opening two matches in charge of Chelsea, but both trained yesterday and could feature against Brentford.

Chelsea's preparations for the game, however, have been hampered by the outbreak of a virus at the club's training ground. Liam Delap and Jamie Gittens were among those to stay away from the the Cobham training base with high temperatures.

Platini says FIFA President Infantino has become 'more of an autocrat'

London: Former UEFA boss Michel Platini says FIFA president Gianni Infantino "has become more of an autocrat" and is too interested in the rich and powerful, in an interview with *The Guardian*.

Infantino was Platini's deputy from 2009 and 2015 when the Frenchman headed European football's governing body. "He was a good number two, but is not a good number one," Platini said of Infantino. "He worked very well at UEFA but he has one problem: he likes the rich and powerful people, the ones with money. It's his character. He was like that as a number two, but back then he was not the boss. Unfortunately Infantino has become more of an autocrat since the pandemic," he said.

Ahead of the 2026 World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico, Infantino has cultivated a close relationship with US President Donald Trump and created a special FIFA peace prize that he awarded him at the draw for the tournament in December.

The Swiss-Italian lawyer took over from the scandal-hit Sepp Blatter in 2016, but Platini believes Infantino's top-down leadership has made FIFA a less democratic organisation than it was in Blatter's day. "There is less democracy than in Blatter's time. You can say what you want about Blatter, but his main problem is that he wanted to continue at FIFA for life. He was a good person for football," Platini told *The Guardian*.

"The administrators in football now, they are just doing their job. You find many who wouldn't care whether it's football or basketball. It's not always a case of loving football if you work at UEFA or FIFA."

Platini has been a vocal critic of Infantino and his close circle for several years, accusing him of thwarting the former French playing great's bid to become FIFA president by tipping off Swiss prosecutors about an undocumented payment from Blatter to Platini of 2mn Swiss francs (\$2.5mn).

SPOTLIGHT

Enrique has no doubts about PSG's title credentials

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain coach **Luis Enrique** said he has no doubts about his team despite their shock 1-0 French Cup defeat at home to newly-promoted city rivals Paris FC before a return to Ligue 1 today.

PSG enjoyed a record-breaking campaign last season, completing the first treble in French football, winning their domestic league and cup, as well as the Champions League. Things have not gone so well this season, with PSG sitting second in Ligue 1, one point behind surprise leaders Lens, and already out of the cup.

"Honestly, if anyone has any doubts about our team... they should drop them," Enrique said ahead of hosting fourth-placed Lille. "What's the problem? People think we're going to win all the trophies and all of our matches? Football doesn't work that way. You have to highlight what we've accomplished. I have no doubts about the type of team we are."

PSG won the league by 19 points last season but Lens have strung together a nine-match winning run in all competitions to surge to the top of Ligue 1.

In the meantime, the champions have had to contend with a spate of injuries. PSG have not been as sharp as last season, something that was in evidence on Monday against PFC when they failed to score from 25 shots on goal, including seven on target.

PFC on the other hand, could muster only four shots and two on target but made their meagre attacking output count. Despite the recent injury returns of attacking pair Ousmane Dembele, the current Ballon d'Or, and Desire Doue, PSG cannot find the same creativity and intensity as last season.

And while the French Cup was not top of their list of priorities



this season, Luis Enrique said he hopes their elimination "will be a motivation for Ligue 1 and the Champions League, which are the most important competitions".

PSG are well-placed to secure a top eight finish in the league phase of the Champions League and avoid the dreaded play-offs but face a tricky trip to Sporting Lisbon on Tuesday. Lens, meanwhile, will be without top scorer Ousmane Edouard for the visit of lowly Auxerre on Saturday.

Edouard, who joined this season from Crystal Palace, has scored eight goals in 16 matches for the Blood and Golds but was injured during Sunday's 3-0 French Cup victory over Sochaux. "We think that he could play, maybe for 15 minutes, but we don't want to take the risk," coach Pierre Sage said.

Youngster Rayan Fofana, who was the first choice forward at the start of the season before Edouard's arrival, is likely to deputise. Third-placed Marseille face a tough trip to Angers knowing that any more slip-ups like last week's 2-0 home defeat to Nantes will likely end any title aspirations they might have as they already trail Lens by eight points.

FIXTURES (TIMES GMT)

Today: Monaco v Lorient (1800), Paris Saint-Germain v Lille (2000)
Tomorrow: Lens v Auxerre (1600), Toulouse v Nice (1800), Angers v Marseille (2005)
Sunday: Strasbourg v Metz (1400), Rennes v Le Havre, Nantes v Paris FC (both 1615), Lyon v Brest (1945)

More than 500 million request World Cup tickets: FIFA

Los Angeles: Football's global governing body FIFA said on Wednesday it had received more than 500 million requests for tickets to this year's World Cup despite rumbling controversy over sky-high prices to attend the event. FIFA said in a statement it had received applications from fans in all of its 211 member nations and territories for the tournament staged in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

The window for submitting requests to be entered in a lottery which will allocate tickets closed on Tuesday. FIFA said fans would be notified of whether their requests had been successful "no earlier than 5 February."

Outside of the tournament's host nations, FIFA said the heaviest demand came from fans in Germany, England, Brazil, Spain, Portugal, Argentina and Colombia. The most requested ticket was Colombia's clash with Portugal in Miami on June 27, followed by Mexico's game against South Korea in Guadalajara on June 18, and the World Cup final in New Jersey on July 19.

FIFA has faced sharp criticism over its ticket pricing strategy for the 48-team tournament, with fan groups branding the cost as "extortionate" and "astronomical."

Football Supporters Europe (FSE) said ticket prices were almost five times higher than at the 2022 tournament in Qatar. Those criticisms prompted FIFA to introduce a new category of cut-price tickets set at \$60 each.

ETO'O BANNED FOR 4 MATCHES OVER MISCONDUCT
Cameroon Football Federation (FECAFOOT) President Samuel Eto'o has been handed a four-match ban for alleged misconduct during the team's 2-0 defeat by hosts Morocco at the Africa Cup of Nations last Friday, the Confederation of African Football (CAF) said. Eto'o was reportedly seen making an angry gesture over refereeing decisions in the presence of CAF President Patrice Motsepe. Players from both sides also jostled each other, and CAF said on Sunday it had opened investigations into violent confrontations during AFCON matches.

FOCUS

Blame me, says new coach Arbeloa, as Real Madrid crash out of Copa del Rey

Reuters

Albacete, Spain

New coach **Alvaro Arbeloa** said he was not afraid of failure as he took the blame for Real Madrid's stunning 3-2 defeat to second-division Albacete in the Copa del Rey round of 16 on Wednesday.

Arbeloa endured a nightmare start to his managerial career at Real after taking charge of the Spanish giants following Xabi Alonso's departure on Monday.

The shock result capped a dismal week for the club, who also lost 3-2 to Barcelona in Sunday's Spanish Super Cup final.

The 42-year-old Arbeloa inherits a side four points adrift of their arch-rivals Barcelona in La Liga and now out of the Copa del Rey. Speaking after the humbling result at a misty Carlos Belmonte stadium, the former Real Madrid defender took full responsibility



ity for the defeat but insisted that brighter days lay ahead.

"At this club, a draw is always bad, a tragedy. It's painful, and I'm sure all our fans are hurting," Arbeloa told reporters. "I am responsible and to blame. As for the line-up and the substitutions, I can only thank the players. Now we have to recover for Saturday."

Arbeloa's decision to rest several first-team stars came under

scrutiny as Madrid struggled against an organised and determined Albacete side. Despite the result, Arbeloa doubled down on his choices. "I don't regret it. I was convinced that the squad I brought was the right one," he asserted.

"The players we had formed a great team. I would make the same decision a thousand times over. It's difficult for players to

adapt to everything I've asked of them in just one day. We also have many players who need to recover physically."

Madrid's second consecutive loss in less than a week was a blow for Arbeloa, but the manager remained steadfast in his belief that failure is a stepping stone to success. "I'm not afraid of failure," he said. "I understand anyone who wants to describe this defeat as a failure. Failure is part of the road to success. It will make me better, and it will make us all better. I've endured defeats harder than this one. We'll prepare for the next match with maximum dedication."

He added that Real had a lot of room for improvement physically. "With a new manager, players will need time to adjust to different ideas," he said. "What happens on the pitch is ultimately my responsibility. We need clearer ideas in how we approach matches, particularly against teams that defend deep."