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AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Djokovic rolls
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third round berth

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MOTORSPORT

Rampant al-Attiyah jumps into early lead at Oman Rally

Qatari stops the clocks in 2min 30.7sec to take a lead of 8.1 secs



Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and his co-driver Candido Carrera in action during the Oman International Rally.

By Sports Reporter
Sohar, Oman

Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and Candido Carrera surged into the lead of the 29th Oman International Rally after the opening 2.52km Sohar super special stage, which was held in dry and breezy conditions in Sohar.

The Skoda Fabia RS crew stopped the clocks in 2min 30.7sec to take a lead of 8.1 seconds into the night halt. Local hero Abdullah al-Rawahi and his Jordanian co-driver Ata al-Hmoud were second quickest in a Skoda Fabia RS. Hamza Bakhashab and Lorcan Moore rounded off the top three in a Toyota GR Yaris.

Several competitors attended the afternoon's pre-event press conference before crossing the start podium to kick start another season's action in the FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC).

Al-Rawahi has only driven around 100km since his nasty accident in Lebanon last summer but the former regional champion is looking

forward to his return. "Coming back from injury after the crash in Lebanon. It was a very bad one but I think I'm quite recovered. I didn't want to miss this rally. It's very important to me. It's my home event.

"I'm not sure we are 100% prepared. The car only arrived a week ago. We weren't sure if we were going to participate or not. Now it's here and I am very excited to be back. Let's see how it goes. Last year we had good pace. We will try to do the same and push to at least win a few stages."

Jordan's Shaker Jweihan and Mustafa Juma headed the FIA MERC2 runners in fourth overall in a Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution IX.

Defending FIA MERC Master Driver champion Nasser Khalifa al-Atya finished the opening Sohar stage in fifth position. The Qatari said: "The stages are going to be very smooth. We were stretching on the shakedown this morning, just to build the pace. The car was good. We checked the brakes and the suspension and now we are looking forward to the real stages on Friday."

Bakhashab survived a late scare after a

transportation delay for his Toyota GR Yaris Rally2 from Saudi Arabia. He was granted a late scrutineering slot on Thursday morning and was cautious on the opening stage as a result of the delayed arrival of further spare parts.

Rashid al-Muhannadi got the better of his QMMF teammate Mohammed al-Marri to lead the Rally4 category in 10th place. Lebanon's Shadi El Fakih made a disappointing start in his little Renault Clio and lost around seven minutes with suspected fuel feed issues in the stage.

Zakariya al-Ofi and Ammar al-Balushi were the early leaders of the 13-strong Oman National Rally in a Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution IX. Today competitors face two passes through three stages. Ar-Rusays (15.69km) opens proceedings at 09.13hrs and precedes runs through Ar-Rassah (19.22km) and Al-Uwaynah (13.99km) from 09.56hrs and 10.39hrs.

The three speed tests will be repeated at 13.18hrs, 14.01hrs and 14.44hrs after a return to Sohar for a late morning regroup and service.

FOOTBALL

Al Sadd's Meshaal joins Belgian side KAS Eupen on loan

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Sadd midfielder **Mustafa Meshaal** has become the latest Qatari footballer to move abroad after joining Belgian side KAS Eupen on loan until the end of the season.

The move follows last week's agreement between Spanish second division club Cultural y Deportiva Leonesa and Al Duhail for the loan of defender Homam al-Amin for the remainder of the campaign.



Both transfers form part of the Qatar Football Association's plan to send selected players overseas as part of preparations for this summer's FIFA World Cup, which will be held in the United States, Canada and Mexico. The programme is also expected to include players who are not yet regular starters for their respective clubs.

KAS Eupen compete in the Challenger Pro League, the second tier of Belgian football, and are owned by Qatar Sports Investments. The club was previously under the Aspire Zone Foundation, which also hold a 99 percent controlling stake in Cultural y Deportiva Leonesa.

In a statement issued yesterday, KAS Eupen said Meshaal "has good vision of the game and high passing accuracy" and can operate in central midfield in both attacking and defensive roles.

The 24-year-old has been with Al Sadd since 2019, winning the Qatar Stars League four times. He has earned 25 international caps and was part of Qatar's squad that lifted the AFC Asian Cup in 2023.

Meanwhile, full-back al-Amin has previously played for KAS Eupen as well as Qatari clubs including Al Gharafa and Al Duhail. A full international since 2019, he represented Qatar at the Concacaf Gold Cup in 2021, the FIFA World Cup in 2022 and the Asian Cup triumph in 2023.

Qatar beat Saudi in Asian Handball Championship



Qatar opened their campaign in the main round of the Asian Handball Championship with a 32-25 win over Saudi Arabia yesterday. Ahmad Madadi led the scoring for Qatar with eight goals, followed by Frankis Marzo with six, while Rafael Capote and Nasreddine Megdich added four goals each. Qatar will take on Bahrain today, before meeting the United Arab Emirates tomorrow in search of a place in the semi-finals. The tournament, currently being held in Sabah Al-Salem, Kuwait, also serves as a qualifier for the World Men's Handball Championship.

SPOTLIGHT

Sharjah beat Gharafa on penalties to lift Qatar-UAE Super Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

UAE's Sharjah were crowned champions of the third edition of Qatar-UAE Super Cup after defeating Al Gharafa on penalties at the Thani Bin Jassim Stadium.

The match, which ended 1-1 in regulation time, saw Al Gharafa losing 5-4 during the penalty shootout, with Hyun Soo Jang missing the last kick for The Cheetahs after what had been an almost flawless kicks.

The high-intensity match saw both sides wasting chances at goals in the first half. Yacine Brahimi had a glorious opportunity to give Al Gharafa an early lead in the 10th minute after pouncing on the rebound from Joselu's thunderous strike, but Sharjah's goalkeeper Adel al-Hosani made a superb

double-save to deny the Algerian international the opportunity.

Ferjani Sassi had his goal-bound header cleared on the line by Luan Pereira in the 61st minute, but the much-awaited opener eventually came three minutes later through Al Gharafa's Florinel Coman who finished off a sublime exchange of passes initiated by Ayoub al-Oui inside Sharjah's final third.

The lead, however, only lasted for 10 minutes as Luan Pereira secured the equaliser for the Emirati side.

Joselu had a great opportunity of restoring Al Gharafa's lead two minutes later, but the Spanish striker headed straight at al-Hosani from a swerving cross by Coman.

With scoring chances being few and far between from thereon, the match headed into the decisive spot kicks, which the Emirati side ended up winning.



UAE's Sharjah players celebrate after winning the Qatar-UAE Super Cup at the Thani Bin Jassim Stadium.

FOCUS

Bangladesh refuse to go to India for T20 World Cup

AFP
Dhaka

Bangladesh will not travel to India to play in next month's T20 World Cup, its cricket board said yesterday, effectively ruling the country out of the tournament. "Our only demand is to play the World Cup – but not in India," Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) President Aminul Islam Bulbul told reporters. The refusal came a day after cricket's governing body rejected Bangladesh's plea to play its games in Sri Lanka instead.

"There is no scope for changing our decision," said Asif Nazrul, an adviser for youth and sports issues in Bangladesh's interim government. The T20 World Cup begins on February 7, with Bangladesh scheduled to play their four group matches in the Indian cities of Kolkata and Mumbai. The row between the neighbouring nations erupted on January 3 when the Indian cricket board ordered the Indian Premier League (IPL) franchise Kolkata Knight Riders to release Bangladesh fast bowler Mustafizur Rahman. Mustafizur's removal from the IPL followed online outrage

in Bangladesh. The sport's global governing body said on Wednesday 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 International Cricket Council (ICC) said "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. However, Nazrul said Bangladesh's security concerns "did not

arise from speculation or theoretical analysis". "They arose from a real incident – where one of our country's top players was forced to bow, and the Indian cricket board asked him to leave India," he said. Bangladesh will hold elections during the World Cup, its first since a mass uprising in 2024 toppled then-prime minister Sheikh Hasina, a close ally of New Delhi. Political relations have since soured between Bangladesh and India, where Hasina fled after she was ousted. There are wider issues for India, which is preparing to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games that

are seen as a stepping stone for its ambitions to host the 2036 Olympics. "Bangladesh is a cricket-loving nation. If a country of nearly 200mn people misses the World Cup, the ICC will lose a huge audience," the BCB's Bulbul said. "Cricket is entering the Olympics in 2028, Brisbane in 2032, India is bidding for 2036. Excluding a major cricket-loving country like Bangladesh would be a failure." Bangladesh's appeal to the ICC was not without precedent, with India's arch-enemy Pakistan to play all its games in Sri Lanka. That deal was struck after In-

dia, a financial and administrative powerhouse within cricket, refused to travel to Pakistan for the 2025 Champions Trophy and played its matches in Dubai instead. However, the ICC said a year later a similar shift was impossible for Bangladesh. "There are many precedents worldwide where matches have been moved to other venues due to security risks," Bangladesh's Nazrul said. ICC sources told AFP this week that Bangladesh could be replaced by Scotland, the highest-ranked team that did not qualify outright for the World Cup.

CRICKET

Hosts Sri Lanka seal 19-run win over England

'It was a good game of cricket, but we need to keep improving'

AFP
Colombo

Sri Lanka's spinners turned the screws to script a hard-fought 19-run victory over England in the opening one-day international at Colombo's R. Premadasa Stadium yesterday. Set 272 for victory, England appeared to be cruising at 129-1 with Ben Duckett and Joe Root stroking the ball sweetly and the asking rate firmly under control. But once the 117-run stand was broken, Sri Lanka dried up the runs and England faltered with the bat, being bowled out for 252 in the final over. "It was a good game of cricket, but we need to keep improving. Our spinners did a terrific job. We knew it would start turning after the 30th over and batting would become a challenge," Sri Lanka captain Charith Asalanka said. Duckett's attempted reverse sweep brought Sri Lanka back into the game as he was ruled leg before to Jeffrey Vandersay. However, it was Root's dismissal that truly changed the complexion of the contest. The former England Test captain, a perennial thorn in Sri Lanka's side with imposing averages of 61 in ODIs and 62 in Tests against them, misjudged a sweep off part-time spinner Dhananjaya de Silva. Sri Lanka reviewed instantly, the on-field decision was overturned and the roar from the Premadasa stands said it all. With the required rate climbing north of eight an over, England were forced into risk mode. Harry Brook and Jacob Bethell both paid the price, brilliantly stumped by Kusal Mendis, with Brook undone off a wide by his opposite number Asalanka. Jamie Overton injected late drama with a muscular 34 off 17



Sri Lanka's Dunith Wellalage (left) celebrates with captain Charith Asalanka after taking the wicket of England's Jacob Bethell during the first ODI in Colombo yesterday. (AFP)

balls, adding 39 for the last wicket with Adil Rashid, but it proved too steep a hill to climb and he was the final wicket to fall. Sri Lanka's fielders matched their bowlers stride for stride, with De Silva and Dunith Wellalage pulling off stunning catches to keep the pressure relentless. Earlier, Mendis had been the glue that held Sri Lanka's innings together after England's leg-spin pair of Adil Rashid and Rehan Ahmed reduced the hosts to 124 for four. Battling cramps but showing sharp game awareness, Mendis

rotated the strike cleverly and punished anything loose. He added 88 runs for the fifth wicket with Janith Liyanage, who made 46. Mendis was on 92 at the start of the final over and watched from the non-striker's end as Wellalage stole the limelight, launching three fours and a six in a blistering 25 not out from 12 balls as the last over bowled by Overton yielded 23. That proved crucial as it dragged the hosts to 271-6 from their 50 overs. "Sri Lanka outplayed us," Eng-

land captain Harry Brook said. "We thought we could chase it and we were in a good position, but with the asking rate climbing it became difficult. It's hard to start and someone needed to go on and finish the job." The teams meet again at the same stadium tomorrow for the second game of the three-match series. **BRIEF SCORES: Sri Lanka 271 for 6** (Mendis 93*, Liyanage 46, Rashid 3-44) **beat England 252** (Duckett 62, Root 61, Overton 34, Madushan 3-39) **by 19 runs.**

TABLE TENNIS

Qatar's paddlers shine as Loghraibi wins title

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's **Racha Loghraibi** clinched the U-11 girls' title while young Al Annabi players delivered strong podium finishes as the WTT Youth Contender Table Tennis Championship which concluded at the Lusail Arena yesterday. Loghraibi defeated Egypt's Zeina Farouk 3-2 in the final. Loghraibi also finished runner-up in the U-13 girls' category after losing the final to Egypt's Malak Zaki. Her teammate Alia al-Baz claimed third place in the same category. In the U-13 boys' event, Rabia al-Kuwari took third place after a semi-final loss to Uganda's Joseph Sibatendara. Ahmed al-Abdullah secured third place in the U-11 boys' category, losing his semi-final to Sri Lanka's Taavi Samarweera, who went on to win the title, defeating Saudi Arabia's Rayan al-Manjourni in the final. Abdulaziz al-Abdullah added another podium finish for Qatar by placing third in the U-15 boys' category, after a semi-final defeat to Malaysia's Lee Yong Rin.



Elsewhere, the U-19 girls' title went to India's Syndrela Daz, who beat compatriot Divyanshi Bhowmick 3-1. Lee Yong Rin claimed the U-15 boys' title with a 3-0 win over India's Aditya Daze. The Youth Contender is the third event in the Qatar International Combined Series, which continues until the end of January with a total prize pool of \$500,000. The series opened with the WTT Champions Doha from January 7 to 11, followed by the Star Contender from January 13 to 18. The fourth tournament in the series, the Star Contender Youth tournament, will begin today, running until Sunday.

Injuries force two changes in South Africa squad for World Cup

Injuries have forced two changes in South Africa's squad for the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka next month. Batsman Tony de Zorzi and all-rounder Donovan Ferreira were both ruled out. They have been replaced by batsmen Ryan Rickelton and Tristan Stubbs – who were both surprise omissions from the original squad. Veteran batsman David Miller will miss a three-match series against the West Indies next week because of a groin injury and will need to pass a fitness test before joining the flight to India. The left-handed De Zorzi, who has played in two T20 internationals, was a surprise choice when the original squad was announced three weeks ago. De Zorzi suffered a hamstring injury in a one-day international in India last month. He missed the SA20 and according to a statement by Cricket South Africa "has not progressed as expected in his rehabilitation". The hard-hitting Ferreira broke his collarbone in an SA20 match last week. Rickelton was the leading run-scorer in the league phase of the SA20, which finishes tomorrow, while Stubbs was regarded as one of South Africa's leading T20 players before suffering a dip in form last year. Coach Shukri Conrad said he was optimistic that Miller would be able to recover in time. "He had a follow-up scan today and the results were positive," he said. Left-handed batsman Rubin Hermann will replace Miller for the West Indies series, which starts in Paarl on Tuesday. **Revised South African squad:** Aiden Markram (captain), Corbin Bosch, Dewald Brevis, Quinton de Kock (wkt), Marco Jansen, George Linde, Keshav Maharaj, Kwena Maphaka, David Miller, Lungi Ngidi, Anrich Nortje, Kagiso Rabada, Ryan Rickelton, Jason Smith, Tristan Stubbs.

HORSE RACING

Jenkille Hipolyte clinches Al Arish Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Jenkille Hipolyte delivered a rousing performance to claim the Al Arish Cup at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. The seven-year-old bay, owned and trained by Osama Omer al-Dafea, showed tenacity and class to prevail by a head in a nail-biting finish, under a well-timed ride from Arnaud De Lepine to the Purebred Arabian Conditions contest for four-year-olds and up over 1300m. The early lead changed hands repeatedly, with Taymoor Al Shahania showing the way initially before Shagraan took over briefly. That advantage was short-lived, however, as Kamun Du Nil surged forward to assume control, setting

a solid tempo and maintaining the lead into the early part of the home straight. He was chased closely by Taymoor Al Shahania, Shagraan and Manjam, with Jenkille Hipolyte tracking that leading group patiently, always within striking distance. As the field straightened, Jenkille Hipolyte began to press in earnest, quickening smartly to reel in the front-runners. Inside the final 200m, he hit the front, but the contest was far from settled as Al Khbaib, who had been held up toward the rear for much of the journey, launched a thunderous late challenge from off the pace. The closing stages developed into a gripping duel, with Al Khbaib rapidly closing the gap and threatening to sweep past. Jenkille Hipolyte, however, dug deep under pressure, finding just enough to hold on gamely and se-

cure victory on the line. Al Khbaib, racing for Al Shaqab Racing and trained by Jean de Mieulle, finished a close second under Olivier d'Andigne, beaten only a head, but two lengths clear of the remainder. **RESULTS**
40th Al Uqda Race Meeting - Al Arish Cup
RESULTS (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
Al Arish Cup - Purebred Arabian Conditions (Class 2)
Jenkille Hipolyte, Osama al-Dafea, Arnaud De Lepine
Thoroughbred Handicap 75-95 (Shalfa Qualifier) (Class 3)
Pacifiste, Mohd Ahmed Mohd Hasan al-Sulaiti, Jefferson Smith
Thoroughbred Handicap 70-90 (Class 3)
Ponga (IRE), Khalifa Hamed Nasser al-Sawai, Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik

Thoroughbred Handicap 70-90 (Class 3)
Al Mundher (FR), Owaida Salem al-Hajri, Abdulla Rashid al-Hajri
Thoroughbred Fillies And Mare Novice Plate (Class 5)
Tabahi (IRE), Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, Tomas Lukasek
Local Purebred Arabian Handicap 0-65 (Class 6)
Al Qaws (QA), Zuhair Mohsen, Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi
Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate (Class 6)
Jabroot (QA), Alban Elie De Mieulle, Soufiane Saadi
Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate (4yo Only) (No Official Rating) (Class 6)
Navarzato (FR), Mohammed al-Ghazali, Soufiane Saadi
Local Purebred Arabian Premium Maiden Plate (Class 6)
Agshar (QA), Tareq Essa RA Abdulla, Szczepan M



Jockey Arnaud De Lepine rides Jenkille Hipolyte to Al Arish Cup win at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. **PICTURE: Juhaim**

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Djokovic rolls back years as Sinner and Keys advance

Djokovic easily beats qualifier Maestrelli, Sinner supreme against Duckworth, Osaka still making waves

Reuters
Melbourne

Novak Djokovic rolled back the years to reach the Australian Open third round yesterday but Jannik Sinner, the man who has usurped him as king of Melbourne Park, showed why he is favourite to claim a hat-trick of titles.

Women's defending champion Madison Keys overcame a second-set wobble against Ashlyn Krueger to also advance while former champion Naomi Osaka toned down her outfit but not her power game as she also reached round three.

Iga Swiatek continued her quest to complete her career Grand Slam with a 6-2 6-3 victory over unseeded Marie Bouzkova.

Fourth seed Djokovic, seeking a record-extending 11th Melbourne Park title and 25th Grand Slam trophy overall to break the deadlock with Margaret Court, eased past Italian qualifier Francesco Maestrelli 6-3 6-2 6-2.

The 38-year-old Serb maintained his steady grip on the second-round clash without needing to shift into top gear.

"I didn't know much about him (Maestrelli) until a few days ago, it happens more often than not these days," Djokovic said of his 23-year-old opponent.

He raced through the opening set and pounced again in the opening game of the second set to heap pressure on world number 141 Maestrelli. The win was Djokovic's 399th in Grand Slams and his 101st in Melbourne, leaving him one shy of record-holder Roger Federer. Djokovic will next meet Botic van de Zandschulp.

There was something of a retro feel about day five in the men's singles with Swiss former champion Stan Wawrinka, 40, outlasting Arthur Gea 4-6 6-3 3-6 7-5 7-6 (10-3) while Marin Cilic, 37, dispatched 21st seed Denis Shapovalov 6-4 6-3 6-2.



Serbia's Novak Djokovic hits a shot against Italy's Francesco Maestrelli during their Australian Open match in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

In 2009, Djokovic, Cilic and Wawrinka all reached round three and 17 years later they are still going strong.

The man to beat on blue Melbourne hard courts these days, however, is Sinner. He was supreme as he thumped home wild card James Duckworth 6-1 6-4 6-2 in the Rod Laver Arena evening session, banging down 18 aces in a dominant display.

Sinner, bidding to join Djokovic by becoming only the second man

in the professional era to win three successive Australian Open titles, has now won 12 successive Tour-level matches without dropping a set and looks razor sharp.

"I know how much work I've put in so the body feels good and the mind is in a good moment," he said. The world number two will face American Eliot Spizzirri next.

KEYS STUMBLES ON WAY TO WIN OVER KRUEGER
Keys, the ninth seed in the draw, notched up a 6-1 7-5 win over fel-



USA's Madison Keys hits a shot against USA's Ashlyn Krueger during their Australian Open match yesterday. (AFP)

low American Krueger but was less than convincing after powering her way through the opening set. The defending champion allowed doubts to creep into her game in the second set, handing Krueger two breaks on serve with a succession of double faults before battling back to progress to the next round to face Karolina Pliskova.

Swiatek shrugged off the sluggishness of her first-round match with a much more lively display against Bouzkova.

"It felt great playing today, I felt more free than in the first round so I wanted to go for it," Swiatek said.

Osaka, champion in 2019 and 2021, ditched the parasol, veil and broad-brimmed hat for her walk-out against Romania's Sorana Cirstea but continued making waves in her jellyfish-inspired outfit,

battling to a 6-3 4-6 6-2 win.

There was no love lost between the two players though with a frosty exchange at the net after match point with Cirstea upset by Osaka's antics. "(There were) apparently a lot of 'come ons' that she was angry about," Osaka said.

Sixth seed Jessica Pegula had few issues against doubles partner McCartney Kessler, handing out a comprehensive 6-0 6-2 defeat to her fellow American in 58 minutes to set up a meeting with Russia's Oksana Selekhmeteva in the third round.

Wimbledon runner-up Amanda Anisimova, also from the US, eased to a 6-1 6-4 win over Kateřina Siniakova and the fourth seed will next face compatriot Peyton Stearns while fifth seed Elena Rybakina beat Varvara Gracheva, also in straight sets.

MUSETTI DOWNS PAL SONEGO
Men's fifth seed Lorenzo Musetti won the battle of the Italians on Margaret Court Arena as he beat Lorenzo Sonego 6-3 6-3 6-4 and will face Czech Tomas Machac next after he overpowered Greek 31st seed Stefanos Tsitsipas 6-4 3-6 7-6(5) 7-6(5).

"It was not an easy match to prepare, to play, and to deal with because Lorenzo is one of my best friends on tour," said Musetti.

"We shared a lot of nice memories, so it's not easy to separate those things in the court."

Eighth-seeded Ben Shelton had few issues against Australia's Dane Sweeny, the American claiming a 6-3 6-2 6-2 win to set up a third-round meeting with Valentin Vacherot, who defeated Australia's Rinky Hijikata in four sets.

MOTORSPORT

Norris more confident and gunning for a repeat title



McLaren's Lando Norris celebrates on the podium with the trophy after becoming the 2025 Formula One World Champion at the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix on December 7, 2025. (Reuters)

Reuters
London

Formula One champion Lando Norris has still not watched back his title-clinching race but the McLaren driver will start the new season with more confidence and hungry for a second crown.

The 26-year-old Briton will race with the number one on his car for the first time at the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne on March 8. "It's absolutely the goal, yes," Norris said when asked about possibly becoming a back-to-back champion and joining seven-times winner Lewis Hamilton as the only Britons to achieve the feat.

"Certainly winning one gives you a lot more confidence," he added in accepting two trophies at the Autosport Awards in London on Wednesday night, one presented to him by triple champion Jackie Stewart.

"I've never been the one to have the most confidence in myself,"

he continued, as watching fans shouted "you should" from the balcony.

"I certainly have more of it now, that's for sure."

Norris won seven races last season, one less than Red Bull's four-times champion Max Verstappen whom he beat by two points after a three-way battle going into the season-ending Abu Dhabi Grand Prix.

"IT'S AN INCREDIBLE JOB"

Asked if he had watched back the moment that changed his life, Norris said he had not. "I've honestly tried to be as far away from everything as possible," he added. "Just enjoy the rest of my life, you know. I love Formula One. I also love being away from it."

"I mean, I'm lucky. It's an incredible job. I get paid well, and I get to travel with my friends. I get to go play golf in beautiful places. I like to go do those other things, you know."

Norris said he had reached a point halfway through the season, when his form improved as

teammate Oscar Piastri suffered a slump, where he felt he had everything he needed and was confident in his ability to win. "That first time I really had the belief in myself was last year," added Norris. "And it turned out to be the correct thing to have. So that was a beautiful thing too."

Norris said being champion had made him "probably just a bit happier" in his everyday life but not much had changed otherwise.

The champion will be back in the car next week when teams have a private test in Barcelona before moving to Bahrain for more sessions in February.

"It's a very different year, there's a lot more things to think about and prepare for. Simulator (work) started already a week ago. You approach every year as just a new year and prepare in the best way you can," he told Reuters television.

"It will for sure feel different, more when I step into the car and see the number one at the front. That will put a smile on my face again."

DUBAI DESERT CLASSIC

Molinari leads as McIlroy struggles

AFP
Dubai

Francesco Molinari powered into a two-shot lead after the first day of the Dubai Desert Classic yesterday, as four-time champion Rory McIlroy stumbled to an over-par round.

Former British Open champion Molinari, now 41st in the world rankings, made eight birdies in a seven-under par 65.

The 43-year-old Italian is two shots clear of Sweden's Mikael Lindberg, with Swiss player Joel Giribach and South African JC Ritchie a stroke further back. It was Molinari's lowest round on the European Tour since January 2024. "It's been a long time. I've changed everything and then I've changed back," said the 2018 Ryder Cup winner, who has not won a professional title since the Arnold Palmer Invitational seven years ago.

"Not super unexpected but I wasn't expecting a score like that. Last week I felt very rusty, so I was hoping it would be very good prep for this week."

Molinari will have plenty of work to do to hang onto his lead with a host of top players in the field this week. Shane Lowry and defending champion Tyrrell Hatton, who played starring roles in Europe's Ryder Cup triumph at Bethpage Black last year, both made solid starts with two-under rounds of 70.

"Standing here right now, I'm very happy with



Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland plays a shot on the 5th hole during the first day of the Hero Dubai Desert Classic yesterday. (AFP)

that score," said England's Hatton after his first competitive round of the year. "It was pretty tough this morning. Feel like I hit some pretty scruffy golf shots, which in some ways is to be expected."

It was a disappointing day though for McIlroy, who hit his approach shot on the par-five 18th hole into the water en route to a closing double-bogey.

The Masters champion had earlier mixed three birdies with two bogeys. McIlroy will need to make a move on Friday to get into contention for a fifth title in the event, as will world number three Tommy Fleetwood who also carded a one-over 73.

KOSGEI TRADES KENYA FOR TURKIYE AT OLYMPICS

Kenya's ex-marathon record holder Brigid Kosgei told AFP yesterday that she and four other Kenyans will compete for Turkiye at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. Kosgei, a silver medalist at the Tokyo Olympics, said fellow runner Ronald Kwemoi, a silver medalist at the Paris Games, will also switch to Turkiye along with three others.

"Yes, it's true, I changed my nationality to Turkish," she told AFP, happily.

"It was my decision, and I'm happy to compete under the Turkish flag in Los Angeles once the allegiance process is complete," she said. AFP was unable to reach Kwemoi for confirmation of his switch. The Olympic Charter requires an athlete to wait three years after last competing for one country before switching to another.

Kosgei, 31, has won numerous marathons including London, Chicago, Madrid, and Tokyo, and held the world record from October 2019 to September 2023 with a time of 2:14:04 (in a mixed-gender race). The process of obtaining Turkish citizenship began in 2024, she said.

"It is a personal decision and these runners have chosen and have been accepted by Turkiye. It's a

free world provided they follow the regulations," Barnaba Korir, a member of the Kenyan Athletics Federation's executive committee, told AFP. "We have very many runners in Kenya and we cannot accommodate all of them. Those who seek opportunities to compete for other countries are welcome. After all they will compete for them and still invest in the country," he said.

The others to switch flag are the less well established trio of Catherine Amanang'ole, Brian Kibor and Nelvin Jepkemboi. Several top Kenyan athletes have in the past chosen to run for other countries. Bernard Lagat, a bronze medalist at the Sydney Olympics and then a silver medalist at the Athens Games for Kenya, later represented the United States. He became a double world champion (1500m and 5000m) in 2007 for the US.

Another Kenyan Saif Saaeed Shaheen was world champion in the 3000m steeplechase in 2003 and 2005 for Qatar. At the last World Championships in Tokyo, Kenya finished second overall behind the United States with 11 medals, including seven golds, thanks to its long-distance runners.

SHOWJUMPING

Al-Marri leads Qatari riders' charge at Father Amir's Prix

Al-Marri produces a double-clear round aboard Navaronne, stopping the clock at 26.04 seconds

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatari rider Rashid Towaim al-Marri delivered a standout performance at Al Shaqab yesterday, claiming victory in the CSI5* Two Phases 1.40m class as the third round of the HH The Father Amir's Prix got under way at Al Shaqab.

Competing in his first five-star class of the championship, al-Marri produced a flawless double-clear round aboard Navaronne, stopping the clock at 26.04 seconds to secure top honours. Fellow Qatari Salman Mohammed al-Emadi finished second on Wathnan Toblerone in 26.32 seconds, while Mohammed Khalifa al-Baker completed the podium on Dukhan 3 in 26.38 seconds. "I am very happy with the performance of my horse Navaronne, which earned me the title in this class," al-Marri said. "This is my first participation in a five-star class in this championship, and I look forward to maintaining this start and competing with greater focus in the upcoming classes."

The CSI5* Faults and Time 1.50m class saw Saudi Arabia's Abdullah al-Sharbatly emerge victorious from a competitive field of 33 riders, with 13 finishing in the placings. Riding Boeckmanns Lord Pezi Junior, al-Sharbatly delivered a clear round in 64.45 seconds. Italy's Roberto Previtali placed second on I'm Special Mess PS, while Austria's Max Kuhner finished third aboard Eic Cooley Jump The Q.

In the CSI3* Two Phases 1.40m class, Italy's Emanuele Gaudiano topped the standings with a double clear in 25.96 seconds on Diarouge Blue PS.

Britain's Oliver Fletcher was second on Krack Bleu C, while Qatar's Salman Mohammed al-Emadi claimed third place aboard Wathnan Higoletta.

Qatari riders continued to impress in the CSI3* Special Two-Phase 1.35m class, with Nasser al-Ghazali taking first place on Heavens Light H. Faleh Suwead al-Ajami finished second on Wathnan Qapella, while al-Sharbatly came third this time on Dr Scarpo.

Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Alasaker won the CSI3* Faults and Time 1.25m class



Qatar's rider Rashid Towaim al-Marri in action aboard Navaronne.

on Stago CC Z, followed by Qatar's Suhaim Hamad al-Yafei on Flash du Puits and Sultan Salem al-Naemi on Cavallina 13.

In the CSI1* Faults and Time 1.10m class, Qatar's Abdulla Ahmed al-Khulafi secured victory on Quenta van de Corsendonksehoeve, narrowly ahead of Abdulla Tamim al-Thani on Cassandra 352. Saudi rider Fahad al-Shammari finished third.

The CSI1* Faults and Time 1.20m class was led by Saudi rider Salem Balharith on Lovina, with compatriots Khalid al-Hadi and Abdullah Abdul Aziz al-Alsheik completing the podium.

At national level, the Optimum Time 0.60m class showcased promising local talent, with Al Qaqaa Tamim al-Thani claiming first place on Goteborg Handyman, followed by Norah Jassim al-Thani on Rosi S and Ahmad Nasser al-Thani on Janne. The competition continues today at the Longines Main Outdoor Arena, featuring CSI3* classes at 130cm and 145cm, followed by CSI5* events at 145cm and the headline 155cm class.



HE Sheikh Thani bin Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Qatar Fund for Development, presents the trophy to Salman Mohammed al-Emadi, who finished second in the CSI5* Two Phases 1.40m class at the third round of the HH The Father Amir's Prix at Al Shaqab.



The CSI5* Faults and Time 1.50m class saw Saudi Arabia's Abdullah al-Sharbatly emerge victorious. He also claimed third place in the CSI3* Special Two-Phase 1.35m class.



HE Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Thani, Minister of Transport, crowned the winners of the national level 60cm class. Al Qaqaa Tamim al-Thani claimed first place.

EUROPA LEAGUE

Sancho sends Villa through as Lyon and Freiburg also advance



Aston Villa's Jadon Sancho shoots at goal as Fenerbahce's goalkeeper Ederson looks on helplessly during the UEFA Europa League match at the Sukru Saracoglu Stadium in Istanbul. (Reuters)

Reuters
Istanbul

Aston Villa secured a spot in the Europa League last 16 as Jadon Sancho's header earned a 1-0 win at Fenerbahce, with SC Freiburg and Olympique Lyonnais also booking their places in the knockout stage.

The deadlock in Istanbul was broken by Villa in the 25th minute as Sancho steered a precise downward header into the net after a deflected cross from Matty Cash. The second half brought a flurry of action and Fenerbahce thought they had equalised in the 75th minute

when Kerem Akturkoglu found the net, only for it to be disallowed after an offside in the build-up and Villa held on for the win.

Celtic got off to a flying start in Bologna with two first-half goals, as Reo Hatate struck early and Auston Trusty doubled the lead before the break. However, between the two goals Hatate was sent off after receiving two yellow cards. Bologna responded through Thijs Dallinga before Jonathan Rowe brought them level with a goal in the 72nd minute as the match ended 2-2.

Lyon secured their place in the next round with a hard-fought 1-0 win over Young Boys, as Ainsley

Maitland-Niles struck deep into first-half stoppage time in Bern.

A late goal from Igor Matanovic gave Freiburg a 1-0 win at home against Maccabi Tel-Aviv, ensuring the German side a place in the last 16. In the Norwegian city of Bergen, a penalty in the tenth minute of stoppage time from Joachim Soltvedt rescued a 3-3 draw for SK Brann against Danish side Midtjylland in a highly entertaining Nordic clash.

Real Betis' strong run in the competition took a hit as they lost 2-0 at PAOK, where a goal from Andrija Zivkovic and a penalty from Giorgos Giakoumakis secured the Greek side a win.

FOOTBALL

Casemiro to leave Man United

AFP
London

Casemiro will leave Manchester United at the end of the season following the expiry of his contract, the Premier League club announced. The Brazil international arrived from Real Madrid in 2022 for a fee of £70mn and has so far played 146 games for the club, scoring 21 goals. Casemiro said in a club statement that he would "carry Manchester United with me throughout my entire life".

The midfielder, 33, forged his reputation at Real Madrid, where he won five Champions League titles. Casemiro scored the opening goal in United's League Cup final win against Newcastle in 2023 as the club finished third in the league. But he did not feature in the club's FA Cup final win

against Manchester City the following year. Casemiro, one of the highest earners at old Trafford, said on his personal Instagram account that he would be "forever" a Red Devil.

REAL MADRID TOP FOOTBALL RICH LIST

Real Madrid stayed top of football's rich list as Liverpool outstripped their English rivals for the first time, according to Deloitte's Money League study. Spanish giants Madrid generated nearly 1.2bn euros in revenue in the 2024/25 season despite failing to win a major trophy.

The refurbishment of the club's Santiago Bernabeu stadium into a multi-purpose venue continues to pay rich dividends - Madrid's 594mn euros of commercial revenues alone would be enough for a place in the top 10. Barcelona climbed back into second place in Deloitte's table (975mn euros)

despite delays forcing them to play the whole season away from the Camp Nou, which is still being redeveloped.

Bayern Munich were third on the list (861mn euros), marginally ahead of Paris Saint-Germain, whose income was boosted by winning the Champions League for the first time.

The rest of the top 10 is dominated by Premier League clubs, with Liverpool leading the English contingent for the first time.

An expansion of Anfield plus a return to the Champions League and winning the Premier League title boosted the Reds' revenue to 836mn euros.

Manchester City and Manchester United both slipped down the list. Pep Guardiola's City fell from second to sixth. United dropped behind Arsenal to eighth after missing out on the Champions League and finishing 15th in the Premier League.

Track star Levrone announces pregnancy

Los Angeles: Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone, the two-time Olympic 400 metres hurdles champion and the second fastest woman ever in the flat 400m, announced that she is expecting a child. The 26-year-old American broke the news on social media with a series of photos with her husband Andre Levrone.

The pictures also show the couple admiring scans of the baby. McLaughlin-Levrone is track and field's biggest woman star, having shown at the world



championships in Tokyo last year that she can transfer her talents from the hurdles to the 400m flat with stunning success.

In winning the title, she became the first woman since 1985 to break the 48-second barrier and nearly eclipsed a 41-year-old world record set by Marita Koch of the former East Germany.

McLaughlin-Levrone won the Olympic 400m hurdles title at the 2020 Tokyo and 2024 Paris Games. She will likely miss the biggest event of the 2026 calendar, the new World Athletics Ultimate Championships, being held in Budapest on September 11-13.

FIBA Basketball World Cup trophy to be showcased at Match for Hope Fan Festival

Doha: The Naismith Trophy, awarded to the winners of the FIBA Basketball World Cup, will be on display at the Match for Hope Fan Festival from tomorrow until January 31 at Place Vendome Mall in Lusail. With Qatar set to host the FIBA Basketball World Cup in 2027, fans will have a rare opportunity to see the sport's most prestigious prize up close and take

photographs with the trophy.

The fan engagement initiative is being organised by the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027 Local Organising Committee and the Qatar Basketball Federation, in collaboration with Qatar's International Media Office and the Education Above All Foundation. The eight-day festival will feature a range of basketball activities,

including games on an official World Cup 3x3 court under the guidance of the Qatar national team's technical staff. Fans can also take part in shooting contests and win prizes, including tickets to Qatar's upcoming matches in the FIBA Basketball World Cup Asian Qualifiers.

The highlight of the basketball programme will be a 3x3 All-Star Game

on January 28, featuring players from Qatar and Lebanon alongside well-known content creators visiting Doha. Basketball activities will begin on January 24 with performances by school teams competing in the Mini World Cup, while the Qatar women's national team will also visit the festival to interact with fans.

Match for Hope is an annual charity

football match held in Doha, bringing together football legends and prominent content creators to support educational causes. Since 2024, the initiative has raised more than \$19.5 million to support quality education for disadvantaged youth across the Middle East, Asia and Africa. This year's match will be staged on January 30 at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium.