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Grand Slam prize  
money boost, vow  
to push for more



Saturday, January 17, 2026  
Rajab 28, 1447 AH

# GULF TIMES

## SPORT

MOTORSPORT

### Sixth Dakar triumph looms for al-Attiyah after stage win



Dacia's Nasser al-Attiyah and his co-driver Fabian Lurquin in action during stage 12 of the Dakar Rally in Al Henakiyah, Saudi Arabia. (Reuters)

**Reuters**  
Riyadh

Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah looked set for a sixth Dakar Rally title after the Dacia driver won yesterday's penultimate 12th stage in the Saudi Arabian desert and extended his lead to 15 minutes with 105km remaining.

The stage win was the 50th of the 55-year-old's career, equaling a record in the car category held by Finnish rally great Ari Vatanen and France's 14-times Dakar winner Stephane Peterhansel. The rally ends today outside the Red Sea port of Yanbu.

"To win this stage and to have a good lead now is really amazing," said al-Attiyah after the 409km drive over rocks and sand left him on the verge of victory. "You can lose everything today but we did a good job. One day to go, but we need to be smart and really focused."

Ford's Nani Roma remained his closest rival but the Spaniard's overnight deficit of eight minutes ballooned after he broke his car's front axle and lost a wheel.

French teammate Romain Dumas came



Nasser al-Attiyah poses with the medal after winning his 50th Dakar stage.

to Roma's rescue at the stage finish, providing the parts for the second-placed driver to continue on the link road and

reach the overnight bivouac on time and without penalty.

Ford's Mattias Ekstrom was third overall, 23 minutes and 21 seconds off the lead, with Dacia's nine-times world rally champion Sebastien Loeb a close fourth and ahead of Ford's Carlos Sainz.

American Mitch Guthrie was second on the stage for Ford, with Australian Toby Price third in a Toyota.

In the motorcycle category Honda's American Ricky Brabec returned to the top of the standings after taking a strategic decision on Thursday to drop back and get a better start position.

Brabec, who started the day in second place behind Luciano Benavides, led home to take his second special of this rally and his 13th in total. He finished the route from Al Henakiyah to Yanbu 3min 43sec ahead of Benavides (KTM) and will hold a lead of 3min 20sec when he opens the way on Saturday's 13th and final 105km special.

"We've got one more day to go," said Brabec who is looking for his third Dakar title. "Tomorrow is supposed to be 'easy', they say, and if I open and do a good job, I should get about a minute-and-a-half of bonus time, so we'll see what happens."

**QATAR STARS LEAGUE**

### Late goals lift Sadd past Ahli as Shahania cruise

Sadd stay in second and are five points behind Gharafa

**By Sports Reporter**  
Doha

Defending champions Al Sadd edged past Al Ahli 2-0 in an entertaining Qatar Stars League clash at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday. The win kept Al Sadd in second place, maintaining their position from the previous round following leaders Al Gharafa's victory. Al Sadd moved up to 26 points, while Al Ahli stayed ninth on 15.

The first half ended goalless, and the match looked set to finish the same way until Rafa Mujica broke the deadlock with a header ten minutes from time. In stoppage time, substitute Hashem Ali sealed the result after a one-on-one move created by Akram Afif.

Al Ahli delivered a disciplined performance, particularly in defence, and the side coached by Younes Ali came close to imposing their tactical approach before Mujica's decisive goal. The match also saw a late red card for Al Ahli defender Khaled Radwan Sheikh, who was sent off in the final minute after fouling Afif on the edge of the penalty area. Following a VAR review, the referee awarded a free kick from outside the box and dismissed the defender.

Earlier, Al Shahania cruised to a 3-0 victory over Umm Salal at Al Khor Stadium. Lotfi Rabah Madjer opened the scoring in the 64th minute, Jawad al-Jumaili added a second four minutes later, and Belgian substitute Francesco Antonucci wrapped up the win in stoppage time. The result lifted Shahania to 11 points and moved them up to tenth place, overtaking Umm Salal, who remained second from bottom on nine points.

Shahania were the stronger side early on, dominating possession and showing attacking intent. They thought they had taken the lead in the eighth minute through Moamen Moatasem's long-range strike, but the goal was ruled out for a foul in the build-up. Despite controlling much of the play, Al Shahania found it difficult to break down Umm Salal's compact defence, with long-range efforts proving their main outlet. Spaniard Alvaro Sanz came close in the 33rd minute, but goalkeeper Louay Sharif made a fine save.

Umm Salal threatened late in the first half through Cristo Perez, whose power-



Al Sadd's Rafa Mujica celebrates after scoring against Al Ahli in the Qatar Stars League at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.



Al Shahania beat Umm Salal 3-0 at Al Khor Stadium.

ful effort narrowly missed the target, Shahania replied with a Petros Amorsvoort header that sailed over the bar as the half ended goalless.

Umm Salal showed more ambition after the break following several substitutions by coach Patrice Carteron. Meshaal al-Shammari nearly scored in the 54th minute, only to be denied by an excellent save from goalkeeper Shehab al-Laithi.

Shahania eventually made their pressure count when Madjer struck from outside the area to give his side the lead. Moments later, al-Jumaili produced a fine solo run past several defenders before firing into the far corner. Umm Salal pushed forward in the closing stages, but Shahania struck again on the counter, with Antonucci scoring in the 90+2 minute to complete a convincing win.

**HORSE RACING**

### Aafoor leads 12 runners for Sheikh Joaan Rifle

The race meeting for the Trophies and Rifle of HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee, will be staged today, on the turf track at Al Rayyan Racecourse at Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC).

The meeting serves as a final rehearsal ahead of the HH The Amir Sword Festival, scheduled to take place from February 11 to 14, and as such has attracted significant interest from owners, trainers and jockeys, with competitive racing expected across all ten contests as connections chase top honours.

Hours before the meeting gets underway, QREC, chaired by Hamad bin Abdulrahman al-Attiyah, confirmed full readiness to stage the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al Thani Rifle race meeting.

Rashid Saed Adiba, Head of Racing Operations at QREC, said: "The meeting comprises ten races, and all preparations have been completed ahead of what we expect to be a highly competitive card. Total rewards on offer exceed QR2.7mn. From an organisational standpoint, QREC is fully prepared for this event."

"The meeting forms part of three consecutive race days, running from last Wednesday through to Saturday, and carries significant prestige for all participants. Racing for the Trophies and Rifle of HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani is firmly in the spotlight as we approach the HH The Amir Sword Festival. Given the importance of the meeting, QREC has also arranged accompanying activities for families and children, with free admission for all."

#### 12 RUNNERS FOR THE FEATURE

The tenth and feature race of the meeting will be run for the Rifle of HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, a Class 1 contest for Thoroughbreds over 2,200m, with rewards of \$100,000. The opener is run for the Na'ama 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 Sprint Trophy for Thoroughbreds over 1,200m, with \$50,000 on offer. It is followed by another Trophy, restricted to three-year-old Thoroughbreds over 1,400m, carrying \$50,000. The mid-card contest is for local Thoroughbreds over 1,750m, worth \$55,000. A later supporting race is for Thoroughbreds over 1,400m, offering \$50,000. Attention then turns, in the eighth race on the card, for Purebred Arabians over 1,750m, worth \$50,000.



Aafoor, representing Al Jeryan Stud, is seeking to retain the Rifle.

foor, representing Al Jeryan Stud, who is seeking to retain the Rifle after landing the title last year.

The field also includes Basalt, carried by the colours of HE Mansoor bin Ebrahim al-Mahmoud; Aemilianus, campaigned by Sheikh Mohammed Salman al-Thani; El Chaco, from Sharq Stud; Foehn, owned by Hamad Ramzan al-Naimi; Forceful Speed, representing Engineer Hassan Ali Abdulmalik; Garden Route, racing for Nibras Racing Syndicate; Maraseem, from Al Wasmiyah Farm; Mia Man, another Sharq Stud runner; Simca Mille and Wafei, both representing Wathnan Racing; and Aeon's Aegis, owned by Abdulrahman Rashid Abdulrahman Mohammed al-Thani. Hassan Ali Abdulmalik; Garden Route, racing for Nibras Racing Syndicate; Maraseem, from Al Wasmiyah Farm; Mia Man, another Sharq Stud runner; Simca Mille and Wafei, both representing Wathnan Racing; and Aeon's Aegis, owned by Sheikh Abdul Rahman Rashid al-Thani.

#### REMAINDER OF THE CARD

Adiba went on to outline the supporting programme, noting that aside from the feature, the ninth race is an international contest, run for Purebred Arabians (Group 3 PA) over 2,200m, with rewards of \$100,000. The opener is run for the Na'ama 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.

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## FORMULA ONE

# Will Red Bull deliver speed? Watch this space: Hodgson

RED BULL COMPETING WITH OWN ENGINE FOR THE FIRST TIME AS NEW CAR LIVERY IS UNVEILED



Red Bull Racing reveal their car livery at a launch in Detroit ahead of the new Formula One season.

**Reuters**  
Detroit

**R**ed Bull are hopeful four-times world champion Max Verstappen will have a good enough engine behind him to get back in front as Formula One enters a new era.

The Dutch driver lost the title to McLaren's Lando Norris last season and returns with Ford-backed Red Bull producing their own power unit for the first time and the sport facing its biggest technical overhaul in decades.

While ex-partners Honda have joined Aston Martin, Red Bull are taking on Ferrari and Mercedes as constructors of both chassis and engine.

There has been plenty of speculation about how competitive an

engine Verstappen will have but Red Bull Ford Powertrains boss Ben Hodgkinson played down some of that concern ahead of yesterday's livery launch in Detroit.

"Everything I do has got to be backed up by the belief I can do it," the former Mercedes man told British reporters when asked if he could give Verstappen what he needed. "I don't think you belong in this industry if you don't believe that. So it's clearly the target."

"But I think if you show me a confident engineer, I'll show you one that's about to lose. You can never underestimate where everybody is. You always have to assume you're behind so that you always push to the absolute maximum."

"Look, it's going to be an interesting season."

Hodgkinson was confident Red Bull had an incredible team of peo-

ple, many hired from Mercedes, and the Milton Keynes factory was a benchmark.

That said, Red Bull remained engine newcomers and had to build facilities while rivals could focus purely on producing a powertrain.

"I think we started behind but I think the people and the facilities we've got are better than everybody else," said Hodgkinson, who spent 20 years at Mercedes before joining Red Bull four years ago.

"So watch this space. Will I have overtaken them by race one? I don't know."

Mercedes started the last engine era in 2014 with a dominant power unit and racked up a record eight constructors' titles in succession.

There has been talk of them again having an advantage but Hodgkinson suggested last year's runners-up, who have made over-

tures to Verstappen, had started that conversation at a time when their car was not performing.

"My gran used to say an empty can rattles the loudest," he said. "So I just want to get my head down and get on with it and we'll let the results do the talking."

The rumour mill has also suggested Mercedes and Red Bull, third last year, may have exploited a loophole in the new engine regulations through the thermal expansion of components to gain more power than Ferrari and Honda. Hodgkinson said the regulations were "super, super clear" and any F1 engineer who did not understand thermal expansion did not belong in the sport.

"There's a list of what you're allowed to do. So I don't really understand why everyone's so up in arms about it," he said.

## Verstappen motivated as Red Bull braces for F1 changes

**Detroit:** Four-time world champion Max Verstappen said he's keen to get to grips with the new car Red Bull unveiled yesterday for a 2026 Formula One season of massive change.

The team unveiled the livery for their new cars before a few hundred guests at Detroit's Michigan Central Station less than two months before the season opens in Melbourne on March 7.

New rules for 2026 see aerodynamic changes to make cars lighter and smaller along with modifications to engine specifications to make for a greater contribution from electric power in the hybrid units.

"There is a lot of unknown, there are big changes in the engine, in the car," Verstappen said. "Initially I'll take time to adjust during test days. The motivation is very high."

"It always takes a bit of time to get used to things," he added. "You need to understand where the most performance is to be found, get comfortable in the car. Also with the new engine now as well, that will take a bit of time."

Red Bull, which has previously relied on Honda engines, took the gamble in 2023 of developing its own engine for 2026 in partnership with automotive giant Ford, which will return to



Max Verstappen during the F1 car livery launch for Red Bull Racing.

## COMMENT

## Hadjar targets at least one Grand Prix win in 2026

**Reuters**  
Detroit

**H**adjar is dreaming big after landing the ultimate Formula One promotion to the Red Bull team, saying that his goal for 2026 was to win at least one race after replacing Yuki Tsunoda as Max Verstappen's teammate.

The 21-year-old Frenchman, who impressed with sister team Racing Bulls last season, said the reality had still not fully sunk in as he teams up with his idol who he watched win four championships with Red Bull.

"It's a bit unreal for me. I've always dreamed

of driving for this team as a kid watching TV. I saw (Sebastian) Vettel winning all those titles and now I'm finally in the big team," Hadjar said as Red Bull revealed their 2026 car livery in Detroit. A string of hopefuls have failed to match Verstappen's relentless pace in Formula One, with the Dutch driver set to start the 2026 season with his fourth different teammate since the last race of 2024.

Sergio Perez, Alex Albon, Pierre Gasly and Tsunoda have all fallen by the wayside but the transition for Hadjar should prove smoother than most having spent years climbing through Red Bull's development ranks.

"The Red Bull family have been in it for a cou-

ple of years now since I signed up in the program as a kid. So it's not fully new to me," Hadjar said.

"I'm lucky enough not to have to meet everyone the first time, there are familiar faces, also a couple of mechanics. I started to work quite early in the season to make sure I'm fully adapted and fully in the rhythm." As for his 2026 goals having secured a podium with third place in the Dutch Grand Prix in his rookie season, Hadjar said: "A race win would be good, at least."

The 2026 season marks the start of a new engine era with an overhaul of the technical regulations and Verstappen, who lost the 2025 title to McLaren's Lando Norris by two points, said drivers would need time to get used to them.

F1 22 years after its departure. Verstappen's run of four straight world titles ended in 2025 as McLaren's Lando Norris claimed the prize. But despite an inferior car the Dutch driver battled back from a massive deficit in the standings to challenge for the title, snatching eight wins - more than either Norris or teammate Oscar Piastri.

This year Verstappen will be joined by French driver Isack Hadjar, promoted to the team's Number 2 seat after a successful rookie season with Racing Bulls.

Hadjar was also on hand for the splashy big reveal, as was Red Bull boss Laurent Mekies, who said the sweeping regulatory changes and a new engine would make for a steep learning curve.

"I think it would simply be naive of us to think we could build our engine from scratch... and be more competitive right from the start than people who've been doing it for 95 years," he said.

## GOLF

## Erratic McIlroy slips off Dubai Invitational lead in 2nd round

**AFP**  
Dubai

**R**ory McIlroy endured a tricky second day at the Dubai Invitational yesterday as he posted a three-over round of 74 to slip off the top of the leaderboard.

The reigning Masters champion found the water four times on a tough day as he made only two birdies, following on from his fine first-round 66 on Thursday.

McIlroy, 36, is targeting his eighth professional title in Dubai after four Dubai Desert Classic victories and three wins in the European Tour's Tour Championship.

But now with the Northern Irishman on two-under at the halfway point, Republic of Ireland's Shane Lowry and Spaniard Nacho Elvira sit joint-first, three shots ahead of him.



Rory McIlroy in action during the second round of the Dubai Invitational golf tournament yesterday.

"Very happy. It was hard. It was tricky," Lowry said after the day's play.

"If I play golf like that for the rest of the season in that frame of mind, I'll be pretty good," he added.

On a windy day at Dubai Creek, eagles were at a premium, however, American Rygg Johnston overcame the conditions to sink a hole-in-one at the 218-yard par three eighth hole.

The American used a six iron at the 218-yard par three for the ace, and was rewarded with 1,000,000 World of Hyatt Loyalty Program Bonus Points after being the first professional to achieve the feat.

It was the fourth hole-in-one of the season.

## CRICKET

## India's Sundar ruled out of NZ T20I series due to side strain ahead of the World Cup

**Reuters**  
New Delhi

**W**ashington Sundar has been ruled out of India's five-match Twenty20 international series against New Zealand, the country's cricket board (BCCI) said yesterday, with the all-rounder facing a race against time to be fit for their World Cup title defence.

Sundar complained of rib discomfort while bowling in a one-day international against New Zealand last week and was subsequently ruled out of the ODI

series. "Washington Sundar underwent scans after reporting an acute onset discomfort in his lower rib area while bowling during the first ODI...," the BCCI added.

"This was followed by an in-person consultation with an expert. He has been diagnosed with a side strain and has been advised rest for a few days, following which he will report to the BCCI Centre of Excellence for further management of his injury."

"The men's selection committee has named Ravi Bishnoi as his replacement. The men's selection committee has also added Shreyas Iyer to the T20I squad for

the first three matches as a replacement for the injured Tilak Varma," the statement added.

Spin-bowling all-rounder Sundar was named as part of a 15-man squad for the World Cup last month.

The January 21-31 series against New Zealand is a key part of India's preparations for the biennial tournament, which begins on February 7 and will be co-hosted by India and Sri Lanka.

India are in Group A of the World Cup. They play their first match against the United States on February 7, before taking on Namibia, Pakistan and the Netherlands.

## SWIMMING

## McIntosh, Marchand grab wins in Austin

**AFP**  
Los Angeles, United States

**O**lympic swim stars Summer McIntosh and Leon Marchand cruised to 200m individual medley victories as US great Katie Ledecky impressed again on the second day of the Pro Swim Series in Austin, Texas, yesterday.

Canada's McIntosh, winner of three gold medals at the Paris Olympics and four titles at last year's World Championships in Singapore, opened her night by cruising to victory in the 200m individual medley in 2min 08.48sec.

The 19-year-old didn't approach her world record of 2:05.70, but she was 5.25sec faster than runner-up Cyrielle Duhamel of France.

McIntosh, now training with Marchand and under Michael Phelps mentor Bob Bowman in Austin, also bagged a silver,



finishing second in the 100m butterfly won by American Regan Smith in 56.18.

Ledecky, a nine-time Olympic gold medalist still going strong at 28, cruised to a victory in the 400m free in 4:00.54 - 6.83sec ahead of fellow American Claire Weinstien.

Ledecky's victory - made a bit easier by world record-holder McIntosh's decision to skip the event this week - followed her superb win in the 1500m free on Wednesday in the second-fastest time in history.

France's Maxime Groussset won the men's 100m fly in 50.95sec. Caeleb Dressel, who set the world record back in 2021, was second in 51.62 with France's Clement Sechi third in 52.45.

Serbia's Andrej Barna clocked 21.77 to edge Groussset in the 50m free, Groussset taking second in 21.82 and world bronze medalist Jack Alexey of the United States third in 21.92.

## TENNIS

# Players welcome Slam prize money boost but want more

Gauff, Sabalenka say continued progress needed as Zverev urges better cohesion among stakeholders

Reuters  
Melbourne

The Australian Open will offer a record A\$111.5mn (\$74.73mn) in prize money this year and while players welcomed the increase, top names like Coco Gauff and Aryna Sabalenka said the push for a bigger payout must continue across the Grand Slams. The world's top players wrote a letter to the Grand Slams calling for significant improvements in prize money in April last year.

The French Open (\$65.42mn) and Wimbledon (\$71.60mn) boosted their prize pots last year, although they still fell short of the US Open's purse (\$90mn).

Twice Grand Slam champion Gauff said the Australian Open's increase was a positive step but more could be done considering the tournament's revenue, which the *Australian Financial Review* reported was \$467.33mn last year.

"The percentage of revenue comparison, is still not where we would like it," Gauff told reporters yesterday.

"There's still further conversations that have to be had, not just with the Australian Open but with all Grand Slams. We have player representatives that have been working hard to do that a lot for us because we can't do it, be in person as often.

"From my last update, the collective feeling is that 'yes, there's been progress', but I think it's not where we would like to see it."

World number one Sabalenka echoed Gauff's view but said at least the Grand Slams were lis-



Venus Williams of the US prepares to serve during a practice session in Melbourne ahead of the Australian Open yesterday. (AFP)

tening to the players. "I hope one day we'll get to a happy place for everyone," she added. The sport's governing bodies are also facing a lawsuit filed by advocacy group the Professional Tennis Players' Association which, though no longer associated with co-founder Novak Djokovic, is pushing for better pay and improved welfare.

Reigning Australian Open champion Madison Keys said she was completely in favour of players being supported better by the Grand Slams.

"It's really important. We give a lot of ourselves to this sport," Keys

said. "They, being the highest revenue holders, it absolutely makes sense. As we're the product, it makes sense for us to be partners. It's been the most productive conversations we've had, which leads me to be cautiously optimistic for the future."

The French Open said when it received the letter last year it was committed to working with players and stakeholders to develop tennis responsibly and collectively, while the US Open welcomed open and direct conversations with players.

Men's world number three Alexander Zverev said there had to be

better cohesion among the sport's stakeholders.

"It's very difficult to get them in one room and talk about what is good for the future of tennis really," he added.

"Maybe it's a question towards those guys more than players, because we're just bystanders. We're playing the matches. We're playing the tours. When we try to get into the politics, we don't really have that much of a voice in it."

"Most of the time, it's a lot of investment time-wise from our side but not a lot of results which is sometimes upsetting."

## SWIATEK BLOCKS OUT CAREER SLAM CHATTER

Melbourne: Poland's Iga

Swiatek has dismissed suggestions the career slam is driving her Australian Open campaign this year, with the world number two saying yesterday that she tries to block out outside noise and focus only on "grinding match by match".

A six-times major winner with titles at the French Open, Wimbledon and the US Open, Swiatek

has yet to clear the semi-final hurdle at Melbourne Park.

Although the 24-year-old acknowledged the milestone would be special, she refused to make it her primary focus.

"Honestly, since the beginning of the year, there are many people coming to me and talking to me about it. I'm really just focusing on day-by-day work. This is how it's always been for me," Swiatek

want to be surprised after every match."

Swiatek had mixed performances at the United Cup, where she lost her singles matches in the semi-finals and final, but Poland still managed to win the trophy for the first

time after they beat Switzerland in the title clash. "The Sydney matches weren't the smoothest ones. It wasn't an easy start.

I think I still need to work on some stuff. I could play better," she said. "Overall I think it's also going to be about the mentality and if I'm going to be able to go on court and just enjoy playing and give this extra energy. It's not something I can describe, but just bring the intensity, be there every point and not really care if I'm going to make some mistakes or something will not work. Just go forward and try to push."

Swiatek is on a collision course with twice champion Naomi Osaka while the big-hitting Elena Rybakina could block her path to the title, but the second seed said she did not want any spoilers about who her potential opponents could be.

"I'm not looking at the draw, so thanks for the heads-up. No, it's not a joke. I'm literally not doing that," said Swiatek, who faces China's Yuan Yue in the first round.

"So please don't spoil it for me. I

want to be surprised after every match."

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time after they beat Switzerland in the title clash. "The Sydney

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something will not work. Just go

forward and try to push."

## BOXING

## Former world champ Joshua back in gym after horror crash

AFP  
London

Anthony Joshua has returned to the gym for "mental strength therapy", just weeks after a car crash which killed two of the former world heavyweight champion's close friends.

The British fighter was a passenger in a Lexus SUV that collided with a stationary truck on a busy highway linking Lagos and Ibadan in Nigeria on December 29.

Joshua's backroom team members Latif Ayodele and Sina Ghami died in the crash, while the boxer sustained minor injuries.

Although his promoter warned he could be out of action for some time, the boxer shared online footage of himself hitting pads with a trainer on Thursday.

Joshua captioned the clip, which he posted on Instagram, "Mental Strength Therapy".

The crash sparked speculation as to whether Joshua will box again, but promoter Eddie Hearn said Wednesday: "That is not a conversation that anyone is comfortable having... When the time is right, I believe he will make his decision and you will hear it from him."

## SPOTLIGHT

## Motivated Medvedev desperate for Grand Slam gains after 2025 wipe-out



Russia's Daniil Medvedev during practice in Melbourne. (Reuters)

Reuters  
Melbourne

Tennis was denied one of its most watchable characters for much of 2025 as Daniil Medvedev put in a shocker of a season but the enigmatic Russian heads into the Australian Open with a welcome burst of form.

Having ended an 882-day wait for a title in Almaty in October, the former world number one hoisted the Brisbane International trophy on Sunday in a boost before the year's first Grand Slam.

The resurgence has been driven by a new coaching setup led by the 2002 Australian Open champion Thomas Johansson and Australian Rohan Goetzke, who chips in part time.

Medvedev turned to the duo after crashing

out of the US Open, his third first-round exit at the Grand Slams in succession.

That meant splitting with long-time coach Gilles Cervara, the Frenchman who guided Medvedev to the world number one ranking and the 2021 US Open title.

It was a tough call at the time for the Russian but one he feels was the right one.

"It was, of course, a big decision in my life with Gilles. It depends how we count, but like 11 or eight years fully together," he told reporters at Melbourne Park yesterday.

"In the end, (after the US Open) was the moment to do it, the turning point. It helped me a lot. I (have) loved working with Thomas and Rohan. We were first kind of, let's call it, on a trial period until the end of the season. But I love working with them. I do think they love working with me, so we decided to continue. Hopefully it can be a long one and a great one."

A motivated and fit Medvedev is good news for a men's tour which was reduced to a two-man show in 2025 as Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner won virtually everything on offer.

At his peak, Medvedev was giving the greats a run for their money, felling Novak Djokovic for his first and only major title at Flushing Meadows while riling up crowds with his on-court antics.

Many tennis fans will hope Medvedev can channel those glory days at Melbourne Park, where he has made three finals, the latest two years ago ending in bitter defeat to Sinner after taking the first two sets. At 29, Medvedev's career could be set for a revival as the rangy Russian is not getting carried away.

He said he had set himself only one goal - and a quirky one at that - to win an event twice. All 22 of his titles to date have been at different tournaments.



Switzerland's Stan Wawrinka during a press conference in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters)

time on his career began surfacing late last season. "End of last year, between October, November, December, I had things in my mind," he said. "I wanted to keep going, that's for sure. I was happy playing. And I am still," he told reporters yesterday. "It was quite clear that next year should be my last year. It was not at all a hard decision. It was quite easy. I'm super

happy with this decision. I'm at peace with that."

Despite his age and a body that has endured multiple knee surgeries, Wawrinka slogged through nearly 30 ATP Challenger Tour matches and spent periods away from the main tour as his ranking drifted outside the top 150. He has started the season on a positive note, reaching the final of the team-

based United Cup for Switzerland, largely on the back of teammate Belinda Bencic's outstanding form. He said he would continue to grind as hard as his body would allow him in his 25th and final season. "I'm looking forward to the year," he said. "One year of tennis is a lot of tennis. I'm also happy to try to play this year by being still competitive, by playing well."

## PREMIER LEAGUE

# Carrick shutting out the background noise in interim job

Former midfielder faces a baptism of fire as United take on City

Reuters  
Manchester

**M**ichael Carrick said he is blanking out the background noise as he prepares for his second stint as Manchester United's interim manager with a derby against Manchester City today.

The former midfielder won five Premier League titles at Old Trafford as well as the Champions League, but returns with the club in a rut and struggling to revive the golden days. Carrick has been handed control for the rest of the season and his return has divided opinion, but all he is concerned about is salvaging something from the campaign. Former United teammate Gary Neville said Carrick should not be considered as a long-term option while Roy Keane said United should hire "the best of the best".

"They're (former players) not putting more pressure on me. I don't feel that. There are plenty of opinions around, some positive, some not too much," Carrick said. "It's totally irrelevant in terms of what I focus on. I know what we want to improve on, how we want to work with the players. There's a lot that can be said, it's the way of the world. I'm not gonna pay too much attention to that. For me, the players and staff it's a focus on how we're going to succeed. That's our job."

Carrick stepped up from assistant manager to spend 12 days as caretaker manager of United at the end of 2021 after the sacking of Ole Gunnar Solskjær and was undefeated in his three games, including a 3-2 victory over Arsenal.

He will have longer to get his ideas across this time but will need to hit the ground running with his first two games against City and Premier League leaders Arsenal. Last weekend's defeat by Brighton & Hove Albion in the FA Cup means United now only have the league to focus on and the target will be getting back into Europe. They are seventh in the standings after one win in their last six league games, but only three points off fourth-placed Liverpool.

"We want to be near the top. But we have to take some small steps toward that and European football would a step toward that," Carrick said. "I'm eager to succeed; it's a big and important job. Helping individuals is a big part of what I enjoy. I think if you improve the individuals, then you create a better team. And results. There is an element of performance, an element of improvement and doing what it



Michael Carrick won five Premier League titles at Manchester United as well as the Champions League, but returns with the club in a rut and struggling to revive the golden days.

takes to win in certain ways. We want to keep pushing and finish as high as we can."

#### MAN CITY'S GUARDIOLA WARY OF UNPREDICTABLE UNITED

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola said his focus was solely on his own team as he was unsure what to expect of Manchester United under new boss Michael Carrick today's Premier League derby. City, who are second and six points adrift of leaders Arsenal, picked up a dominant 3-0 win when the two sides met in September.

But Guardiola was still cautious about facing their familiar foes under a new leader, with only Carrick's time as Middlesbrough manager and a previous stint as United's caretaker boss to go on. "If you don't have more info of the opponent, you focus on yourself and the players," the Spaniard said. "You can have some ideas of what Middlesbrough has done or when Michael was in his part as a manager at Man United, but tactics is about the players and the players tomorrow are different to the Middlesbrough ones. I don't have a time-

out after 10 minutes to tell them what Michael wants to do. When you don't have info it's better to focus on yourself."

Since City appointed Guardiola in July 2016, United have had nine managers, including interim and caretaker appointees, with the local rivals standing in stark contrast in terms of on-field success. "Results, results," said Guardiola, when asked about his longevity at the club. "If you don't win, you are sacked. If we don't win, I would be sacked. We won a lot, that's why I am sitting here. There is no other secret."

Guardiola has added a haul of silverware to the City trophy cabinet including six Premier League titles, two FA Cups and a Champions League. He endured a difficult spell last season, however, when City finished third, a long way adrift of champions Liverpool.

Chief among Guardiola's challenges is City's injury-ridden defence. "Without John (Stones), Ruben (Dias), Josko (Gvardiol) we are in a difficult situation not for one game but a long period... Ruben will be back soon, Josko no, John hopefully, we'll see," Guardiola said.

to make his return after a six-month injury absence in today's Bundesliga match at RB Leipzig. Kompany said Musiala would be included in the squad "if everything goes well today in training".

The 22-year-old broke his leg against Paris Saint-Germain in the Club World Cup in July and has been making his way back, returning to team training in December. Bayern could also welcome back Germany captain Joshua Kimmich and Canada captain Alphonso Davies from injury.

## Van Nistelrooy to rejoin Dutch coaching team for World Cup

**T**he Hague: Former Manchester United and Dutch international striker Ruud van Nistelrooy will rejoin the Netherlands coaching staff in the run-up to the World Cup, the national association announced. The 49-year-old, who scored 35 goals in 70 caps for the Dutch, will be assistant to manager Ronald Koeman as the Oranje prepare their World Cup bid.

The Dutch sailed through their qualifying group unbeaten, the only blemish being draws home and away against Poland. Their

group opponents in the World Cup will be Japan, Tunisia and whoever gets through from Poland, Ukraine, Sweden, and Albania. At the 2022 edition, the Netherlands lost on penalties in the quarter-finals to Lionel Messi's Argentina after an ill-tempered encounter in Qatar.

#### MUSIALA SET FOR BAYERN RETURN AFTER SIX-MONTH ABSENCE

Bayern Munich coach Vincent Kompany confirmed midfielder Jamal Musiala was set

to make his return after a six-month injury absence in today's Bundesliga match at RB Leipzig. Kompany said Musiala would be included in the squad "if everything goes well today in training".

The 22-year-old broke his leg against Paris Saint-Germain in the Club World Cup in July and has been making his way back, returning to team training in December. Bayern could also welcome back Germany captain Joshua Kimmich and Canada captain Alphonso Davies from injury.

## Qatar beat Oman in Asian Handball opener



Qatar's handball team opened their Asian Championship campaign in emphatic fashion, cruising to a 27-15 victory over Oman in Group A of the 22nd Asian Men's Handball Championship in Kuwait. The reigning champions will next face South Korea on Tuesday, as they continue their bid for a place in the main round of the tournament, which runs until January 26 and serves as a qualifier for the 2027 World Handball Championship in Germany. The draw placed Qatar in Group A alongside South Korea and Oman. Group B features Bahrain, Iraq, China and Jordan, while Group C includes Kuwait, the UAE, Hong Kong and India. Group D consists of Japan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Australia. The top two teams from each group advance to the main round, where eight teams will be split into two groups and compete in a league format. The top two teams from each of those groups qualify for the semi-finals, in addition to securing direct qualification for the 2027 World Championship. Qatar are aiming to retain the Asian title they have claimed in the last six editions and to qualify for the World Championship for the eleventh time in their history. Their best finish on the global stage remains second place at the Qatar 2015 World Championship.

## LALIGA

# Coach Arbeloa calls on Bernabeu faithful to rally behind Real Madrid

Reuters  
Madrid

**N**ew Real Madrid coach Alvaro Arbeloa said he understood the hurt and disappointment felt by fans after a turbulent week but urged them to rally behind the team ahead of today's La Liga home match against relegation-threatened Levante.

Real suffered back-to-back set-backs, first losing 3-2 to Barcelona in Sunday's Spanish Super Cup final, then crashing out of the Copa del Rey on Wednesday after a 3-2 defeat to second-tier Albacete, a result that also marked Arbeloa's first game in charge following the departure of Xabi Alonso. Real sit second with 45 points from 19 matches, four fewer than leaders Barcelona.

"I have a lot of respect for the opinion of the Bernabeu. I understand that the fans are hurt and disappointed, but I'm going to ask them to support their players," Arbeloa said. "Great achievements



Real Madrid's coach Alvaro Arbeloa (left) and forward Kylian Mbappe during a training session in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)

have been made when the Bernabeu has stood by its players. I'm going to ask them to stand by us, support us and hopefully this season will end the way we want it to."

Arbeloa, a two-time Champions League winner as a player for Real, said he would not change anything about the defeat at Albacete. "I understand that people are looking

for someone to blame, but I work to find solutions. When things aren't going well, it's because I need to help my players better," he added.

The 42-year-old also recounted a story he shared with the dressing room about the mindset required. "I told them a story in the dressing room about how it took me many years to win a European Cup. I was world champion, European champion, I had won a lot ... And when I finally won that European Cup..." the Spaniard said.

"I got on the bus and there was a teammate behind me who had been there for a year and he said to me: let's go for another one, shall we? I said to the dressing room: Do you know who he is? Your captain (Dani Carvajal), who was already thinking about another one. The past doesn't matter."

In a major boost, Arbeloa said forward Kylian Mbappe, La Liga's leading scorer this season with 18 goals, is fit and will rejoin the squad, having recovered from a sprain in his left knee.

However, winger Rodrygo will not be available.

## Al-Sharshani and al-Athba strike gold in mixed team skeet at Asian Shotgun Championship



Qatari shooters Reem al-Sharshani and Rashid Saleh al-Athba clinched the gold medal in the mixed team skeet event at the Asian Shotgun Championship Doha at Lusail Shooting Complex. After intense qualifying rounds, the Qatari duo delivered a strong performance in the final to secure first place with a score of 47 targets. South Korea's Jang Soo-hwang and Koki Jang claimed silver with 45 targets, while Kazakhstan's Eduard Yashchenko and Asim Ornbay took bronze with 39. This was al-Sharshani's third medal in the Championship, after having earlier won silver in the individual and team skeet events. Al-Athba had also won gold in the team event. The victory lifted Qatar's overall tally in the skeet competition to six medals, comprising three gold and three silver.

## SPOTLIGHT

# Slot 'happy' to welcome Salah back at Liverpool

AFP  
Liverpool



**A**rne Slot said he would welcome Mohamed Salah back at Liverpool even if he had 15 attackers as the Egypt forward nears a return from the Africa Cup of Nations.

Salah is set to play in Egypt's third-place play-off match against Nigeria in Morocco today. His impending return has been a major talking point after he took aim at Liverpool in an explosive interview early last month.

Slot accused the club of throwing him "under the bus" after he was benched for three games in a row and said he had no relationship with manager Slot. But he appeared as a substitute in a 2-0 Premier League win against Brighton on December 13, providing a assist, and Slot subsequently said the club had moved on from the furore.

Slot, whose fourth-placed team host struggling Burnley today, was asked at his pre-match press conference about Salah's return. "First of all, he needs to play another big game for Egypt on Saturday," said the Dutchman.

"And then he comes back to us, and I'm happy that he comes back. Mo has been so important for this club, for me, so I'm happy that he's back. Because even if I had 15 attackers I still would have been happy if he would have come back, but that's not our current situation. So I'm happy to have him back after an important game that he still has to play."

Slot refused to divulge the content of his conversations with Salah, 33, who joined Liverpool in 2017. "I think what happens between Mo and me on our phone or over here stays between the two of us," he said. "I don't think it's necessary for me to share all the private conversations I have either on the phone or here with any of my players."

Salah scored 29 league goals to win the Premier League Golden Boot last season as Liverpool romped to a 20th English league title, but has managed just four goals during the current campaign.

The Premier League champions' title defence collapsed with a run of six defeats in seven league matches starting in late September. But Slot has steadied the ship and the club are now unbeaten in 11 games in all competitions.