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CRICKET | Page 2

Bangladesh's plea to play WC matches outside India rejected



FOOTBALL | Page 4

Arsenal's Gabriel in dreamland after double in win at San Siro

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TENNIS

Alcaraz spearheads big names into Australian Open third round

Page 3

FOOTBALL

Martins confident as Gharafa face Sharjah in Super Cup final

'We are fully aware of the challenge we face in this final'



Al Gharafa players train yesterday at Thani Bin Jassim Stadium ahead of the Qatari-Emirati Super Cup final against Sharjah.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Gharafa will take on Sharjah at Thani Bin Jassim Stadium in the Qatari-Emirati Super Cup final today, with coach Pedro Martins backing his team to rise to the challenge.

Speaking at a press conference yesterday, Martins said the match would be difficult against an experienced Sharjah side that has been performing well in the AFC Champions League, but expressed confidence in his team's ability to deliver a strong performance and win the title.

"We are fully aware of the challenge we face in this final, but we are ready and ambitious to win. We hope to produce the level required to lift the championship cup," Martins said.

He added that Al Gharafa is currently enjoying a good run of form after positive results in recent matches, which he hopes will be reflected against Sharjah.

Martins noted that the technical staff had carefully studied Sharjah's strengths and weaknesses, while also assessing their own team, stressing that the focus would be on Al Gharafa's style of play to produce the performance needed in such an important match. He expressed hope that the Super Cup would be presented to Al Gharafa, its fans and Qatari football.

The Al Gharafa coach dismissed suggestions that his side was under pressure ahead of the final, stating that the atmosphere within the



Al Gharafa coach Pedro Martins speaks at a press conference yesterday.

squad was positive and that all players were eager to be crowned champions at this stage of the season.

He also highlighted the importance of fan support, saying, "We enjoy great backing at all levels, especially from our supporters, who we expect will play a key role in this crucial encounter. We hope to make Al Gharafa fans happy by winning the championship."

Meanwhile, Al Gharafa's Spanish forward Joselu also confirmed the team's readiness for the Super Cup final, while acknowledging the difficulty of one-off finals.

"We have prepared well for the match against Sharjah and understand how demand-

ing finals can be, as they offer only one opportunity to win a title," Joselu said. "We must take that chance in the right way and do everything possible to win the cup."

Joselu stressed that the match cannot be compared to league fixtures, noting that finals are decided in a single encounter, unlike the league which unfolds over several months. He added that Al Gharafa is enjoying an impressive season and is on the right path, describing a mid-season trophy as a significant achievement, with hopes of further success by the end of the campaign.

The Spanish striker also called on Al Gharafa supporters to attend the match and back the team, reaffirming the players' determination to secure the title.

Drawing on his experience of playing in finals during his career in Europe, particularly with Real Madrid, Joselu said, "Finals are different from any other matches. My advice to my teammates is to enjoy the occasion and give their best. I am confident in Al Gharafa's ability to perform well despite the difficulty of the match, and I sense great enthusiasm within the squad to achieve victory."

The Qatari-Emirati Super Cup features four matches, beginning with Al Gharafa of Qatar against Sharjah today. This will be followed by the Challenge Shield match between Al Wahda of the UAE and Al Duhail of Qatar tomorrow, the Super Shield clash between Al Sadd of Qatar and Shabab Al Ahli of the UAE on Saturday, and concluding with the Challenge Cup match between Al Jazira of the UAE and Al Ahli of Qatar on January 25.

SPOTLIGHT

Al-Attiyah in focus as Oman International Rally begins today

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The three-day Oman International Rally gets underway from the Sohar Entertainment Centre today. Competitors from 10 nations will tackle 13 timed gravel special stages and 215.44 kilometres timed against the clock on this opening round of the 2026 FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) organised by the Oman Automobile Association (OAA).

Fresh from a sixth Dakar Rally success last weekend, Qatar Nasser al-Attiyah will be aiming to begin his challenge for a record-breaking 21st regional title with a ninth win in Oman. He teams up with Candido Carrera in a Skoda Fabia RS that he was able to shake-down on a nearby gravel stage on Tuesday afternoon.

The Qatari admitted that it had taken a couple of days of sensible diet and rest to recover physically and mentally from his recent Dakar exploits. He said: "This is part of the life. We need to keep running in the Middle East to improve the championship. If I stop, it will not be nice. We need to bring in a new generation of drivers. We finished Dakar. It was a great result for us. I was testing on Tuesday and then we have the official shakedown. Everything is good. The stages are nice, similar to last year with a few parts changed. I am quite happy to be back here in Oman. This is one of the best rallies, the terrain, the gravel."

Al-Attiyah confirmed that he will drive a two-wheel drive Optimus MD Buggy at the forthcoming Bajas in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. He also admitted that his Dakar goal remains to beat Stephane Peterhansel's eight victories in a car but he also retains targets in the MERC. "My goal is to stay racing until my son starts with me (he's 15). Next year, maybe. We can give him the perfect experience. Maybe also 100 Middle East wins!"

Oman's Abdullah al-Rawahi will be hoping to prevent the Qatari se-

curing a 92nd MERC victory this weekend. The two-time winner and former regional champion is back to full fitness after an accident in Lebanon last summer and teams up with Jordan's Ata al-Hmoud in a second Skoda Fabia RS.

Qatar's Nasser Khalifa al-Atya has more experience of the regional series than any other driver still competing and the Qatari veteran will be aiming to defend his FIA Master MERC Driver title with Lebanese co-driver Ziad Chehab in a Motortune Racing-run Ford Fiesta.

The Jordanian duo of Sheikh Bader al-Fayez and Ihab al-Shorafa wheel out a pair of Rally 2 Skodas and there is youthful competition from Hamza Bakhshab and his Irish co-driver Lorcan Moore in a Toyota GR Yaris Rally2. Al-Fayez teams up with Lebanese co-driver Joseph Matar, an 11-time winner of the Rally of Lebanon.

Zakariya al-Aamri finished as runner-up to fellow Omani Abdullah al-Zubair in last year's FIA MERC2 Championship. He returns to try and go one better this season in a Subaru Impreza WRX STi, although Kuwait's Jassim al-Muqahwi and the Jordanian duo of Shaker Jweihan and Sami Fleifel will have other ideas in a trio of Mitsubishi Lancers.

The QMMF has entered a pair of Peugeot 208 Rally4s for the second season for last year's champion Rashid al-Muhammadi and the talented youngster Mohammed al-Marri. In the absence of Indian racer Payyaakkal Panikkaveetil, the Qataris will duel for supremacy with al-Marri trying to add an FIA MERC3 crown to the FIA Junior MERC title he secured in 2025. The duo will be partnered by their respective co-drivers Szymon Gosp-darczyk and Pierre Delorme.

Today, competitors will be permitted to carry out a 5.5km shakedown test from 9am on a nearby stage. The official ceremonial starts at 3:15pm, flowed by the opening 2.52km Sohar super special stage.



Fresh from a sixth Dakar Rally title, Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah will be aiming to begin his challenge for a record-breaking 21st regional title with a ninth victory in Oman.

QATAR WIN MIXED TRAP GOLD AS ASIAN SHOTGUN CHAMPIONSHIP CONCLUDES

Qatar won the gold medal in the mixed team trap event on the final day of the Asian Shotgun Championship at the Lusail Shooting Complex. The Qatari duo of Mohammed al-Rumaihi and Kholoud al-Khalaf finished first after a strong contest against teams from Kuwait and Chinese Taipei. They hit 30 of 40 targets, setting a new Asian and world record. Kuwait's team of Talal al-Rashidi and Sarah al-Hawal claimed the silver medal with 20 of 40 targets, while the Chinese Taipei pair of Kai Pang-chan and Lin Yu-chen secured bronze after finishing third with 19 of 40 targets. With this result, Qatar concluded the championship with a total of eight medals, including four gold and four silver. Six medals came in skeet events, while two were won in trap.



DECISION

Bangladesh's plea to play World Cup matches outside India rejected

AFP
New Delhi

Cricket's governing body said yesterday it had rejected Bangladesh's request to shift their T20 World Cup matches out of India, casting doubt on their participation in next month's tournament. The T20 World Cup begins in a little over two weeks on February 7, with Bangladesh's four group matches scheduled to be played in Kolkata and Mumbai. The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) has repeatedly refused to play its games in India, and the

Dhaka government said on Tuesday that they would not be pressured into changing their stance. The International Cricket Council (ICC) said in a statement that in the "absence of any independent security findings that... compromise the safety of the Bangladesh team", the ICC will not relocate the match. The row between the neighbouring nations erupted on January 3, when the Indian cricket board (BCCI) ordered the Indian Premier League (IPL) franchise Kolkata Knight Riders to release Bangladesh fast bowler Mustafizur Rahman. The BCB asked to move their

matches to World Cup co-hosts Sri Lanka. There was no immediate confirmation of whether Bangladesh would buckle to the ICC's decision. The ICC said it had "engaged with the BCB in sustained and constructive dialogue" to ensure Bangladesh could participate in the tournament, but added that those efforts had been "rebuffed." The ICC said in a statement that "independent security assessments, comprehensive venue-level security plans and formal assurances from the host authorities" found there was "no credible or verifiable threat to the safety" of the Bangladesh team.



The council said, despite efforts, that the BCB had maintained its position citing: "a single, isolated and unrelated development concerning one of its player's in-

volvement in a domestic league." Youth and Sports Adviser in Dhaka's interim government Asif Nazrul told the state-run BSS news agency late Tuesday that Bangladesh "cannot be forced to play in India." Bangladesh captain Litton Das, speaking to reporters after a domestic match on Tuesday, said he had no idea if the team would take part. "From where I stand, I'm uncertain, everyone is uncertain," Das said, asking back: "Are you sure we will play the World Cup?" "I think at this moment, the whole of Bangladesh is uncertain," he added in comments reported by

Dhaka's *Prothom Alo* newspaper. Sources in Colombo told AFP Sri Lanka had not been contacted about hosting Bangladesh's matches. Earlier, ICC sources told AFP that Bangladesh could be replaced by Scotland, who are the highest-ranked team that did not qualify for the World Cup. During the World Cup, Bangladesh will hold its first elections since a mass uprising in 2024 toppled then-prime minister Sheikh Hasina, a close ally of New Delhi. Political relations between India and Bangladesh have soured since.

CRICKET

Abhishek, Rinku fireworks help India beat NZ

India, after scoring 238 for 7, easily win the series opener by 48 runs

AFP
Nagpur, India

Opener Abhishek Sharma struck 84 off 35 balls to set up a convincing 48-run win for India in the first of five T20 internationals against New Zealand yesterday. Abhishek smashed eight sixes to get India off to a flying start before a late unbeaten cameo of 44 by Rinku Singh helped the hosts reach 238-7 after being invited to bat first in Nagpur. New Zealand could only muster 190-7 in response as regular wickets helped India take a 1-0 lead in the warm-up series ahead of the T20 World Cup starting February 7 in India and Sri Lanka. Glenn Phillips hit a valiant 78 off 40 balls and briefly threatened a fightback in his 79-run partnership with Mark Chapman, who made 39. But Phillips' exit in the 14th over off left-arm spinner Axar Patel ended New Zealand's hopes despite a sloppy fielding display by the hosts. Spinner Varun Chakravarthy took two key wickets including Tim Robinson, for 21, and Chapman. Shivam Dube also took two wickets in two balls with his medium pace in the final over. Abhishek was in fine flow despite India losing two early wickets - his fellow opener Sanju Samson for 10 and Ishan Kishan, back in the side for the first time since 2023, for eight. Skipper Suryakumar Yadav put on 99 runs for the third wicket with Abhishek, making a 22-ball 32. Suryakumar said yesterday: "Always good when we bat first, put on runs and defend with dew. All batters played their roles very well, which was a plus point. I felt good when I went into bat. I've been batting well in the nets. It was a matter of continuing that and not changing my identity. Last 2-3 weeks, I've been hitting it well. Fingers crossed for Abhishek doing well. The way he prepares himself and carries himself is great, nice to see it flowing on here." Suryakumar, 35, started slowly but gained some momentum as he attempts to end his recent slump in form ahead of the World Cup. Suryakumar, formerly the ICC's top-ranked T20I batsman, has failed to score a fifty in his 23 innings in the format dating back to October 2024. He holed out off the left-arm spin of his opposite number Mitchell Santner. Abhishek kept up the charge and raced to his



India's Abhishek Sharma plays a shot during the first Twenty20 international against New Zealand at the Vidarbha Cricket Association Stadium in Nagpur yesterday. (AFP)

seventh T20 fifty for India in 22 balls, but finally fell to Ish Sodhi after he mistimed a hit to long-on. India lost a couple more quick wickets and the run-scoring dipped before Rinku cracked three sixes and four fours in his 20-ball knock to finish with a flourish. The second match of

the five-match series is tomorrow in Raipur.

BRIEF SCORES
India 238 for 7 (Abhishek 84, Rinku 44*, Duffy 2-27) **beat New Zealand 189 for 7** (Phillips 78, Chapman 39, Dube 2-28, Varun 2-37) **by 48 runs**

Maxwell, Waugh among franchise owners in Bollywood-backed European T20 league

Australia all-rounder Glenn Maxwell and former captain Steve Waugh are among the franchise owners in a new European Twenty20 league, which will begin in August after two false starts. Backed by the cricket boards of Ireland, Scotland and the Netherlands, and approved by the governing International Cricket Council, the European T20 Premier League's (ETPL) founders include Bollywood star Abhishek Bachchan. "Mainland Europe is not known for cricket," Bachchan told Reuters from Sydney, where they unveiled owners of the three teams, including the Amsterdam franchise owned by a group that includes Waugh and Jamie Dwyer, a five-time International Hockey Federation player of the year. "It's an opportunity to create a huge cricket ecosystem in and around Europe. With ETPL, we hope we can bring the magic of cricket euphoria to mainland Europe." Maxwell is a co-owner of the Belfast franchise, while former New Zealand internationals Nathan McCullum and Kyle Mills bought the Edinburgh side.

The ICC has 33 members in Europe, most for any continent, including full members England and Ireland. Scotland and Netherlands have played World Cups, while Italy will make their T20 World Cup debut next month. "Italy's World Cup qualification indicates Europe's interest in cricket, and cricket being in the 2028 Olympics is another boost for Europe," Bachchan said. "We hope to turn ETPL into one of the top T20 leagues in the world." Waugh hoped the Amsterdam franchise would inspire more kids to take up the game. "Franchise cricket has the world's best players playing with locals," the two-time World Cup winner told Reuters. "At Amsterdam, the Dutch players will have the opportunity to play alongside players like Mitchell Marsh, the current Australia T20 captain, or Steve Smith, one of the all-time greats of the game. You can't buy that kind of experience." Initially conceived as Euro T20 Slam, the league could not take off in 2019 and its planned launch last year was delayed for the second time.

Afghanistan beat WI by 39 runs, take 2-0 lead



Spinner Mujeeb Ur Rahman with his Man of the Match award after Afghanistan beat West Indies by 39 runs in the second T20I in Dubai yesterday. Mujeeb picked up 4 for 21 as Afghanistan defended their score of 189 for 4 wickets in 20 overs. West Indies were bowled out for 150 in 18.5 overs. Afghanistan have taken an unassailable 2-0 lead in the three-match series. The third and final game of the series will be played in Dubai today.

FOCUS

Brook apologises, admits nightclub fracas 'not the right thing to do'

AFP
Colombo

England white-ball captain Harry Brook yesterday admitted it was "not the right thing to do" to get into an altercation with a nightclub bouncer in New Zealand, but insisted "I've learnt from my mistakes". The 26-year-old was fined £30,000 (\$40,000) by the England and Wales Cricket Board after the incident in Wellington the night before a one-day international. England lost the match the next day with Brook scoring just six. "I've learnt from my mistakes," Brook told reporters in Colombo where England face Sri Lanka in a three-match ODI series beginning yesterday. "I've reflected a lot and I know it wasn't the right thing to do," he said, speaking publicly for the first

time about the incident on the tour that preceded the Ashes series, which England lost 4-1. "I want to apologise to my teammates, the fans and the ECB for putting them in a tricky situation," said Brook, who will lead England in next month's T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka. "It will never happen again. I'm extremely sorry." Controversy dogged England's Ashes series, with allegations of poor preparations, muddled team selection and a "drinking culture" in the England camp. England players were photographed spending hours in bars during a mid-series beach resort break, with a video of an apparently drunk Ben Duckett circulating on social media. The three-match ODI series in Sri Lanka will be followed by three Twenty20 internationals, England's final warm-ups before the T20 World Cup begins on Febru-

ary 7. Brook said the series would be a timely litmus test for his side, who have been searching for rhythm and results. "It's important to get used to the conditions, the climate and the heat," Brook said. "We are looking forward to a competitive series." England's white-ball fortunes have nosedived since their forgettable 50-over World Cup campaign in India in 2023 where, as defending champions, they failed to make the semi-finals. Since then, they have lost six of their last seven bilateral series and endured a Champions Trophy to forget, bowling out after losing all three group games. "We would like to be a little more consistent, absorb pressure and stay in the game for longer periods," Brook said. "Yes, we've lost a few series, but I feel we're heading in the right direction." Sri Lanka are wrestling with se-

lection issues ahead of co-hosting the World Cup. Charith Asalanka was removed as T20 captain late last year but continues to lead the 50-over side. Injury-prone strike bowler Dushmantha Chameera has been rested for this series, while there remains uncertainty over the availability of leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga. "I would have liked to have both in the team," Asalanka said. "But we have to look at the bigger picture, which is the World Cup. We haven't made a final call on Hasaranga yet."

Sri Lanka's captain Charith Asalanka (left) and his England counterpart Harry Brook pose with the trophy yesterday, on the eve of their first ODI match at the R. Premadasa International Cricket Stadium in Colombo yesterday. (AFP)



AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Alcaraz spearheads big names into third round

Sabalenka beats Bai in straight sets, Zverev overcomes injury scare to down feisty Frenchman Muller

Reuters
Melbourne

Carlos Alcaraz withstood a barrage of big hitting from a familiar foe in Yannick Hanfmann in the Australian Open second round yesterday, with fellow top seed Aryna Sabalenka also enduring some shaky moments before sealing progress.

Alexander Zverev's advance was stalled by rain showers, an injury scare and feisty Frenchman Alexandre Muller in the evening session, but the men's third seed prevailed in four sets to safely reach the third round.

His equivalent in the women's draw, Coco Gauff, earlier made short work of Olga Danilovic, while in-form seventh seed Jasmine Paolini and eighth seed Mirra Andreeva also romped through their contests.

After a comfortable win in the opening round, top seed Alcaraz was given more of a workout by Germany's world number 102 Hanfmann on a sunbathed Rod Laver Arena but rose to the challenge and moved on 7-6(4) 6-3 6-2.

"I knew he was going to play great," Alcaraz, 22, said.

"I knew his level. We came through the Challengers together, I've played him. It was tougher than I thought at the beginning and I didn't feel the ball that good."

Alcaraz found himself trailing 3-1 in the first set and after getting back on level terms wasted several chances to break Hanfmann's huge serve again.

The six-times major winner pounced in the tiebreak to wrap up a physically draining opening set in 78 minutes, however, and carried that momentum into the second set.

Hanfmann received medical treatment before the start of the third and Alcaraz showed no mercy, sealing a double break and closing out the contest on serve.

"It was coming like a bomb," the Spaniard said of Hanfmann's



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz hits a return to Germany's Yannick Hanfmann during their Australian Open match in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

power. "Forehand, backhand, serves. I had to be ready for those.

"I'm really happy that I got through a difficult first set ... and I played a really good level at the end of the match and get through."

SABALENKA STUMBLES

Sabalenka's issues in the opener on the main showcourt came out of the blue, the Belarusian racing to a 5-0 lead against China's Bai Zhuoxuan before losing three games in a row.

The world number one refocused and proceeded to mow down Bai the rest of the way, running out a 6-3 6-1 winner to stay on track for her third title at Mel-

bourne Park. "She didn't start well, but then she had the strength to step in and to change couple of things and, to put me under pressure. That was really impressive," Sabalenka said.

"It seemed like she didn't really care about the score. She would just try to find something that's going to help her to win the match."

American title contender Gauff was at her ruthlessly efficient best as she crushed Danilovic 6-2 6-2 in bright sunshine but the evening rain meant Italian Paolini had to swap courts to complete her 6-2 6-3 demolition of Magdalena Frech.

Emma Raducanu's day ended in disappointment as the 2021 US Open champion was beaten 7-6(3) 6-2 by Anastasia Potapova, while Russian teenager Andreeva thumped Maria Sakkari 6-0 6-4.

Zverev, runner up last year and still seeking his first major title, played down fears of a tournament-ending injury after receiving treatment on his lower left leg several times in his 6-3 4-6 6-3 6-4 win over Muller. "I took a painkiller and it was fine after that," said the 28-year-old German.

DE MINAUR BATTLES PAST MEDJEDOVIC

That match aside, ticket holders

Federer's smooth golf swing in Melbourne leaves Alcaraz impressed

Carlos Alcaraz found out that Roger Federer's elegance extends well beyond the tennis court after playing a round of golf with the Swiss maestro in Melbourne during the Australian Open.

The Spaniard has made no secret of his own love for golf, carving out time during his busy Grand Slam schedule to indulge the hobby. During his triumphant US Open run last year, he even celebrated key victories by mimicking golf swings.

After beating Yannick Hanfmann to seal his spot in the third round of the Australian Open yesterday, an on-court interview quickly became all about Alcaraz's experience of playing Federer on the golf course.

"It's as beautiful as his tennis," Alcaraz said about the stylish former world number one's golf skills.

"I'm not surprised. It's unbelievable. Everything he does, he does in style, really beautiful. On the

golf course, it's a really beautiful swing. He plays really good."

While Alcaraz knows his way around a golf course, Federer has taken to it surprisingly fast after the 20-times Grand Slam champion retired from tennis in 2022.

"I think he has been playing for two years now and his level is really good," Alcaraz said.

"I've been playing five and he's already beating me.

"It hurts, yeah."

Alcaraz, who faces French 32nd seed Corentin Moutet as he resumes his bid to become the youngest man to claim the career Grand Slam, said there would always be time for more golf.

"We can always find time ... We're trying to make the most of the day," Alcaraz said.

"I don't know what's coming tomorrow, I need to talk to my team. I'll probably practice a little as I want to be better in the next round but the golf courses are waiting for me."

for the evening session were treated to an Australian-heavy lineup, the highlight for locals being sixth seed Alex de Minaur's 6-7(5) 6-2 6-2 6-1 win over Hamad Medjedovic.

The Australian number one, who has never been past the quarter-finals at a Grand Slam, struggled early on against the tricky Serbian but turned the match with a break for 4-2 in the second set after four deuces.

Russian former finalist Daniil Medvedev also surrendered the opening set to Quentin Halys but dug deep to register a 6-7(9) 6-3 6-4 6-2 victory and join his childhood friend Andrey Rublev in the next round.

While Russian flags are banned

at Melbourne Park as part of measures imposed by Tennis Australia following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, there were plenty of Turkish flags waving in the stands as Zeynep Sonmez continued her dream run Down Under.

The 23-year-old, who has become a crowd favourite after helping a ball kid who fainted on the opening day, beat Anna Bondar 6-2 6-4 to reach the third round for the first time.

"I felt like I was at home, basically I was feeling the energy. It was really unreal," Sonmez said of the support she received.

"I really, really appreciate it. I felt very good on the court. I felt like we were all playing together."

GOLF

Nothing like 72 holes for Scheffler as World No. 1 begins season

Reuters
Los Angeles

Scottie Scheffler steered clear of wine glasses when helping with Christmas dinner this year.

That joke was surely going around the PGA West resort in La Quinta, Calif., as the No. 1 player in the world arrived for The American Express, his 2026 PGA Tour season debut.

Scheffler's 2025 season got off to a delayed start after he injured his hand on Christmas 2024, when a glass bowl shattered while he was using it to shape ravioli for dinner. Among other tournaments, he missed The American Express in the Palm Desert region of California. When you're on a long hot streak like Scheffler has been since 2022, you don't need to make many changes to your approach. Speaking with reporters Tuesday, Scheffler said he treated his off-season the same as usual.

"I had a few extra weeks off this year, and fortunately it wasn't due to injury, just the start of the year started a little bit later for me," Scheffler said. "Overall, no, things I would say were pretty similar for me in the offseason."

This time, his season is starting later because of how the PGA calendar worked out. The normal season opener, The Sentry, was cancelled due to drought conditions on Maui. So Scheffler didn't fly to Hawaii, skipping last week's Sony Open in Honolulu in favour of the California swing. It beats his hometown of Dallas, which has snow in the forecast this week.

"I saw it's going to snow in Dallas this week, so definitely glad to be here wearing shorts and a shirt," Scheffler said. "... I think the tournament's really well run. I think they do a good job of taking care of us. It's a nice week for my



family and me to enjoy some good weather, and play some competitive golf, and kind of get a gauge of where I'm at to start the year."

When the PGA Tour last saw Scheffler, he was on another incredible streak of success, finishing in the top 10 in his final 15 starts of the 2025 season with six wins, including two majors. He also tied for fourth at Tiger Woods' Hero World Challenge, an unofficial event, in December.

After some time off, Scheffler is eager to see where his game stands, but don't mistake that for playing his way into shape.

"I definitely don't show up to tournaments trying to get my game into shape," he said.

"I like to be prepared, and that's something that I pride myself on. So I like to say that's a good gauge, just because it's different being in competition I think than practicing at home. You can do your best to simulate it, but I don't think there's anything like coming out here and playing and posting a 72-hole score.

"Tournament golf's always just

a bit different. You can prepare as hard as you can, but sometimes you do have to shake off a little bit of competitive rust just from an extended break."

Meanwhile, Will Zalatoris might be well positioned to make himself a top comeback player during the 2026 PGA Tour season. During Tuesday's media availability in advance of The American Express in La Quinta, Calif., he confirmed that could be a possibility. "I want to try to play my way into some Signature Events," Zalatoris, coming back from multiple back surgeries, said. "I feel like I'm very capable of it."

A hot breakout candidate following his first PGA victory at the 2022 FedEx St. Jude Championship, Zalatoris instead fell victim to several back issues, limiting his tournament appearances and leading to multiple surgeries.

Most notably, he underwent a microdiscectomy in the spring of 2023 and had a more recent procedure last May, a disk replacement, which ended his 2025 season prematurely.

HORSE RACING

Naseeb Zakhir clinches Mesaieed Cup in tight finish

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Naseeb Zakhir returned to the winner's enclosure after producing a thrilling late charge to capture the day's feature, the Mesaieed Cup, a Local Purebred Arabian Handicap over 1300m, prevailing by a head at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

Always prominent, the five-year-old grey unleashed a decisive burst inside the final 100m to reel in long-time leader AJS Kabul in the closing strides.

Trained by Osama Omer al-Dafea and expertly partnered by Faleh Bughenaim, Naseeb Zakhir secured his second victory of the season, complementing four runner-up efforts in an admirably consistent campaign.

Earlier on the card, Overrule opened proceedings by winning the Thoroughbred Handicap, trained by Mohammed Hassan

al-Matwi and partnered by Szczepan Mazur. The Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate was claimed by Lubara, who broke her maiden for trainer Jean de Mieulle under Bughenaim. Debutant Muraaqib made a winning start in the Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate, scoring for trainer MHK al-Attiyah with Mazur aboard. The Local Thoroughbred Handicap went to Moharb, trained by Jassim al-Ghazali and ridden by Pierre Charles Boudot.

Among the Arabians, Kawail D'Violettes captured the Purebred Arabian Handicap (1200m) for trainer Ahmed al-Jehani under Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi, while M'tawa El Saa'yeb dominated the Purebred Arabian Handicap (2000m) for Hamad al-Jehani, partnered by Jefferson Smith.

RESULTS
39th Al Uqda Race Meeting - Mesaieed Cup
WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

1 - Mesaieed Cup - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap 75-95 (Class 3)
Naseeb Zakhir, Engineer Osama Omer al-Dafea, Faleh Bughenaim
2 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (65-85)
M'tawa El Saa'yeb, Hamad al-Jehani, Jefferson Smith
3 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (65-85)
Kawail D'Violettes, Ahmed al-Jehani, Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi
4 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (0-55)
Moharb, Jassim al-Ghazali, Pierre Charles Boudot
5 - Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate
Muraaqib, MHK al-Attiyah, Szczepan Mazur
6 - Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate
Lubara, Jean de Mieulle, Faleh Bughenaim
7 - Thoroughbred Handicap (45-65)
Overrule, Mohammed Hassan al-Matwi, Szczepan Mazur



Jockey Faleh Bughenaim rode Naseeb Zakhir to the Mesaieed Cup win at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. **PICTURE: Juhaim**

MOTORSPORT

Qatar set to open FIA WEC season again at Lusail

As Qatar gears up to host the Prologue and opening race of the FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) for the third consecutive year, Lusail International Circuit is set to ignite the 2026 season with high-octane action.

This pivotal role highlights Qatar's expanding footprint in motorsport, with the Prologue – a mandatory two-day pre-season test from March 22-23 – allowing teams to dial in their machines before the Qatar 1812km curtain-raiser, a gruelling ten-hour battle on March 28.

Entering its 14th season under the auspices of the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) and Automobile Club de l'Ouest (ACO), FIA WEC remains the pinnacle of endurance racing, demanding speed, strategy and mechanical resilience across eight

globe-trotting rounds.

What truly sets FIA WEC apart is the diversity it offers, enabling fans to witness 14 major manufacturers battling on the same track at the same time.

This incredible line-up of global brands, from established giants to exciting newcomers, creates unmatched competition in both the elite Hypercar class (LMH/LMDh prototypes) and production-based LMGT3 category, with 35 full-season entries in 2026 including 17 Hypercars and 18 LMGT3 cars.

Eight of the 14 marques feature in the Hypercar division – Alpine, Aston Martin, BMW, Cadillac, Ferrari, Genesis, Peugeot and Toyota – while LMGT3 comprises Aston Martin, BMW, Corvette, Ferrari, Ford, Lexus, McLaren, Mercedes-AMG and Porsche.

Notable grid shake-ups over



The Qatar 1812km will be held on March 28 after two days of prologue.

the off-season include Porsche's retreat from the Hypercar class, offset by Genesis Magma Racing's debut with two GMR-001 prototypes on Oreca chassis! Defending champion Ferrari AF

Corse returns with the proven 499P, while Toyota Racing arrives hungry for redemption after a challenging 2025 campaign. The Japanese carmaker unveiled the updated TR010 Hybrid – its third

major evolution – with key tweaks focusing on enhanced drivability, top speed and overall consistency, complemented by a striking new red, white and black livery inspired by the iconic GT One.

The team has also rebranded from Toyota Gazoo Racing to simply Toyota Racing for 2026.

Driver changes add intrigue, from two-time world champion and multiple 24 Hours of Le Mans winner Andre Lotterer's comeback with newcomer Genesis, to Nick Cassidy's Hypercar bow with Peugeot alongside Théo Pourchaire. Frenchman Victor Martins was recently confirmed for Alpine's Hypercar effort as an FIA WEC rookie, following his stint in Formula 2 and as a Williams F1 development driver.

Ex-F1 star and endurance legend, Sebastien Buemi competes for Toyota; the multiple world champion boasts the most race wins in

the series' history. Fellow former F1 driver Nyck de Vries similarly supplies speed and profile to Toyota's quest for redemption.

Cadillac has swapped Jensen Button for Jack Aitken, while ex-F1 talent Logan Sargeant will contest a full campaign in Proton's Ford Mustang LMGT3 and Kevin Magnussen returns for a second consecutive season in the discipline as the Dane brings his experience to BMW's Hypercar programme. Overall, Hypercar boasts 11 former FIA WEC champions and 14 ex-F1 drivers, blending experience with youth for a grid that's stable yet spiced with potential upsets.

As the series captivates global fans through hybrid innovation, tactical pit battles and marathons like Le Mans, Lusail International Circuit stands to deliver another exciting opener to kick off the 2026 campaign.

FOOTBALL

Arsenal's Gabriel in dreamland after brace at San Siro

'It is always difficult to play against Inter. We came here last season and lost'

Reuters
Milan

Gabriel Jesus said it was a dream to score at the San Siro as he marked his first start in this season's Champions League by netting twice in Arsenal's 3-1 win at Inter Milan on Tuesday.

The Brazilian scored twice in the first half, either side of Inter's equaliser, to send Arsenal on their way to their seventh win from seven games in the competition, and he was emotional after the final whistle. "It's a dream night," Jesus said. "I always dreamed of being a footballer. I watched when I was a kid. I watched a lot of Serie A, so to be here in this stadium and score here is tears in my eyes because I always dreamed of being here."

Jesus only returned to action in December having been sidelined since last January after suffering an anterior cruciate ligament injury in his left knee.

"There is always a reason that things happen even whether it's good things or difficult things," Jesus said. "I learned that during my 11 months out of the field."

The Premier League leaders proved too strong for an Inter side top of Serie A, a team which lost last year's final and beat Arsenal 1-0 during last season's competition. "It is always difficult to play



Arsenal's Gabriel Jesus celebrates with teammates after scoring their second goal against Inter Milan in their Champions League match at the San Siro in Milan. (Reuters)

against Inter Milan. We came here last season and lost," Jesus added.

"Tonight we played better than them, we controlled them but they are a top team and they attack. We scored at the end and got the three points."

Jesus has yet to start in the Pre-

mier League since his return, making seven substitute appearances, but his performance against Inter will surely give manager Mikel Arteta food for thought ahead of Sunday's game with Manchester United.

"Everyone wants to start. I am

a very respectful guy," Jesus said. "I am not a kid anymore, I am 28, so I understand football. I am very happy Vik (Gyokeres) came on and scored a goal. I am so happy I scored and Vik scored. I am confident Kai (Havertz) will score when he gets the chance."

QSL CUP

Al-Harazi brace helps Al Khor stun Rayyan

By Sports Reporter
Doha

A brace from substitute Abdulrahman Mohammed al-Harazi saw Al Khor shock table toppers Al Rayyan 2-0 in their Round 10 match of the QSL Cup at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.

Despite their first defeat in the tournament, Al Rayyan topped the single-stage league table with 25 points securing a direct berth to the quarter-finals along with Umm Salal, who finished second with 20 points.

After a goalless opening half, al-Harazi struck twice in the 66th and 71st minutes for Al Khor, who secured their spot in the knockout stage with 13 points.

At the Al Shamal Stadium, Muaither thrashed Mesaimeer 4-1 to finish level on points with Umm Salal. Muaither scored two goals in each half while Mesaimeer missed a late penalty.

Etyan Morales (3rd minute), Albert Luque (40th minute),

Yanis Merah (70th minute) and Mohamed Sakr (73rd minute) scored the goals for Muaither while Gabriel da Silva scored Mesaimeer's only goal in the 24th minute of the match. Mesaimeer, however, also progressed with 13 points.

Meanwhile, Al Bidda's Cristian Dal Bello Fagundes converted a penalty strike in the 30th minute as they beat Lusail 1-0 at the Hamad Bin Khalifa Stadium.

Later in the 84th minute, Al Bidda won another penalty but they failed to score. Their fourth win of the tournament took Al Bidda's points tally to 15 and to the knockout stage while Lusail were eliminated with 7 points to their credit.

Al Arabi, Al Waab, Al Markhiya, Al Saliya, Al Shahania, Al Shamal, Qatar SC and Al Kharaitiyat also advanced to the knockout stage after the conclusion of league stage.

In the QSL Cup's new format, 20 teams played 10 league matches. The top two progress to the quarter-finals, and teams ranked 3-14 fight in knockouts for the remaining slots.



Al Khor's Abdulrahman Mohammed al-Harazi (centre) celebrates after scoring against Al Rayyan.

FOCUS

Atletico frustrated in draw at Galatasaray

AFP
Istanbul

Atletico Madrid's hopes of earning a Champions League top eight spot at the end of the league phase were diminished by a 1-1 draw at Galatasaray yesterday in their penultimate fixture.

Although the point took them provisionally eighth, the three-time runners-up may now find it tricky to progress straight to the last 16.

Giuliano Simeone's early goal was the perfect start for his father Diego Simeone's team, but Marcos Llorente's own goal left honours even in Istanbul.

The Spain international made amends with a vital late interception which saved his team falling to defeat.

Visitors Atletico dampened a lively atmosphere with their fourth minute goal, nodded home by Giuliano from Matteo Ruggeri's cross.

Turkish side Galatasaray pulled level after 20 minutes when Llorente bundled Roland Sallai's cross into his own net as he tried to cut it out, denying his goalkeeper Jan Oblak a clean sheet on



Galatasaray's Victor Osimhen jumps to control the ball in front of Atletico Madrid's Giuliano Simeone during the UEFA Champions League match at Rams Park in Istanbul yesterday. (AFP)

his 100th Champions League appearance. Baris Yilmaz could have sent Galatasaray ahead before

half-time but skewed a shot high over the bar when well placed to convert.

Atletico came close to regaining their advantage just before the hour mark when Abdulkerim Bardakci cleared David Hanco's effort off the line to safety.

Atletico coach Simeone replaced Sorloth with French veteran Antoine Griezmann, keeping Julian Alvarez on the pitch despite his recent poor form in front of goal.

The Argentina international has scored just once in his last 10 matches, but put in a more lively showing against Galatasaray than in some other recent appearances.

With five minutes remaining Griezmann whipped a free-kick towards the top corner but Galatasaray goalkeeper Ugurcan Cakir tipped his effort away and then denied Alex Baena to preserve a point for his side.

Galatasaray might have won it at the death but Llorente surged in to pinch the ball from Eren Elmalı as he was poised to strike.

The draw was not overly satisfying for the Turkish outfit, away at Manchester City in their final group match next week where they will aim to qualify for the play-off round.

Atletico host Bodo/Glimt and still have a chance of sealing a top-eight league phase spot.

Man City players to reimburse travelling fans after shock defeat in Bodo

Manchester City players will dig into their own pockets to refund travelling fans after a humiliating 3-1 Champions League defeat to Norwegian side Bodo/Glimt in Arctic conditions.

The Premier League club suffered the upset on Tuesday as Bodo/Glimt secured a first Champions League victory thanks to Kasper Høgh's quick-fire double and Jens Petter Hauge's stunning solo effort.

City managed a consolation through Rayan Cherki, but the second-half dismissal of 2024 Ballon d'Or winner Rodri sealed a miserable evening in the Norwegian town of Bodo.

In the aftermath, senior City players Bernardo Silva, Ruben Dias, Rodri and Erling Haaland issued a statement acknowledging the sacrifice of supporters who made the long journey north.

"Our supporters mean everything to us... it was a lot of travelling for the fans who supported us in the freezing cold throughout a difficult evening for us on the pitch," they said on Wednesday.

"Covering the cost of these tickets for the fans who travelled to Bodo is the least we can do."

They will reimburse the 374 fans a total of 9,357 pounds (\$12,568) after each paid about 25 pounds per ticket.

"The City support has an incredible connection with the players on a matchday, and this gesture is yet another reminder of that relationship - it means a lot to us," said Kevin Parker, speaking on behalf of City's Official Supporters Club.

"We know that the players are disappointed with the defeat to Bodo, but with our next game at home on Saturday there's a chance to get back to winning ways and our fans will be in full voice, backing the team as they always do."

Pep Guardiola's side, who lost 2-0 in the Premier League at Manchester United on Saturday, host Wolverhampton Wanderers on Saturday.

City sit second in the Premier League with 43 points from 22 matches, seven points behind leaders Arsenal.

(AFP)