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TENNIS

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FOOTBALL

Defending champs Gharafa face Kharaitiyat in Amir Cup

Last season's runners-up Al Rayyan take on Al Khor in the last 16 of the prestigious football event

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Defending champions Al Gharafa will face Al Kharaitiyat, while last season's runners-up Al Rayyan take on Al Khor in the Round of 16 of the 54th edition of the Amir Cup following the draw ceremony held yesterday.

Sixteen teams were involved in the draw - 12 from the Qatar Stars League and four Second Division sides that progressed from the preliminary round, namely Al Sailiya, Al Waab, Al Markhiya and Al Kharaitiyat. The winners of Al Gharafa versus Al Kharaitiyat will meet the victors of the Al Ahli versus Umm Salal tie in the quarter-finals.

Elsewhere, Al Rayyan will play Al Khor, with the winners set to face Al Wakrah or Al Sailiya. Al Shamal was drawn against Qatar SC, while Al Sadd take on Al Markhiya, and Al Duhail face Al Waab with Al Arabi meeting Al Shahania in the remaining ties. Quarter-final pairings will follow a fixed bracket format leading to the semi-finals and final.

Following the draw, coaches highlighted the challenges of the knockout format.

Al Gharafa coach Pedro Martins said: "There are no easy teams even the Second Division sides. They deserve our respect. In football, if you don't respect your opponents, you don't get success normally. In football any team can defeat the other team. So we need to respect and it will not be an easy game. The tournament will be tough but we will work hard to repeat our success."

Al Rayyan coach Artur Jorge said: "In these kind of competitions, we don't have any easy game. It will be our first step towards the final which will be our goal as we did in the last season. We are happy with the draw."

Al Sadd coach Roberto Mancini said:



The Amir Cup draw was performed by former Qatari football stars Adel Khamis and Abdunnasser al-Obaidli yesterday.



"It's a knockout tournament and anything can happen in one game. We are Al Sadd and we try to win every event we can."

The Qatar Football Association (QFA) confirmed that the Round of 16 matches will be played from February 12 to 15, with

two games per day across Suhaim Bin Hamad, Hamad Bin Khalifa, Grand Hamad and Abdullah Bin Khalifa stadiums.

The draw ceremony began with a short documentary film highlighting the history of the Amir Cup, showcasing past champions and memorable moments. Following this, the draw mechanism was explained. The draw was performed by Qatari football stars and Al Gharafa and Al Sadd club legends, Adel Khamis and Abdunnasser al-Obaidli. The event was presented by Ali al-Sallat, Head of Media in the Marketing and Communications Department of the QFA.

Ali Hamoud al-Nuaimi, Head of Competitions at the QFA, confirmed that tied matches will be decided by penalties and announced a Man of the Match award for each game, sponsored by Qatar International Islamic Bank, with a total value of QR130,000.

This edition of the Amir Cup features an expanded format of 20 teams for the third consecutive time, a historic first for the competition. Previously limited to 17

ROUND OF 16 MATCHES				Amir Cup 2026
THURSDAY 12 FEBRUARY 2026				
AL DUHAIL	16:30	AL WAAB		
AL WAKRAH	19:15	AL SAILIYA		
FRIDAY 13 FEBRUARY 2026				
AL SHAMAL	16:30	QATAR SC		
AL SHAHANIA	19:15	AL ARABI		
SATURDAY 14 FEBRUARY 2026				
AL GHARAF	16:30	AL KHARITIYAT		
AL RAYYAN	19:15	AL KHOR		
AL SADD	19:15	AL MARKHIYA		
SUNDAY 15 FEBRUARY 2026				
AL AHLI	19:15	UMM SALAL		

The Amir Cup round of 16 matches will be played from February 12 to 15, across Suhaim Bin Hamad, Hamad Bin Khalifa, Grand Hamad and Abdullah Bin Khalifa stadiums.

clubs, the tournament now includes 12 from the Qatar Stars League and 8 from the Second Division, with the latter starting in a preliminary stage. Al Gharafa are

the defending champions after defeating Al Rayyan 2-1 in last season's final. Al Sadd remain the most successful club in the competition's history with 19 titles.

ASIAN SHOTGUN CHAMPIONSHIP

Qatar shooters clinch team trap silver, Pakistan's Nadeem wins gold



The Qatari trio of Saeed Abu Sharib, Mohammed al-Rumaihi and Angelo Scalzone pose with their silver medals at the Lusail Shooting Complex.



In the individual trap event, Pakistan's Muhammad Farooq Nadeem won gold.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar shooters won the silver medal in the men's team trap competition on the penultimate day of the Asian Shotgun Championship at the Lusail Shooting Complex yesterday.

The Qatari trio of Saeed Abu Sharib, Mohammed al-Rumaihi and Angelo Scalzone finished second with a total of 352 targets across five rounds. Kuwait claimed the gold medal as Abdulrahman al-Faihan, Nasser al-Muqallad and Khalid al-Mudhaf topped the standings with 354 targets, while the UAE trio of Yahya

al-Muhairi, Waleed al-Aryani and Mohammed al-Maktoum secured bronze with 351.

In the men's individual trap event, Pakistan's Muhammad Farooq Nadeem won the gold medal after setting new Asian and world records with a score of 27 out of 30 targets. Kazakhstan's Maxim Beidarov took silver with 26, while Kuwait's al-Faihan claimed bronze with 20.

Chinese Taipei's Wan-Yu Liu captured the gold medal in the women's individual trap competition, also setting new Asian and world records with 24 out of 30 targets. Kazakhstan's Ibragimova Ilyinova finished second with 23, while China's Shen-Yu Fan secured the bronze with 17.

In the women's team trap event, Kaza-

khstan won the gold medal after accumulating 235 points over five rounds. Chinese Taipei finished second to take silver with 316 points, while Kuwait claimed the bronze with 315.

At the conclusion of the competitions, the winners were crowned by Mohammed bin Yousef al-Mana, First Vice-President of the Qatar Olympic Committee, Roshan Starakhan Azard, ambassador of Sri Lanka, Jassim Shaheen al-Sulaiti, Secretary-General of the Qatar Shooting and Archery Federation, and Obaid Manahi al-Osaimi, Secretary-General of the Kuwaiti and Arab Shooting Federations.

The championship concludes tomorrow with the mixed team trap competition.

SPOTLIGHT

Manchester City stunned by Bodo/Glimt in epic Champions League upset

AFP
Bodo, Norway

Manchester City suffered a humiliating 3-1 defeat against Bodo/Glimt as the Norwegian minnows caused one of the biggest shocks in Champions League history.

Pep Guardiola's side were blown away by Kasper Høgh's first half brace and a second half strike from Jens Petter Hauge at the ecstatic Aspmyr Stadion. Rayan Cherki got one back moments after Hauge's goal, but Rodri's dismissal for two bookings left City in tatters as Bodo/Glimt celebrated their first ever win in the Champions League group phase.

In a fishing town situated 200km north of the Arctic Circle, the 2023 European champions were caught cold in freezing temperatures of minus two degrees. Bodo's entire population of only 55,000 people could almost fit into City's Etihad Stadium.

But Kjetil Knutsen's underdogs ignored the huge financial and talent gap between the clubs to inflict a chastening defeat on the Premier League giants. Bodo/Glimt, who hadn't played since December after the end of the Norwegian season, reached the Europa League semi-finals last term, an impressive run that maintained their remarkable rise over the last decade.

In their first ever season in the Champions League group phase, Bodo/Glimt had already earned creditable draws against Borussia Dortmund and Tottenham. City failed to heed the warning, playing with a lack of urgency in the face of Bodo/Glimt's



Bodo/Glimt's Kasper Høgh celebrates after scoring against Manchester City.

relentless pressing. They travelled to Norway earlier than Guardiola's usual schedule to ensure his players were able to practise on Bodo/Glimt's artificial pitch. Yet they were totally out of sync in the latest disjointed display in an increasingly troubled season.

City are without a win in their last four Premier League matches, with Saturday's 2-0 defeat at Manchester United leaving them seven points behind leaders Arsenal. Guardiola will be alarmed by City's second successive tame surrender, which exposed the Spainard's claim that his players had rediscovered their hunger after finishing without a trophy last season.

The City boss had said he planned to enjoy the Northern Lights from his hotel before the match, but that will be his only fond memory from one of the most embarrassing losses of his glittering career. City's final group phase fixture is at home to Galatasaray on January 28 as they try to seal an automatic place in the last 16 via a top-eight finish.

MOTORSPORT

Desert king al-Attiyah leads star cast at 2026 Oman Rally

OAA has laid out 13 demanding speed tests for first round of 2026 FIA Middle East Rally Championship

By Sports Reporter
Sohar, Oman

While engineers and technicians worked on final preparations and set-up checks on the rally cars, competing crews carried out their first day of reconnaissance of the challenging gravel special stages for this weekend's Oman International Rally yesterday.

The Oman Automobile Association (OAA) has laid out 13 demanding speed tests for the opening round of the 2026 FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) with competitors set to face 215.44 competitive kilometres in a slightly revised route of 661.76km.

The event has also moved to a new base at the National University of Science and Technology, which plays host to rally administration and media formalities over the course of the weekend.

Competitors will remain at the nearby service park within the confines of the Sohar Entertainment Centre that was used for the first time in 2025.

The international field of 17



Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah's Skoda Fabia undergoes final preparations in Sohar.

crews and competitors from 11 nations has been boosted by a bumper national-status event being hosted by the OAA in tandem with the MERC round. An additional 17 teams will compete in the national rally that runs behind the main event. While the newly-crowned, six-time Dakar champion Nasser

Saleh al-Attiyah heads the FIA field with his Spanish co-driver Candido Carrera and local two-time champion Abdullah al-Rawahi wheels out a new Skoda Fabia RS, Salim al-Touqi leads the local contingent in the Oman National Rally at the wheel of a Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution VII. The national

entry includes five Mitsubishi, a Subaru, seven Can-Am Mavericks, a Kia Rio and a trio of Toyota Yaris machines. Haitham Soomar, Hamood al-Touqi, Zakariya al-Ofi and Ghaith al-Qassmi wheel out the other Mitsubishi and Faisal al-Rashdi drives the sole Subaru Impreza. Saif al-Harthy, Hafidh



Team technicians work on Nasser Khalifa al-Atya's Ford.

al-Naamani, Fahad al-Sulaimani, Emad al-Balushi, Fahad al-Balushi, Mohammed al-Harthy and Ahmed al-Mamari represent the Can-Am brand.

The impressive national list is completed by Musab al-Zadjali in a Kia and the three Toyotas in the hands of Bashar Hamid al-Qassmi, Abdullah al-Touqi and Waheeb al-Kharusi. The event has invaluable support from the Ministry

of Culture, Sports and Youth, the Al-Batinah North Governorate and Toyota Oman. The official ceremonial start takes place from 15.15hrs at the Sohar Entertainment Centre on Thursday.

With a favourable weather forecast for the Sohar area over the weekend, dry and dusty stage conditions are expected with temperatures reaching the mid-twenties Centigrade.

TABLE TENNIS

Qatar players impress at WTT Youth Contender



Qatar's Ali al-Baz of Qatar goes for a shot during one of her matches at WTT Youth Contender Doha 2026 in Lusail Sports Arena yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The atmosphere inside the Lusail Sports Hall was electric yesterday as the world's elite youth table tennis talent descended upon Doha for the WTT Youth Contender Doha 2026. From January 19 to 22, the second leg of the prestigious four-part Qatar International Series delivered high-stakes drama and a podium-heavy performance for the home nation's under-13 squad.

The spotlight shone brightest on Qatar's Rashal Laghraibi, who fought her way to a spectacular second-place finish in the Under-13 category. Laghraibi's path to the podium was clinical, but she ultimately met her match in the final against Egypt's Malak Zaki, falling 3-0 in a high-speed clash that tested the limits of both competitors.

The Qatari presence in the division was formidable throughout the bracket, as teammate Alia al-Baz secured a well-earned third place after an emotional rollercoaster of a tournament. Al-Baz provided the highlight of the

quarter-finals, outlasting Egypt's Zeina Farouk in a 3-2 thriller that brought the crowd to its feet, before eventually bowing out to Laghraibi in the semi-finals.

On the boys' side of the Under-13 bracket, Rabeah al-Kuwari added more silverware to the national tally by clinching third place. Al-Kuwari's valiant run ended in the semi-finals at the hands of Uganda's Joseph Sebatindira in a 3-1 battle. His teammate, Mubarak Marzouq, also came within striking distance of a medal but saw his journey halted in the quarter-finals by a powerful performance from Egypt's Youssef Taher, who took the match 3-0.

While the local heroes grabbed the headlines, international heavyweights lived up to their billing.

The field was bolstered by global icons like South Korea's Lee Seung-soo, ranked third in the world, and his compatriot Hyo Wa-rim, the world number two, ensuring the level of play remained world-class.

In the Under-17 girls' category, Chinese Taipei's Wu Ying emerged victorious in a gruelling five-set final, defeating India's



Rashal Laghraibi in action on the first day of the WTT Youth Contender Doha 2026 yesterday.



Mohammed al-Rumaihi, QTTA Board Member, with Qatar's Rabeah al-Kuwari.

Divyanshi Bhowmick 3-2. Meanwhile, the Under-17 boys' title went to Iran's Benjamin Faraji, who dominated Hong Kong's Man Long in a 3-0 sweep. In the Under-13 boys' championship match, Malaysia's Ko Wei Yeo proved too strong for Uganda's Joseph Sebatindira, securing the title with a 3-0 victory.

This tournament marks a pivotal moment in the broader Qatar International Table Tennis Series. With two events already in the books, the action is set to accelerate

ate as the "Star Contender Youth" championship takes centre stage from January 23rd to 25th.

The entire series will reach its fever pitch with the concluding "Feeder" tournament, scheduled to run from January 27 to 31. As the final rounds for the remaining categories wrap up this Thursday, the world watches to see which of these young phenoms will carry their momentum into the next phase of this elite international circuit.

Mohammed al-Rumaihi, a member of the Qatar Table Tennis Federation's Board of Directors, yesterday praised the performance of the Qatari national team players in the WTT Youth Contender Doha 2026.

He noted that "participation in this type of tournament hones the players' skills and experience through interaction with players from different nationalities and schools of thought."

He added: "The Qatar players have undergone a number of preparatory camps and have prepared well for the tournament, so these outstanding results have come about. God willing, the future will be better."

CRICKET

Struggling Suryakumar will not adapt style to find form before T20 WC

AFP
Nagpur, India

India skipper Suryakumar Yadav said yesterday he would not change his style of batting as he bids to stop an alarming slump in form heading into the T20 World Cup.

His team face New Zealand in the first game of a five-match warm-up series on Wednesday in Nagpur, ahead of the World Cup starting February 7 in India and Sri Lanka.

But Suryakumar, formerly the ICC's top-ranked T20I batsman, has scored just 244 runs across his last 22 innings in the format dating back to October 2024, without a single fifty.

"I have been batting really well (in the nets)," Suryakumar, who is set to play his 100th T20 international in the series opener, told reporters.

"And also talking about the runs, it will definitely come but at the same time I can't do things differently. I don't want to change my identity.

"What has given me success in the past three, four years, I would like to bat the same way. And then if (the) performance comes I will take it, if it doesn't I will go back to the drawing board, practise again, work hard and come back stronger."

Suryakumar, 35, boasts a punishing T20I strike-rate of 163.23, although that does drop slightly as skipper. He took over the T20 captaincy full-time when Rohit Sharma stepped down following India's World Cup triumph in 2024.

Suryakumar has flourished as a leader despite his personal struggles with the bat, leading India to six consecutive bi-lateral series wins and victory in last year's T20 Asia Cup.

India are favourites to defend their World Cup title, sitting top of the ICC rankings and unbeaten in T20 series since a 3-2 loss to the West Indies in August 2023.

"If I have to take everyone's responsibility, then I will have to think well about the team," said Suryakumar.

"In that, I think there is no room for personal milestone. It's a team sport. Everyone has to step up; everyone has to do well."

Batter Tilak Varma and spinner Washington Sundar are both racing against time to be fit for the World Cup despite being named in the squad.

Ishan Kishan will return to the team against New Zealand for the first time since 2023 after being recalled to the squad, with Test and ODI captain Shubman Gill a surprise omission.

India were beaten at home in an ODI series by New Zealand for the first time ever earlier this month.

An under-strength Black Caps backed up their remarkable maiden Test series win in India, when they powered to a 3-0 clean sweep in 2024.

India vs New Zealand T20Is - full schedule and venues

1st T20I: January 21, Nagpur
2nd T20I: January 23, Raipur
3rd T20I: January 25, Guwahati
4th T20I: January 28, Visakhapatnam
5th T20I: January 31, Thiruvananthapuram

Squads

India

Suryakumar Yadav (c), Shreyas Iyer (first three T20Is), Rinku Singh, Wicketkeepers: Sanju Samson, Ishan Kishan, Axar Patel (vc), Abhishek Sharma, Shivam Dube, Hardik Pandya, Tilak Varma (fourth and fifth T20Is), Arshdeep Singh, Jasprit Bumrah, Harshit Rana, Kuldeep Yadav, Varun Chakravarthy, Ravi Bishnoi.

New Zealand

Bevon Jacobs, Tim Robinson, Devon Conway, Mitchell Santner (c), Michael Bracewell, Mark Chapman, Kristian Clarke, Zak Foulkes, Daryl Mitchell, James Neesham, Glenn Phillips, Rachin Ravindra. Kyle Jamieson, Jacob Duffy, Matt Henry, Ish Sodhi.



India's captain Suryakumar Yadav addresses a press conference ahead of first T20I against New Zealand yesterday. The match will be played today in Nagpur.

FOCUS

Family of Joshua questions trial over deadly crash

AFP
Sagamu, Nigeria

The driver charged in the car crash that injured Anthony Joshua and killed his friends appeared in a Nigerian court yesterday as the star boxer's uncle wondered whether a trial was "really worth it".

Adeniyi Mobolaji Kayode, 46, was driving the former two-time heavyweight champion Joshua and two of his friends, Latif Ayo-dele and Sina Ghami, when their Lexus SUV rammed into a stationary truck.

Kayode faces multiple reckless driving charges as well as a charge of driving without a

license. Dressed in black trousers and a hoodie, Kayode was visibly downcast and tried to avoid cameras of journalists outside the courtroom in Sagamu, in the country's southwest.

"We are very lucky that our son didn't die. But taking this man to court is something we don't see any reason for," Joshua's uncle, Ademadola Joshua, told AFP at the boxer's family home.

"This is my own personal opinion that the trial is not really worth it. Because we think accidents can happen anywhere in the world."

At the same time, he added, "we sense the opinion of the people of the town" is that "this man must be prosecuted. That he was over speeding".

The Traffic Compliance and Enforcement Agency (TRACE) in the Ogun state section of the highway, where the crash occurred, told AFP in the aftermath of the December 29 incident that its preliminary investigations showed that the vehicle was moving at an excessive speed and had a burst tyre before the collision.

Kayode's court appearance yesterday was brief, as the judge adjourned the case until February 25 after the prosecution requested a delay.

His lawyer Olalekan Abiodun yesterday told journalists outside the courtroom that he agreed to the adjournment "in the interest of justice".

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Short shift for Sinner as Keys makes nervous start

Sinner progresses after Gaston retires, title defender Keys recovers after shaky start to beat Oliynykova



Italy's Jannik Sinner (right) consoles France's Hugo Gaston as Gaston retires injured from their Australian Open match in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Melbourne

Jannik Sinner and Madison Keys made winning starts to their Australian Open title defences yesterday. Sinner, who is aiming for a third straight title at Melbourne Park, spent only 68 minutes on court in his first outing of the 2026 season before Hugo Gaston retired because of injury while losing 6-2, 6-1. The world number two consoled the weeping Frenchman and wished him well in his recovery before declaring himself delighted with the results of his off-season training. "I was very happy," said the

Italian. "We put in a lot of work to be back on court and it felt great. Obviously not the way you want to win the match, but from my side I'm very happy to be back on court." Sinner showed some signs of rust at the start and was forced to save three break points in his opening service game before finding his imperious touch. American Keys made an even shakier start to her maiden Grand Slam title defence before rallying for a 7-6(6), 6-1 victory over Ukrainian Oleksandra Oliynykova. A double break down thanks to some untimely double faults, Keys trailed 4-0 before forcing a tiebreak in which the unorthodox Oliynykova caused chaos with her deep, looping shots.

Oliynykova brought up two set points but Keys erased the deficit with some trademark big-hitting to eventually snatch a tense tie-break before racing through the second stanza. "I think at the start I just felt like I was playing just a little timid and not really trusting my first instinct," said the ninth seed. "I felt like I kind of kept changing my mind on what I actually wanted to do. I felt like I was reacting instead of having a plan of what I wanted to do." Oliynykova, who was playing in her first major, wore temporary face tattoos - blue flowers that matched her outfit and the court - but she was put into the shade in the fashion stakes by Osaka. In one of the boldest fashion



USA's Madison Keys hits a return to Ukraine's Oleksandra Oliynykova during their Australian Open match in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

statements ever seen on a tennis court, Osaka entered Rod Laver Arena carrying a white parasol with a voluminous trailing veil and wore a wide-brimmed hat above a long turquoise tunic with crimped white trousers. The 2019 and 2021 Melbourne Park champion's tennis was at times less impressive than her self-designed outfit but Osaka finished strongly to beat Croatian Antonia Ruzic 6-3, 3-6, 6-4 and take her place in the second round. Leylah Fernandez, the 2021 US Open runner-up, was not so fortunate and exited with a 6-2, 7-6(1) loss to Janice Tjen, who became the first Indonesian to win a match at the Australian Open in 28 years.

There were comfortable first-round wins for fifth seed Elena Rybakina, in-form Tokyo Olympics gold medallist Belinda Bencic and 2017 French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko. In the men's draw, 2023 finalist Stefanos Tsitsipas had to rally from a set down to beat Japan's Shintaro Mochizuki and avoid a first-round exit for the second year in a row. Sinner's compatriot Lorenzo Musetti, the fifth seed, also advanced after his opponent Raphael Collignon retired while trailing 4-6, 7-6(3), 7-5, 3-2. Eighth seed Ben Shelton, who lost to Sinner in last year's semi-finals, beat Ugo Humbert in three tight sets while his fellow American Taylor Fritz, seeded one spot

lower, needed four to get past French opposition in the shape of Valentin Royer. Melbourne Park's favourite Frenchman of recent years, Gael Monfils, bid farewell to the tournament for the 20th and final time after a 6-7(3), 7-5, 6-4, 7-5 loss to Australian qualifier Dane Sweeny. Monfils, who has won 13 ATP titles in a career stretching back to 2004, said in October that this year would be his last in tennis. "My journey started in 2003 with you guys, now we are in 2026 and somehow it's the finish line," the 39-year-old, who will retire at the end of the season, told the crowd after receiving a standing ovation. "Thank you so much for this amazing ride."

SPOTLIGHT

Jellyfish-inspired Osaka battles into Australian Open round two

AFP
Melbourne

Naomi Osaka laboured into the Australian Open round two yesterday with her victory second to an audacious "jellyfish-inspired" fashion statement she made entering centre court. The Japanese superstar emerged onto Rod Laver Arena carrying a white parasol with matching wide-brimmed hat and long veil, wearing a sleeveless turquoise dress over pleated white trousers. She conducted the pre-match formalities wearing part of her outfit before getting to work. When the gasps of the crowd subsided, the four-time Grand Slam champion was made to fight hard before downing Croatia's 65th-ranked Antonia Ruzic 6-3, 3-6, 6-4 to set up a clash with Romania's Sorana Cirstea. "Nike let me design this one, and it's modelled after a jellyfish," she said of her outfit. "I'm just so grateful that I get to be able to do the things that I love. It's really beautiful." The 28-year-old former world number one, who is well known for her on-court fashion statements, won the Australian Open in 2019 and 2021. But her trophy cabinet has been bare since then after mental health issues then having a baby. Now ranked 17 in the world, she showed signs of her brilliant best in reaching the semi-finals at the US Open last year and raced into a 3-0 lead against Ruzic.



Japan's Naomi Osaka walks on court to play against Croatia's Antonia Ruzic in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

out malfunctioned. When they finally resumed, Ruzic, playing on her 23rd birthday, wasted no time sealing the set and taking it to a decider. Osaka took a toilet break and returned to open a 2-0 lead, but once again Ruzic came roaring back. Both players struggled to hold serve in a scrappy final set with Osaka drawing on her experience at the crunch to break once again

and stay alive. "Honestly, this is one of my favourite tournaments and just to start the year off here, it makes me very happy," said Osaka. "I think I served pretty well, and she's an amazing player. I've never played her before, so I hope to not see her on the other side of the net (again)." It was her 70th Grand Slam main draw win, only the second Japanese woman to achieve the feat after Ai Sugiyama.

FOCUS

Aston Martin's chairman Stroll sees 'development journey' in F1 overhaul

Reuters
Tokyo

Aston Martin Executive Chairman Lawrence Stroll said yesterday the team is set to embark on a "development journey" as Formula One readies for its biggest technical overhaul in decades. Speaking in Tokyo at an event to launch Aston Martin's partnership with Honda, Stroll had high hopes for the team's new power unit but acknowledged they would have no idea how it would stack up against their rivals until they get on track. "We're all sitting here anxiously waiting to get on track and I really don't think we'll have the answer to that question before we get to Melbourne," he said. "And even when we get to Melbourne, you know these rules and regulations will be in place for five years." Formula One faces a new engine era in the upcoming season as well as the rule changes. The sport will see thinner and lighter cars and a 50/50 split on internal combustion, using sustainable fuel, and electric power. Testing starts behind closed doors in Barcelona on January 26, before the 2026 championship begins with the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne in early March. Honda unveiled the new power



Aston Martin Aramco Formula One Team Executive Chairman Lawrence Stroll, Formula One Group President and F1 CEO Stefano Domenicali and Honda CEO Toshihiro Mibe during their joint press conference in Tokyo yesterday. (Reuters)

unit for the 2026 season at the event, marking the official start of its exclusive supply deal with Aston Martin. "There'll be reliability issues, there'll be all sorts of things," Stroll said, adding that he believed it was the first time in Formula One history that teams faced a new chassis and power unit at the same time. "There'll be a lot of issues to contend with, but we're very positive." Aston Martin enters the season as a works team with Honda and with new team principal Adrian Newey leading the design of the new car. Honda CEO Toshihiro Mibe said he believed electrifi-

cation technology became more important this year in order to win given the engine's electric power usage. "We want to show that Honda's technology is world class, even in the age of electrification," he said. Andy Cowell, Aston Martin's chief strategy officer, said Honda and Aston Martin had set tough targets and were already deep into validation testing. "We want to win. But we understand that Formula One is the pinnacle of motor sport," he said. "It's really exciting," he added. "Pulling together an Adrian Newey-designed Aston Martin Honda car is something that everybody is really revelling in."

Mercedes chief designer Owen to leave F1 team

Mercedes chief designer John Owen is to leave the Formula One team later this year, it was announced yesterday. Owen, 52, joined the British-based outfit in 2007, when it was Honda, and has been a key figure in championships won under the name Brawn in 2009 and Mercedes from 2010. Brawn GP clinched both the drivers' and teams' championships in 2009 and the team won seven drivers' and eight constructors' championships as Mercedes from 2014-2021. "We can confirm that John Owen, our director of car design, has decided that now is the right time to

take a break from F1 and that he will be leaving the team later this year to begin a period of gardening leave, after assuring the transition to his successor," Mercedes said in a statement. "John has been with our Brackley team since 2007 and played a considerable role in our success." Mercedes said Owen's role would be filled by Giacomo Tortora, currently engineering director, while deputy technical director Simone Resta will oversee the group. Pre-season testing starts in Bahrain next month, ahead of the first Grand Prix of the season in Australia on March 8.

SPOTLIGHT

Dakar delights in Senegal parade honouring champs

‘THE LIONS ARE OUR PRIDE AND THEY DESERVE ALL THE HONOURS’

AFP
Dakar

Tens of thousands of Senegal football fans lined the streets of Dakar yesterday as the Lions of Teranga held a victory parade to celebrate their triumph in the Africa Cup of Nations final against Morocco.

The players and coaches brandished their trophy from an open-top bus which inched its way through immense crowds across the capital, winding towards the country's presidential palace.

As the players travelled the final stretch of their journey along the city's oceanside highway, the Corniche, fans walked and sometimes ran alongside the bus, with throngs of people lining the sidewalks.

Downtown was overcome by a fever pitch of almost deafening noise – revving engines, horns, vuvuzelas and shouting – as the players neared the palace, where they will be officially received.

In the morning, thousands had gathered at the parade's starting point in Patte d'Oie, a working-class neighbourhood across town, wearing team jerseys, chanting, whistling and blowing vuvuzelas.

All along the route old and young, men and women turned out decked in the country's green, yellow and red colours, sometimes watching on from buildings and bridges, or even climbing on top of cars and billboards.

Security forces were also present in large numbers, including anti-riot police.

The Senegal team made its way across the capital after arriving on a special flight from Morocco shortly before midnight on Monday, where they were greeted by President Bassirou Diomaye Faye, Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko and other members of the government.

Senegal won the Africa Cup of Nations when they beat hosts Morocco 1-0 in a chaotic final in Rabat on Sunday that saw the eventual champions storm off the pitch late in the game.

"I wouldn't have missed this



Senegal players greet a crowd of supporters while riding on an open bus past fans during a trophy parade in the streets of Dakar yesterday, as they celebrate Senegal winning the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) that was hosted in Morocco. Senegal beat Morocco in the final in Rabat on Sunday. (AFP)

moment for the world," 26-year-old fan Doudou Thiam told AFP from the parade's sidelines in the Bourguiba neighbourhood, wearing a Senegal jersey.

"The Lions are our pride and they deserve all the honours. Even if it meant staying here all day, I would have done it", he said.

Din of victory

A ruckus of whistles and horns has been almost constant since Senegal's victory on Sunday night, when fans flooded the streets, filling the air with honking, fireworks and the deafening roar of vuvuzelas. The win marked Senegal's second title, after their 2022 victory over Egypt in Cameroon. It was the team's third final in just the last four editions.

Hortense Kenny brought her five-year-old child to Patte d'Oie to watch the parade.

"The Lions made an entire nation proud, beating the host coun-

try in those circumstances," she told AFP, referring to the end of the match.

"Now, all that's left is to win the World Cup. With Sadio Mane, anything is possible," she said, referencing the team's biggest star.

His role as peacemaker during the final – he was the one who stayed on the pitch and persuaded his teammates to return – has been widely praised. Nearby Abdulai Sy, a 49-year-old, told AFP he felt personally touched by the victory which gave him a "big sense of pride to also be Senegalese".

Controversial win

Yesterday's crowd seemed unphased by a cloud of controversy surrounding their team's decision to storm off the pitch late in normal time in protest at a penalty awarded to Morocco.

Prompted by Mane, they returned to the pitch and an attempted 'Panenka' penalty from

Morocco's Brahim Diaz was easily saved by Senegal's goalkeeper before Pape Gueye won the game with a superb shot in extra time that stunned the Moroccan crowd.

The Moroccan FA said it had referred the incidents, including protests from Senegal players and fans, to the Confederation of African Football and FIFA.

Far from Morocco, football's lucrative business side had trickled down even to the streets of Dakar yesterday.

Amath Ndiaye, a 36-year-old street vendor who usually sells tissues, told AFP he has switched to hawking jerseys, flags, vuvuzelas and whistles for the duration of AFCON and the celebratory aftermath.

Yesterday, he was basking in the wisdom of his decision.

"I'm doing well," he told AFP from Patte d'Oie, near the joyous crowd decked out in patriotic Senegalese gear and waving flags.

FOCUS

QSL Cup: Al Shamal beat Al Kharaitiyat; Waab edge Shahania

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Shamal scored a crucial 4-1 win over Al Kharaitiyat in their Round 10 match of the QSL Cup 2025-26 season at the Grand Hamad Stadium yesterday. The victory fetched Al Shamal three valuable points and took their tally to 15 while Al Kharaitiyat remained on 13 points. Tamer Seyam, Mohamed Waad, Omar Ali and Adam Ounas were on target for Al Shamal, while Rodrigo Tabata (Penalty) scored Al Kharaitiyat's only goal.

Al Waab 2-1 Al Shahania

A stoppage time goal saw Al Waab edge Al Shahania 2-1 in their Round 10 match of the

QSL Cup at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium. The important win saw Al Waab take their tally to 18 points while Al Shahania remained on 17 points.

Abdulrahman Mohamed and Baha Faisal were on target for Al Waab while Artur George scored for Al Shahania.

Al Shahania also lost a player in the 63rd minute after being flashed with a red card.

Al Markhiya and Wakrah in 1-1 draw

Earlier, Al Markhiya and Al Wakrah shared a 1-1 draw at the Saoud Bin Abdulrahman Stadium. While Y Njie scored for Al Markhiya in the opening half, R Burkan equalised for Al Wakrah in the second session. Al Markhiya moved to 18 points with the draw, while Al Wakrah's tally moved to 6 points.



Al Shamal players rejoice after one of their four goals against Al Kharaitiyat at the Grand Hamad Stadium yesterday.

Howe calls on Newcastle to use spirit of Robson to inspire win over PSV

Eddie Howe urged Newcastle to use the spirit of former boss Bobby Robson as they target a vital Champions League victory against PSV Eindhoven. Robson enjoyed a successful two-year stint in charge of PSV in the 1990s before finishing his managerial career with five years at Newcastle from 1999 to 2004. The former England coach twice won the Dutch title at PSV and although he never lifted a trophy with Newcastle, he remains fondly remembered at both clubs. "We're all well aware of the history with Sir Bobby," Howe told reporters yesterday. "Hard work, organisation, always going to the end, never giving up, and trying to do the crowd justice by representing the club in the right way, these are all values he stood for. "He wanted teams to fully commit to the crowd and give it everything on a match day. That's what we are going to try to do. We have been trying to live by those principles ever since I arrived here. I think that's what the crowd want to see."

Newcastle, currently 12th in the Champions League standings, will host PSV today having taken 10 points from their first six group phase matches. They are close to securing a play-off berth at least, but automatic qualification for the last 16 via a top eight finish remains a significant challenge with a trip to holders Paris Saint-Germain in their last group game. "This club is just growing every year. We achieved already great things, I think, but we definitely want to have more," Newcastle defender Sven Botman said. "We definitely are setting a goal for ourselves to be in the Champions League spots every single season."

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Salah back in Liverpool squad after AFCON duty

AFP
Liverpool

Mohamed Salah made his much-anticipated return to the Liverpool squad yesterday following the Africa Cup of Nations as the club prepare to face Marseille in the Champions League.

A smiling Salah was put through his paces at the club's training centre with the rest of Arne Slot's squad ahead of today's match in France.

The return of the Egypt forward has been a major talking point after he took aim at Liverpool in an explosive interview early last month. Salah 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 Slot.

But he appeared as a substitute in a 2-0 Premier League win against Brighton on December 13, providing an assist, and Slot subsequently said the club had moved on from the furore.

Last week, Slot said he welcomed Salah's return, refusing to divulge the content of his conversations with the 33-year-old, whose team finished fourth at the Africa Cup of Nations.

Slot said before Saturday's 1-1 draw against struggling Burnley he was unsure whether the forward would face Marseille.

But yesterday afternoon Liverpool said Salah had been named



Liverpool's Mohamed Salah laughs with teammate Jeremie Frimpong during a team training session in Kirkby yesterday, on the eve of their UEFA Champions League match against Olympique Marseille. (AFP)

in the 20-man squad for the trip to France. "Mohamed Salah is included having returned to the club after representing Egypt at the Africa Cup of Nations," a statement on the club's official website said.

Liverpool are currently ninth in the league phase of the Champions League.

The top eight qualify automatically for the last 16 while teams placed from ninth to 24th face a play-off round.

Salah is Liverpool's third-highest goalscorer of all time with 250 goals in 421 appearances, winning two Premier League titles and the Champions League since joining

from Roma in 2017. He signed a lucrative new two-year contract last year as he played a starring role in guiding Liverpool to a record-equalling 20th English top-flight title.

But he has been a shadow of his former self during Liverpool's struggles this season, managing just five goals in all competitions.

Liverpool's Premier League defence collapsed with a run of six defeats in seven matches starting in late September.

The club are now unbeaten in 12 games in all competitions but remain 14 points behind Premier League leaders Arsenal.

COMMENT

Rosenior keen to build winning ties with 'world-class' Fernandez

AFP
London

Chelsea boss Liam Rosenior said he is hoping Enzo Fernandez can be convinced to remain at Stamford Bridge for the long term by success on the pitch.

The Argentina World Cup winner, who joined Chelsea from Benfica in 2023 for a then British record transfer fee of £107mn (\$144mn), has been linked with a move to Real Madrid.

"It means nothing to me. When you are a world-class player there will always be speculation you cannot control," Rosenior said ahead of his team's Champions League home game against Pafos today.

"Enzo has been outstanding and he has surprised me in a good way – in terms of what he did on Saturday, covering the ground he did when he was ill.

"He is a Chelsea player, he is very important to me and hopefully we will have a winning relationship in the short-term and long-term."

The 25-year-old missed training on Monday due to an illness which has affected a number of Chelsea players and staff.

In Rosenior's first experience of Champions League football, the Blues can assure themselves of at least a place in the play-off round with victory over the Cypriot champions.

Chelsea are 13th in the 36-team table and would realisti-



Chelsea's Enzo Fernandez takes part in a team training session at the Chelsea training ground in Cobham, London, yesterday. (AFP)

cally need to win both their remaining games, including a trip to Napoli next week, to have any

chance of making the top eight and securing direct passage into the last 16.