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# GULF TIMES SPORT



**AUSTRALIAN OPEN**

‘Centurion’ Djokovic romps to Melbourne win as Swiatek and Gauff advance

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## FOCUS

# Qatar to host elite football festival from March 26 to 31

A total of six matches will be played during the festival, headlined by the Finalissima on March 27

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Qatar will welcome some of the world's biggest football stars when it hosts the Qatar Football Festival from March 26 to 31, the Local Organising Committee for Football Events announced yesterday.

The festival will feature the Finalissima 2026 between Argentina and Spain, along with a series of high-profile international matches involving hosts Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Serbia. The fixtures will offer the teams a valuable opportunity to assess their readiness and fine-tune preparations ahead of the FIFA World Cup, scheduled to be held in the USA, Canada and Mexico from June 11 to July 19.

A total of six matches will be played during the festival, headlined by the Finalissima at the iconic Lusail Stadium on March 27. European champions Spain will face World and South American champions Argentina in a highly-anticipated clash that is set to bring together legendary Lionel Messi and teenage sensation Lamine Yamal for the first time.

The action begins on March 26, with Egypt taking on Saudi Arabia at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium, followed by Qatar's clash with Serbia at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium. On March 30, Egypt will meet Spain at Lusail Stadium, while Saudi Arabia face Serbia at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium. The festival will conclude on March 31 with hosts Qatar facing Argentina at Lusail Stadium.

With all matches scheduled during football governing body FIFA's designated international window, teams are expected to field their senior squads. In addition to



European champions Spain will face World and South American champions Argentina in a highly-anticipated Finalissima at Lusail Stadium on March 27.

Messi and Yamal, Liverpool forward Mohamed Salah and Manchester City's Omar Marmoush, who both play for Egypt, are among the star attractions expected to feature. The matches will be particularly important for hosts Qatar, who secured qualification for next year's World Cup through the Asian qualifiers for the first time in their history. It will mark Qatar's second appearance at the global showpiece, following their debut as hosts in 2022. The national team will be aiming to improve on their inaugural campaign, where they exited at the group stage having lost all three group stage matches.

### TICKETS ON SALE NEXT MONTH

Exclusive travel packages for international fans will be available from February 1 in partnership with Visit Qatar and Qatar Airways. Match tickets will go on sale from February 25, 2026 via roadtoqatar.qa. HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, LOC Chairman for Football Events, said: "We look forward to welcoming players and fans from around the world as we prepare to host the world's biggest football stars ahead of the FIFA World Cup. We are hon-

oured to open our doors once again to the global football community."

Sheikh Hamad added: "Hosting the Qatar Football Festival reflects our commitment to delivering world-class experiences and reaffirms Qatar's position as a trusted partner in global football."

Lusail Stadium holds a special place in world football history, having staged iconic moments at major tournaments, including the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and Qatar's Asian Cup triumph. The venue continues to strengthen its status as one of the sport's most prestigious landmarks and a stage for creating new footballing memories.

### SCHEDULE

**March 26:** Egypt vs Saudi Arabia at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium  
**March 26:** Qatar vs Serbia at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium  
**March 30:** Egypt vs Spain at Lusail Stadium  
**March 30:** Saudi Arabia vs Serbia at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium  
**March 31:** Qatar vs Argentina at Lusail Stadium

**QATAR FOOTBALL FESTIVAL**  
26-31 MARCH 2026

	<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	v	<b>Egypt</b>		
Ahmad bin Ali Stadium, Thursday 26 March					
	<b>Qatar</b>	v	<b>Serbia</b>		
Jassim bin Hamad Stadium, Thursday 26 March					
	<b>Argentina</b>	<b>FINALISSIMA QATAR 2026</b>		<b>Spain</b>	
Lusail Stadium, Friday 27 March					
	<b>Egypt</b>	v	<b>Spain</b>		
Lusail Stadium, Monday 30 March					
	<b>Serbia</b>	v	<b>Saudi Arabia</b>		
Jassim bin Hamad Stadium, Monday 30 March					
	<b>Qatar</b>	v	<b>Argentina</b>		
Lusail Stadium, Tuesday 31 March					

## FOOTBALL

# Senegal's Africa Cup of Nations win overshadowed by threat of sanctions

Reuters  
Rabat

Senegal might be celebrating their Africa Cup of Nations victory but will anxiously await possible sanctions for their walk-off during Sunday's final against Morocco.

African football's showpiece event was marred by most of the Senegal team walking off when, deep into injury time of normal play and with the match locked at 0-0, Morocco were awarded a spot-kick following a VAR check by referee Jean-Jacques Ndala for a challenge on Brahim Diaz. As a group of their enraged fans fought with Moroccan security personnel at the other end of the stadium, Senegal's players eventually returned to the pitch to see Diaz shoot a soft penalty into the arms of their goalkeeper Edouard Mendy.

Senegal went on to win the final with a brilliant goal from Pape Gueye in extra time, stunning the vast majority of the 66,526 fans at the Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat.

But their actions have been widely condemned, including by FIFA President Gianni Infantino and the Confederation of African Football. Senegal coach Pape Bouna Thiaw, who ordered his players off, and some of those who went to the changing room can expect to face disciplinary charges.

With a trip to the World Cup next for Senegal, they will be concerned the manager and key players could be suspended for matches at the finals in Canada, Mexico and the US in June. Senegal's opening two games against France and Norway are in New York.

Thiaw has expressed belated regret for his actions, although a chance to address the post-match press conference after Sunday's final was quickly ended when he was jeered by Moroccan journalists. But in a television interview, he said: "I don't want to dwell on the events of the match. In hindsight, I really shouldn't have told my players to come off. I apologise for the sake of football. After further consideration, I



Senegal players celebrate with the trophy after winning the Africa Cup of Nations at the Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat, Morocco. (AFP)

brought them back on. We know what happens behind the scenes," he added, referring to conspiracy theories around hosts Morocco being favoured by the referee.

"We can react in the heat of the moment, and we must also ask ourselves whether that was a penalty? Now, we accept the referee's mistakes; it can happen. We shouldn't have done it, but it's done. Now, we apologise to football."

CAF said it was reviewing footage and that disciplinary proceedings will follow, adding that it "condemns the unacceptable behaviour from some players and officials." "CAF is reviewing all footage and will refer the matter to competent bodies for appropriate action to be taken against those found guilty," African football's governing body said in a statement.

Morocco coach Walid Regragui was worried by the damage done globally to African football by the chaotic final. "The image we gave of African football was rather shameful. Having to stop the game for more than 10 minutes with the world watching is not very classy," he said.

Infantino's statement appeared to be designed to avoid criticising Senegal's former Liverpool star Sadio Mane, who remained on the pitch and urged his teammates to return to the game for the penalty. "We strongly condemn the behaviour of some 'supporters' as well as some Senegalese players and technical staff members," Infantino said. "It is unacceptable to leave the field of play in this manner, and equally, violence cannot be tolerated in our sport, it is simply not right."

## SPOTLIGHT

# Morocco's remorseful Diaz apologises for penalty miss in final

Reuters  
Rabat

Morocco's Brahim Diaz has apologised for his Panenka penalty miss that cost his country the Africa Cup of Nations title on Sunday, saying his "soul hurts" and he took responsibility for the 1-0 defeat by Senegal in the decider in Rabat.

Morocco were awarded a spot-kick in the 98th minute after Diaz was hauled to the ground by defender El Hadji Malick Diouf, an incident that sparked ugly scenes in the stands and on the pitch. It followed five minutes after a disallowed goal at the other end and the decision, made on Video Assistant Referee review, resulted in some Senegal players leaving the pitch in protest, encouraged by their coach Pape Bouna Thiaw.

It took over 14 minutes for calm to be restored and the game to resume, only for Diaz to inexplicably attempt a weak chipped penalty that was easily caught by goalkeeper Edouard Mendy. It proved one of the last actions before the game went to extra time and Senegal triumphed thanks to Pape Gueye's superb winner.

"Yesterday I failed, and I take full responsibility and apologise with all my heart," Diaz said via X. "It will be hard for me to recover because this wound does not heal easily, but I will try. Not for myself, but for all who believed in me and for all who suf-



fered with me. I will keep going until someday I can give back all this love and be a pride for my Moroccan people."

Diaz, 26, plays for Real Madrid having been born in Malaga and also won a cap for Spain before switching allegiances to Morocco in 2024. He finished as the leading scorer in the 2025 Cup of Nations after netting a goal in each of Morocco's first five games at the tournament.

Morocco's 50-year wait for the continental title will continue at least until the 2027 tournament. Named after Czech footballer Antonin Panenka, the style of spot-kick is one where the player gently chips the ball into the centre of the goal rather than powerfully to either side, hoping the keeper will commit to diving.



TABLE TENNIS

# Zhu Yuling and Zhou Qihao clinch Doha title wins

SECOND SUCCESSIVE TOURNAMENT GLORY FOR CHINA'S YULING AS QIHAO BEATS WEN RUIBO



The President of Qatar Table Tennis Association Hammad al-Hammadi with the men's singles finalists at the WTT Star Contender Doha 2026 at Lusail Sports Arena.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The 2026 table tennis season has a definitive queen, and her name is Zhu Yuling. In a stunning display of resilience at the Lusail Sports Arena, Zhu Yuling captured the WTT Star Contender Doha 2026 title, marking her second consecutive trophy at the venue in as many weeks.

The final appeared to be slipping away early as Japan's defensive specialist Hitomi Sato dismantled Zhu's rhythm, racing to a commanding 2-0 lead.

However, the momentum shifted violently in the third game as Zhu adjusted her tactics to pierce Sato's legendary defence. By clinching back-to-back championships in Doha, Zhu Yuling cements her status as the player to beat for the remainder of the 2026 tour.

Her ability to dismantle one of the world's best choppers after dropping the opening sets has sent a clear message to the rest of the field.

Zhu Yuling won 5-11, 11-13, 11-7, 11-6, 11-6, 11-5.

"Zhu is playing on another level right now. To go back-to-back in a field this deep is a statement of intent for the World Championships later this year," the WTT Broadcast Commentator said.

Picking up her first WTT Champions success in this very city just last week, Zhu is yet to taste defeat on WTT Series 2026, adding five more wins this week off the back of the five she picked up last week, making that 10 out of 10.

That perfect record very nearly came undone at the semi-final hurdle on Sunday, with Zhu pulling off a Match Point save to deny Satsuki Odo, and the final would prove equally as challenging.

Facing off against the unshakable defensive prowess of Sato, the Japanese star hadn't dropped a single game in the lead up to the final, and she looked to be well on her way to another outstanding victory, sweeping the opening two games of the title match.

But Zhu would eventually find the breakthrough she was looking for, hitting back in the third to get the ball rolling.



Ahmed Khalil al-Mohannadi, the secretary-general of Qatar Table Tennis Association, is seen with the women's singles finalists Zhu Yuling and Hitomi Sato.

The former World No.1 had cracked the code, and from that point on it was one-way traffic. Patiently waiting for her moment to strike, Zhu began to pick apart her opponent's defensive stance, chalking up four games on the bounce to deny Sato at the last.

**Memorable day for Zhou Qihao**

The Men's Singles honours ended up going Zhou Qihao's way, who laid claim to his first WTT Star Contender title, and his first WTT Series success since WTT Contender Lagos 2023.

His opponent in the final, Wen Ruibo, had impressed all week, signalling his intent with a stunning semi-final win over No.2 seed Hugo Calderano.

Despite starting the final brightly, the 19-year-old would ultimately fall short.

Zhou Qihao, a player who has been there and done it in finals before, lent on his experience to expertly navigate the occasion, staying grounded in the heat of battle to reach the finish line first (8-11, 11-9, 11-7, 11-7, 5-11, 11-8).

Earlier in the day, Wong Chun Ting and Doo Hoi Kem finally got

their hands on the WTT Series trophy that had eluded them for years, taking home the Mixed Doubles title in Doha.

One of the sport's longest running partnerships, combining forces for the first time well over a decade ago, Wong and Doo know everything there is to know about each other's game, and their vast experience would prove pivotal in deciding Sunday's title clash.

Weathering an early storm, the Hong Kong, China duo would find their mojo in game two and didn't look back from there, punishing Park Ganghyeon and Kim Nayeong who failed to take advantage at 7-9 up in the third before kicking on to finish the job in four (9-11, 11-8, 11-9, 11-5).

The focus of the international table tennis family shifts now to emerging stars with Youth Star Contender (Jan 23-25), showcasing the next generation of global talent.

After the next tournament, the Qatar series concludes with the Feeder event, providing 114 players a vital opportunity to earn ranking points and bridge the gap to the elite circuit (Jan 27-31).

### Qatar a world-class hub for top TT events, says al-Hammadi



The President of QTTA Hammad al-Hammadi (second right) and other dignitaries watch one of the games on the final day of WTT Star Contender Doha 2026 at Lusail Sports Arena.

**DOHA:** Stakeholders and sports fans around the world are applauding Qatar as a premier centre for top-tier table tennis events following the successful conclusion of the WTT Star Contender Doha 2026, this was said by Hamad Ahmed al-Hammadi, President of the Qatar Table Tennis Association (QTTA).

Al-Hammadi expressed his great satisfaction with the event, noting that its success reflects the prominent position Qatari table tennis has attained on the international stage.

In a statement following the final matches, al-Hammadi said: "We feel immense pride in the success of the Star Contender Championship, both in terms of organisation and the high level of competition, especially in the final rounds, which witnessed top-class matches between some of the world's best players. This confirms the International Table Tennis Federation's confidence in Qatar's organisational capabilities and reflects our status as a global destination for table tennis." The tournament reached its peak with a thrilling men's singles final that saw Zhou Qihao reclaim the top spot for China.

Al-Hammadi noted: "The finale was exceptional by all accounts, and the men's singles final was truly a fitting conclusion. We witnessed a top-level all-Chinese match between two of the game's most prominent stars, and the champion, Zhou Qihao, succeeded in bringing China back to the podium. This reflects the strength of the competition and confirms that Doha brings together the best of world table tennis."

The success was further validated by the leaders of the sport. Al-Hammadi mentioned said: "We received high praise from all delegations, guests, and VIPs, most notably the President of the International Table Tennis Federation, Petra Sorling, who commended the level of organisation and professionalism of the work, and affirmed that Qatar possesses exceptional capabilities that qualify it to host major international tournaments. These words are a testament we deeply value, and they motivate us to continue developing and excelling."

CRICKET

## Australia rest pacers Cummins and Hazlewood from Pakistan T20 series

Reuters  
Melbourne

Australia's Pat Cummins will be kept on ice until a few games into the Twenty20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka as selectors take a cautious approach with the pace veteran's recovery from a lower back injury.

Cummins returned to action during the third Ashes Test in Adelaide but missed the last two matches against England and will skip Australia's T20 warm-up matches against Pakistan.

Selectors' chief George Bailey confirmed that pace bowlers Josh Hazlewood, Nathan Ellis, all-rounder Glenn Maxwell and hard-hitting batter Tim David will also be rested from the three-match series against Pakistan in Lahore, which starts on January 29.

Hazlewood has been recovering from hamstring and Achilles problems while David has also been nursing a hamstring strain.

Bailey said that David had suffered a minor setback in his recovery last week but was expected to be fit for the start of the World Cup along with Hazlewood.

The tournament runs from February 7 to March 8.



Australia's Josh Hazlewood celebrates with Pat Cummins during a 2023 ICC World Cup match.

"Pat's a little bit different ... he'll probably join that World Cup group a little bit later in the tournament, around game three or four," Bailey told reporters yesterday.

Fast bowler Mahli Beardman and all-rounder Jack Edwards could make their international debuts after being included in a 17-man squad for the Pakistan series released yesterday.

"The series is a great opportunity for those on the brink of selection, and some young players we

rate highly, for valuable experience with the World Cup group in Pakistan," said Bailey.

**AUSTRALIA SQUAD FOR PAKISTAN TOUR:**

Mitchell Marsh (capt), Sean Abbott, Xavier Bartlett, Mahli Beardman, Cooper Connolly, Ben Dwarshuis, Jack Edwards, Cameron Green, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Matthew Kuhnemann, Mitch Owen, Josh Philippe, Matthew Renshaw, Matthew Short, Marcus Stoinis and Adam Zampa.

SPOTLIGHT

## Bangladesh face deadline over refusal to play World Cup matches

AFP  
New Delhi

Cricket's governing body has told Bangladesh to agree to play their matches at next month's T20 World Cup in India or risk being kicked out of the tournament, reports said yesterday.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) is refusing to play in India, citing security concerns, and have asked the governing International Cricket Council to shift their matches to co-hosts Sri Lanka.

The BCB held talks in Dhaka at the weekend with ICC officials over the impasse, but no agreement was reached.

"During the discussions, the BCB reiterated its formal request to the ICC to relocate Bangladesh's matches to Sri Lanka," a

BCB statement said. The ICC have not officially commented, but website *Cricinfo* and other Indian media reported yesterday that the deadline of Wednesday had been set for Dhaka to make a decision.

ICC sources have told AFP that Bangladesh could be replaced by Scotland, who are the highest-ranked team who did not qualify for the World Cup.

The T20 World Cup begins on February 7 with Bangladesh in England's Group C and scheduled to play all of their group matches in Kolkata and Mumbai. One suggestion was for Bangladesh to swap with Group B's Ireland, whose matches are in Sri Lanka.

"Among other points, the possibility of moving Bangladesh to a different group as a means of facilitating the matter with minimum logistical adjustments was discussed," said the BCB.

Pakistan will play all their matches in Colombo under an ICC agreement with India to play at neutral venues in global or regional tournaments.

The row erupted on January 3, when the IPL's Kolkata Knight Riders were ordered by India's cricket board to drop Bangladesh fast bowler Mustafizur Rahman, sparking fury in Dhaka.

Political relations between India and Bangladesh soured after a mass uprising in Dhaka in 2024 toppled then-prime minister Sheikh Hasina, a close ally of New Delhi. India's foreign ministry last month condemned what it called "unremitting hostility against minorities" in Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's interim leader, Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, has accused India of exaggerating the scale of the violence.

### Afghanistan beat West Indies in first T20I



Afghanistan captain Rashid Khan (left) celebrates with bowler Noor Ahmad during their T20I against West Indies in Dubai yesterday. Batting first, Afghanistan scored 181/3 in their 20 overs and then restricted to 143/9 to win the match by 38 runs. The next T20I of the series is tomorrow.

### Watson critical of LIV Golf's format change, reduces 'chaos'

**New York:** Bubba Watson prefers tighter, more chaotic finishes to golf tournaments, so he's against LIV Golf's move from 54 to 72 holes for every event this upcoming season.

Watson, a two-time Masters champion, argued in a recent interview against the format change announced in November. The captain of LIV's Range-GoatsGC team told *Mirror US Sports* that more holes means a greater likelihood of a runaway winner and less interest for fans.

"I think we should go three days," said Watson. "And there's a reason why. I think with the sprint, everyone stays together. When you go four days, you're going to have some more spread-out leaders, and it just kind of takes away your last round, right?"

"When everybody's close battling, it puts more people in the mix on a Sunday or the last round on a Saturday, whichever tournament you're at, and so that just makes it better for the fans when there's chaos happening."

While 54 holes was an initial distinction of the upstart LIV tour from its rival PGA Tour - and the number is embedded in its very name in Roman numerals - expanding to 72 holes could better serve the players. The Official World Golf Ranking does not recognise LIV results in calculating points, resulting in its tour players losing status and having greater difficulty qualifying for major championships. Watson, 47, is critical of the decision but supportive of five-time major champion Brooks Koepka's recent defection from LIV Golf and reinstatement to the PGA Tour for 2026 under its Returning Member Program.

"The league's in a great spot," Watson said. "One person's not going to dictate what the league's doing. The beauty is, though, now (Koepka) gets to spend more time with his family, that's what he wants," he continued. "And so that's good, that's great for him. As a friend, I hope he has a great time. It's great that he's still playing professional golf. LIV has always been about pathways to play other tours, so it's great."

RangeGoats GC re-signed Ben Campbell, Peter Uihlein and Matthew Wolff earlier this month, ensuring Watson's team will remain intact for the upcoming LIV Golf season.

The quartet combined to finish 10th in the 2025 team championship standings as Watson settled at No. 11 in the individual points race. Campbell was the circuit's No. 36 golfer in 2025, Uihlein placed No. 38 and Wolff, who missed two events with a back injury, was No. 42. Watson achieved RangeGoats' best performance in 2025 with his runner-up finish at LIV Golf United Kingdom. A 12-time PGA Tour winner, Watson was the Masters champion in 2012 and 2014 and defected to LIV as a non-playing team captain when the rival tour materialised in 2022. He returned to the course in the 2023 season. The new LIV campaign opens Feb 4-7 at Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.



AUSTRALIAN OPEN

# ‘Centurion’ Djokovic and Swiatek in second round

TITLE CHALLENGER GAUFF ALSO ADVANCES, CANADIAN AUGER-ALIASSIME EXITS AFTER CRAMPING UP

Reuters  
Melbourne

Novak Djokovic safely negotiated the first hurdle in his quest for a 25th Grand Slam title at the Australian Open yesterday as women's title challengers Iga Swiatek and Coco Gauff also eased into the second round on day two of the championships.

There were straightforward victories for Daniil Medvedev, local hope Alex De Minaur as well as top Americans Amanda Anisimova and Jessica Pegula in front of another bumper crowd of 100,763 fans at Melbourne Park.

Djokovic was last out on the Rod Laver Arena showcourt where he has won 10 of his major titles and ensured there would be no late finish with a vintage 6-3 6-2 6-2 victory over Pedro Martinez.

Martinez was eight years old back in 2006 when Djokovic last lost in the opening round of a Grand Slam and the Spaniard was unable to put sufficient pressure on the Serbian fourth seed to earn more than sympathetic applause for holding his serve.

“What can I say? I like the sound of it. Centurion is pretty nice,” Djokovic said after sealing his 100th Australian Open win in his first tour-level match since November.

“It always feels good at the beginning of the tournament. Let's see how I progress. Tonight's performance was definitely great, I cannot complain about anything ... let's hope for the best.”

Djokovic, 38, was not the only member of the men's old guard to



Serbia's Novak Djokovic hits a return to Spain's Pedro Martinez during their Australian Open match in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

progress with 2014 champion Stan Wawrinka, 40, and 37-year-old Marin Cilic, who won the US Open in the same year, also rolling back the years with first-round victories.

“I know I'm not as good as I was before,” wildcard Wawrinka said after kicking off his final season of Grand Slam tennis with a four-set win over Laslo Djere. “That's normal. I'm getting old. But I'm still happy with what I'm doing, always trying to push my own limit, always trying to be better.”

## SWIATEK BATTLES INTO SECOND ROUND

Even with six Grand Slam titles already in the bag, Swiatek is probably nearer the start than the end of her career and she opened her bid for a first Australian Open crown with a 7-6(5) 6-3 win over Chinese qualifier Yuan Yue. The 24-year-old Pole was far from convincing, however, particularly in the opening set as an inspired Yuan overwhelmed her at times with a relentlessly aggressive game.

“I guess there were some moments where I felt great, but the start of the match wasn't that perfect,” said the second seed.

“I'm happy that I worked through this and could finish in two sets.”

Gauff is also bidding for a maiden title in Melbourne and looked every bit the Grand Slam champion as she thumped Kamilla Rakhimova 6-2 6-3 in the first match of the day on the main showcourt.

Anisimova, who downed Simo-



Iga Swiatek reacts after winning a point against Yuan Yue yesterday. (AFP)

na Waltert 6-3 6-2, and Pegula, a 6-2 6-1 winner over Anastasia Zakharova, also wasted little time in breezing into the second round in the vanguard of a strong American challenge in the women's draw this year. Their compatriot Madison Keys begins her title defence along with men's champion Jannik Sinner today.

After record crowds crammed into Melbourne Park on the opening day on Sunday, the venue was heaving again yesterday as fans streamed through the gates under cloudy skies.

It was still steamy during the day, however, and seventh seed Felix Auger-Aliassime retired with severe cramp after falling 3-6 6-4 6-4 behind to Portugal's Nuno Borges.

“I want to be on the court competing with my opponent,” said the Canadian, who reached the US Open semi-finals last year.

“I don't want to be just standing

there, you know, like a punching bag. So there's no point.”

Three-times finalist and former world number one Medvedev may have been quietly cheering at Auger-Aliassime's exit as he could well have met the Canadian in the fourth round.

After three consecutive first-round exits at the Grand Slams, the Russian was relieved to pass a 7-5 6-2 7-6(2) test against Jesper de Jong at Margaret Court Arena.

Originally drawn to play injured former Wimbledon finalist Matteo Berrettini, sixth-seeded Australian De Minaur instead faced lucky loser Mackenzie McDonald and thrashed the American 6-2 6-3 6-3.

Frenchman Alexandre Muller later denied fans more local success to cheer when he outlasted Alexei Popyrin in the sort of marathon five-setter that turns John Cain Arena into a bear pit in the early rounds at Melbourne Park.

## SPOTLIGHT

# Trailblazer Eala exits after ‘overwhelming’ scenes in Melbourne

AFP  
Melbourne

Packed crowds turned out to see Alexandra Eala at the Australian Open yesterday but the Philippines trailblazer was unable to deliver for her adoring fans in a first-round defeat, admitting it was “a bit overwhelming”.

The 20-year-old was playing in the main draw at Melbourne Park for the first time and even practice sessions were mobbed by large numbers of her followers. She stormed to the first set against Alycia Parks in front of a full house at the intimate court six. But the lower-ranked American fought back in front of the fiercely pro-Eala crowd to win 0-6, 6-3, 6-2.

The umpire had to repeatedly call for spectators to quieten down as they tried, unsuccessfully, to will Eala to victory. Hundreds more Philippines fans watched on nearby big screens and waved their national flag.

Chants of “let's go Alexandra” frequently rang out, then hush descended when her American opponent sealed the match.

Eala was rushed from the court afterwards surrounded by as many as a dozen security guards. “It was so heart-warming,” she said of the hero's welcome she received all week.

“That's one of the things that makes a loss like today a little bit

harder – I know a lot of people were rooting for me.”

Eala, who has put Philippines tennis on the map, admitted however that some of the attention had been too much.

“It's a process to take it all in. I think this week definitely there were elements that were a bit overwhelming, especially during my practices,” she said. “I didn't expect that many people to be there. So it's a learning process.”

The 49th-ranked Eala has risen fast in the past 12 months.

She trains at the Rafael Nadal Academy in Mallorca and broke into the top 100 last year following her shock run to the semi-finals in Miami, where she beat world number two Iga Swiatek.

In August at the US Open, she carved out a piece of tennis history, becoming the first player from the Philippines to win a Grand Slam singles match.

“I'm still young, so learning how to deal with all of this attention, but then at the same time being grateful,” Eala said after her loss to the 99th-ranked Parks. Although disappointed, Eala said just being at the first major of the year was significant for her nation. “I guess this is one of the moments that I can reflect on what this means for Philippine tennis,” she said.

“I'm the only Filipina in the draw this year. I'm the only Filipina that's ever been in the draw, I think. So there are positives to take away.”



Alexandra Eala hits a return to Alycia Parks during their Australian Open match in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

## FOOTBALL

AFP  
Leipzig, Germany

Despite leaving Liverpool as one of the most highly regarded coaches in world football in 2024, Jurgen Klopp said he never thought of himself as among the game's best.

“I never considered myself a world-class coach,” Klopp told AFP and other media in an interview in Leipzig, “because I still had so many questions when I finished. I was like ‘how can I be world class with these questions still?’”

After starting out at Mainz, where he took the club to the top flight for the first time, Klopp moved to Dortmund, where he won two Bundesliga titles and reached the 2013 Champions League final. After signing with Liverpool in 2015, Klopp's Reds won every trophy on offer, including Champions League and Premier League.

In his new role as Red Bull's global head of football, where he oversees a multi-club structure with teams including RB Leipzig, New York Red Bulls and Paris FC, Klopp said that he wants to help coaches answer those questions.

“My role with the coaches is to be the guy I never had. I sat in my office very, very, very often, very, very, very alone. A lot of people gave me advice and have great ideas... It's great to have ideas, but it's really not that easy to make the final decision. I want to be in moments when I know they are alone, or feel alone. I want to be there.”

Klopp oversaw the firing of then-Leipzig coach Marco Rose, a long-time friend, in 2025 and said that being on the other side felt odd. “Grave-digger of the coaches – that's a title I never wanted to win!”

From taking Mainz to the Bundesliga to breaking Liverpool's



Premier League drought, Klopp improved clubs and players wherever he went. Often taking over with teams at a low ebb, the coach would try and put things in perspective. “How did I start a game? I would say ‘the worst news is you can lose it’ – so let's try and win it... Do not try to avoid defeat – try to win.”

The coach said he told his players: “Giving your all doesn't mean you will get anything, but it's your only chance to get something. That's pretty much how you do it. We gave everything – and sometimes we got something.”

Klopp said media and fans were too focused on results. “I never watch the goals back, because I want to understand the game to the left and the right of the result. I want to understand why it happened... Results are the result of the performance. So we worked on

the performance and the results came later.” He said he “didn't take any pride” out of trophy ceremonies and parades. “I love being a part of it, not in the middle of it. You might see pictures where someone gave me a trophy and I'd take it, but I didn't need to touch it. For me, it was the journey that I loved. That gave me much more than the moment.”

Klopp retains cult-like status at his former clubs, with fans remembering the German for his sideline antics and everyman appeal as much as his successes. RB Leipzig sporting director Marcel Schaefer told AFP that Klopp has brought the same presence into his new role, even if he is no longer on the sideline.

“He has something that is unique. He has a god-given talent which everyone knows from his

coaching jobs. He can catch people in five to 10 minutes.”

Schaefer said Klopp plays an important role in player recruitment by “talking to families, talking to players about our vision, about our project. “You know if Jurgen Klopp is in the room.”

Since stepping down at Anfield, Klopp has been linked to an array of high-profile coaching jobs, but he said that a return to the dug-out is unlikely. “I don't expect to change my mind, but I don't know.

“We're building a house right now and my missus wanted to have a really big trophy room. There was another small room and I said ‘this is enough, because we know how many trophies we have, we will not add any’. “It might sound arrogant, but I know I can coach a football team. But I don't need to do it until my last day.”

## YOUNG STAR ZHENG MAY HAVE TO GIVE BACK PRIZE MONEY

American rising star Michael Zheng faces the prospect of giving back his Australian Open prize money as a college student, but is hoping a concession can be made. The 21-year-old, who is yet to turn professional, came through qualifying at Melbourne Park before stunning former quarter-finalist Sebastian Korda in a first round five-set thriller. His exploits have so far

earned him at least Aus\$225,000 (\$150,000), which will soar to Aus\$327,750 should he beat 32nd seed Corentin Moutet in the second round. But US college tennis rules state that he can only earn a maximum of \$10,000 in prize money from tournaments per year. “I still have one more semester at Columbia (University), which I do intend to finish. So whenever my

run here is done, I'm going back to school,” said Zheng, a senior psychology major. “But, yeah, I'll talk to our head coach and try to figure out what's the deal with the prize money, if I'm allowed to take it or not. I'll try to figure that out after the tournament is over, I think. I've heard rumours I'm allowed to take it, because it's my senior spring,” he added.



QSL CUP

# Umm Salal beat Duhail, Arabi smash five past Sadd

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Umm Salal secured an easy 3-0 win over Al Duhail at Grand Hamad Stadium in the tenth round of the QSL Cup.

Ali Hassan opened the scoring in the 25th minute before Spaniard Cristo Perez doubled the lead in the 37th. Khalid Sheikh sealed the win with a late goal in the 87th minute. The victory lifted Umm Salal to 20 points, while Al Duhail remained on nine.

Earlier, Al Arabi produced a dominant display to defeat Al Sadd 5-0 at Al Khor Stadium.

Al Arabi led 4-0 at the break through goals from Carl Toko in the fourth minute, Javi Hernandez in the 19th, Salem Reda in the 23rd and Mohammed Khaleed in the 35th. Joao Pedro added the fifth after the interval.

The QSL Cup fixtures were played during the league break, with Qatari clubs engaged in Super Cup matches against the UAE opposition. Al Sadd fielded a largely second-string side, including Hassan al-Haydos, goalkeeper Saad al-Dosari and striker Rafa Mojica, while Al Arabi coach Cosmin Contra rotated his squad and handed minutes to several reserves.



Al Arabi produced a dominant display to defeat Al Sadd 5-0 at Al Khor Stadium, while Umm Salal secured an easy 3-0 win over Al Duhail at Grand Hamad Stadium.



Meanwhile, Qatar SC secured a 3-2 victory over Al Gharafa at Hamad Bin Khalifa Stadium. Qatar SC raced into a 3-0 first-half lead through Sebastian Soria, Jan Matthews and Abdul Rashid Ibrahim. Al Gharafa responded after the break with

goals from Rabah Boussafi and Ibrahim Thamer, but fell short.

The win lifted Qatar SC to 13 points and into the next stage, where they will compete for a place in the quarter-finals. Al Gharafa finished bottom with five points

and were eliminated.

At Al Shamal Stadium, Al Sailiya edged Al Ahli 2-1 in another clash. Youssef Zaid and Mohammed Estadi found the net for Al Sailiya, while Younes Hussein pulled one back for Al Ahli from the penalty spot.

Al Sailiya moved up to 18 points, while Al Ahli stayed fifteenth with nine.

Both sides remain in contention to reach the next phase, which brings together teams ranked from third to fourteenth, with six advancing to the quarter-finals.

SPOTLIGHT

# Mbappe calls on Real fans to back Vinicius

Tensions at the Santiago Bernabeu reached boiling point during win over Levante

Reuters  
Madrid

Kylian Mbappe has urged Real Madrid fans to refrain from singling out Vinicius Jr for the club's woes, insisting the blame for their stuttering form rests on the entire team.

The France forward appealed for unity ahead of Real's Champions League clash at home to Monaco today, after tensions at the Santiago Bernabeu reached boiling point during Saturday's 2-0 La Liga victory over Levante. "I understand the fans because we're not doing things right," Mbappe said.

"What I didn't like was that if they boo, they should boo the whole team. You shouldn't single out one player. It's not Vini's fault that we're playing the way we are now. That's all I have to say: don't go after one player. It's our collective fault, and we have the character to change that on the pitch."

Despite Saturday's La Liga win, which saw second-placed Real move within a point of Barcelona, who lost at Real Sociedad on Sunday, frustration spilled over at the Bernabeu, with the fans directing their anger at several players, including Vinicius. The Brazil winger was jeered throughout the match and particularly targeted during the starting lineup announcements, with heavy boos resonating in the stadium.

The unrest follows a turbulent period for the 15-times European champions. Their defeat by Barca in the Spanish Super Cup final this month, coupled with a shock 3-2 Copa del Rey exit at second-division side Albacete, has left fans disillusioned.

The dismissal of manager Xabi Alonso last week, seven months into his tenure, has further fuelled tensions.

Reports of internal discord, including clashes between the coach and Vinicius, cast a shadow over Real's beleaguered campaign and Alonso's exit.

Saturday's scenes painted a picture of strain and vulnerability. Broadcast footage showed a visibly emotional Vinicius sitting



Real Madrid's Kylian Mbappe (centre) trains with teammates on the eve of the Champions League match against Monaco. (AFP)

on the stairs leading to the pitch, clearly affected after hearing boos during the lineup announcement. Mbappe, who was seen comforting the 23-year-old winger before the game, emphasised the importance of providing a supportive environment for Vinicius.

"Vini, like you, like her, like everyone else, he's a human being," Mbappe said. "He's an unbelievable talent, a great guy, and I'm fortunate to know him. We all need

to protect him better. He's not alone at Real Madrid, and we're all with him. When he's at his best, he's one of the best players in the world. My job is to support him, look after him. When he's happy, he's a difference-maker, and that should be our collective focus."

Levante's visit to the Bernabeu might have secured three points for Los Blancos, but the tense atmosphere underscored the lasting impact of recent disappointments.

Despite Barcelona's surprising 2-1 loss at Sociedad, giving Madrid the chance to close the gap, the Bernabeu faithful remain restless, demanding improvement from their players.

Real have the opportunity to move closer to qualifying for the Champions League last 16 with a win over Monaco today that could be key to Arbeloa rediscovering their rhythm and encourage fans to offer the united backing the team needs.

## Under-fire Frank claims backing of Spurs hierarchy

**London:** Thomas Frank insisted he retains the support of Tottenham's hierarchy after the under-fire boss met with the club's powerbrokers on Monday.

Frank's future was reportedly discussed by Tottenham on Sunday in the aftermath of a dismal 2-1 home defeat against struggling West Ham. Tottenham fans jeered Frank and chanted "you're getting sacked in the morning" during the West Ham debacle.

But Frank took training with his players ahead of Borussia Dortmund's visit to north London in the Champions League today and remains adamant he will be given the chance to save his job. The Dane spoke with Tottenham chief executive Vinai Venkatesham, sporting director Johan Lange and Nick Beucher, another member of the ownership group, over lunch on Monday.

"I've just been, how can you say, feeling the trust along the way. I've said that every press meeting. I had lunch with Nick, Vinai and Johan today and it was all good," Frank told reporters. "All part of the media circus and I can only think about winning against Dortmund."

Just seven months after being hired from Brentford to replace the sacked Ange Postecoglou, Frank has been pushed to the brink by Tottenham's woeful form. The West Ham defeat was Tottenham's third successive loss and their eighth in their last 14 matches in all competitions.

Frank's team are languishing in 14th place in the Premier League and have already been knocked out of the FA Cup and League Cup. Accepting the responsibility for Tottenham's plight, Frank said: "Even the best manager in the world, Pep Guardiola, says 'I am nothing without my players' and it is fair to say they haven't been available enough the whole time. But hey, no problem. I am happy to take the blame as long as everyone supports the players. It is about keeping the noise out, staying calm, carrying on."

As the questions grew more pointed during his media briefing, Frank vowed to keep battling to turn the tide and called for unity at a club in crisis. "If your back is against the wall, you fight. I am energetic and I fight," he said. "It is not about me, we need to win football matches and we need to do that together. Unfortunately, it is a results business and emotions are in this as well. There are a lot of signs that this is going the right way. We still need to find a way to get over the line and we are much closer than we think."

Tottenham fans have been frustrated with Frank's prosaic game-plan, which prioritises defensive solidity and uses set-pieces as the primary method of attacking. It is a stark contrast to the entertaining style used by Postecoglou, who ended the club's 17-year trophy drought by winning the Europa League.

With Wales defender Ben Davies sidelined after ankle surgery, Frank's problems keep mounting. He has only 11 fit outfield players available for the Dortmund clash. "We are a little bit limited with the players available," Frank said. "We need everyone to support us."

PREMIER LEAGUE

# City sign Palace defender Guehi amid injury crisis

AFP  
London

Manchester City signed Crystal Palace defender **Marc Guehi** on a five-and-a-half-year contract for a reported fee of £20mn. City stepped up their pursuit of the England international after suffering an injury crisis at centre-half.

Guehi, who came close to joining Liverpool on transfer deadline day in September, is City's second signing of the January transfer window after their capture of Ghana winger Antoine Semenyo from Bournemouth for about £65 million. "I am really happy and incredibly proud to be a Manchester City player," Guehi said. "This move feels like the culmination of all the hard work I have put into my career. I am now at the best club in England and part of an unbelievable squad of players. It feels good to be able to say that. I want to grow as a player and a person, and I know at this club that's going to happen."

City boss Pep Guardiola praised his club



for sealing the deal for the highly sought after defender. "A top central defender, playing for the national team. Personally, thanks to the club to bring him here because he's come at the perfect age, he can play right and left," he said.

"I know how much he wanted to choose us. With the problems that we have in the back in the next few months it's really, really important he's here. I'm pretty sure if he had a long contract at Crystal Palace it would have been impossible, but the fact

that it's six months (left), end of contract, the situation was easier in those terms."

The Chelsea academy graduate played 188 times for Palace after moving to Selhurst Park from the Blues in 2021. He captained Palace to FA Cup glory against City in May – the first major trophy in the south London club's history – and has won 26 England caps.

Other teams reportedly interested in the defender, including Liverpool once again and Bayern Munich, were understood to be targeting a move at the end of the season, when Guehi would have been a free agent.

Guardiola's men, dethroned as Premier League champions by Liverpool last year, are second in the table, seven points behind leaders Arsenal. Central defenders John Stones, Ruben Dias and Josko Gvardiol all missed from Saturday's 2-0 defeat by Manchester United at Old Trafford.

The club are also still challenging for silverware in the Champions League, FA Cup and League Cup. Guardiola has overseen an expensive rebuild of his squad over the past year, with a clutch of long-serving players exiting the club, including Kevin De Bruyne, Ilkay Gundogan and Ederson.