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SPORT

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MOTORSPORT

Al-Attiyah headlines entry list for Qatar International Rally

20 cars and competitors from 12 nations set for MERC round 2

By Sports Reporter
Lusail, Qatar

Defending champion Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah headlines a 22-car field with competitors from a dozen nations announced yesterday by the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) for next weekend's Qatar International Rally.

The second round of the 2026 FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) follows hot on the heels of last weekend's season opener in Oman and takes place on February 4-7.

Al-Attiyah and his Spanish navigator Candido Carrera stormed to victory in Sohar just four days ago and top a field that includes five Rally2 machines, six crews fighting for honours in the FIA MERC2 category, an impressive half a dozen machines in FIA MERC4, a Rally5 entrant and four visiting teams with SSVs.

Former regional champion Abdullah al-Rawahi and the 2012 event winner Abdulaziz al-Kuwari should be al-Attiyah's closest challengers. Like the top seed, they wheel out a pair of Skoda Fabia RS machines.

Talented up and coming local driver Mohammed al-Marri has made the transition from Rally4 to the premier Rally2 category and will drive a Citroen C3 for the first time, while defending FIA Master Driver champion Nasser Khalifa al-Atya rounds off the Rally2 field in his Ford Fiesta.

Jordanian Shaker Jweihan was the runaway winner of the MERC2 section in Oman last weekend and tops the field in his Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution X with co-driver Mustafa Juma. He faces 'showroom' category competition from fellow countryman Sami Fleifel, Kuwait's Jassim al-Muqahwi, Omani Zakariya al-Aamri, Indian Mohamed Mansoor Parol and Lebanese driver Charbel Chebly.

The QMMF launched its Qatar Academy Stars programme a couple of years ago and the federation is keen to continue the promotion of local talent and young drivers.

Al-Marri is one of the success stories from the project and drives a Rally2 machine on this occasion, while six teams will battle it out for MERC4 success in a quintet of Peugeot 208s and a solitary Ford Fiesta.

Academy member Rashid al-Muhannadi is the defending FIA MERC4 champion and teams up with Irishman Gary McElhinney in the first of the Peugeots. He will face fierce re-



Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and Candido Carrera stormed to victory in Oman last week.



Qatar Academy Stars' Rashid al-Muhannadi is the defending FIA MERC4 champion.

distance from the experienced trio of Ahmed al-Kuwari, Khalifa Saleh al-Attiyah and Nouef al-Sowaidi and their respective co-drivers, Baptiste Cerrato, Aisvydas Paliukenas and Laos Savvas. Ahmad al-Mohannadi and Taha al-Zadjali crew the fifth 208.

The Indian duo of Payyaakkal Panikkaveetil and Musa Sherif will be hoping to break

down the French manufacturer's stranglehold on the category in a Ford Fiesta.

SSVs are also eligible to score points in the MERC and a Qatari driver and three Italians will battle it out for honours. Mohammed al-Atteya and Mirko Carrara have a pair of Can-Am Mavericks, while Mario Marotta and regular Qatar Rally entrant Christiano Gabbarini wheel out Yamaha YXZ 1000 Rs built by Quaddy Racing.

The Lebanese duo of Shadi El Fakih and Joseph Kmeid overcame first stage fuel pump woes in Oman last weekend to round off the finishers and they will again be competing in a Renault Clio RS Rally 5 at the rear of the field.

Engine issues in Oman last weekend forced Jordan's Sheikh Bader al-Fayez to miss the event in Qatar and an accident also made it impossible for Ihab al-Shorafat to continue his MERC campaign from Lusail.

The event will be held under the chairmanship of QMMF President Abdulrahman al-Mannai, senior committee member Abdulrazaq al-Kuwari and the QMMF's Executive Director Amro al-Hamad. Administration checks will take place next Tuesday (February 3rd) at the Lusail International Circuit.

SPOTLIGHT

Sheikh Joaan's election as OCA President 'boosts Asian and gulf sporting development'



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani was elected unopposed as President of the Olympic Council of Asia during the 46th OCA General Assembly held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on Monday.

President of the Asian Athletics Association Dahan Jumaan al-Hamad and President of the Qatar Gymnastics Federation Ali al-Hitmi said the election of President of the Qatar Olympic Committee HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani as President of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) reflects strong Asian confidence in his leadership and marks an important step for the development of sport across the continent.

Al-Hamad said Sheikh Joaan's election represents a major leap towards broader sporting excellence in Asia, noting that his vision for institutional development, administrative expertise, and accumulated experience qualify him to lead the OCA towards a future that meets the aspirations of Asian sport.

He added that Sheikh Joaan's leadership will enhance opportunities for institutional co-operation among Asian sports bodies, support sustainability pathways, and consolidate Olympic values across national Olympic committees and continental federations.

Al-Hitmi, meanwhile, described the election as a significant achievement for Arab and Gulf sport, affirming Asian confidence

in Gulf leadership capabilities and their influential role in advancing the Olympic movement at the continental level.

He said the broad consensus surrounding Sheikh Joaan's election reflects the high standing of Qatari sports leadership and its ability to assume senior positions within continental and international sports institutions. Al-Hitmi added that Sheikh Joaan's vision and extensive experience will contribute effectively to the next phase of Asian sport and to strengthening progress and achievement within the OCA.

Both officials congratulated the Asian Olympic committees on the election, stressing that the coming stage requires leadership grounded in experience, strategic planning, and comprehensive institutional management - qualities they said Sheikh Joaan has consistently demonstrated through his successful leadership of the Qatar Olympic Committee in recent years.

Sheikh Joaan was elected unopposed as President of the Olympic Council of Asia during the 46th OCA General Assembly held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on Monday, with the participation of more than 350 sports officials representing 45 Asian Olympic committees.

Qatar beat Kuwait in thriller to reach Asian Handball Championship final



Qatar reached the Asian Handball Championship final after a thrilling 27-26 overtime win over hosts Kuwait, keeping their bid for a seventh straight title alive. Trailing 13-8 at halftime, Qatar rallied to level 22-22 by full time before edging the extra period. Ahmad Madadi led with nine goals. Qatar will face Bahrain in the final, after the latter defeated Japan 35-25 in the other semi-final.



MCILROY SAYS STARS NOT SATISFIED PLAYING WITH LIV GOLF

New York: Rory McIlroy referenced what he perceived as a shifting mindset among former LIV Golf members when asked about Brooks Koepka's return to the PGA Tour. The PGA Tour recently reinstated Koepka through a new Returning Member Program that offers a window for select players to return. The five-time major champion will compete this week in the Farmers Insurance Open. "I think it says more about Brooks than anything else," McIlroy told reporters last night after their TGL match. "He obviously is a very competitive person and wants to compete at the highest level. I

think he made the decision that he thought competing at the highest level meant coming back to the PGA Tour. "You've seen others say this recently; Patrick Reed said it in Dubai last week. It seems like some of those guys are maybe starting to realise that they're not getting everything that they wanted out of going over there, and that's obviously a great thing for the PGA Tour." Reed, who is ranked No. 29 in the world, completed an impressive victory at the Hero Dubai Desert Classic on Sunday. However, he admitted his LIV Golf status remains in the air with the start of

the season two weeks away. "We're still finalising the contract," Reed, 35, said Sunday. "We're not complete on that yet. It's one of those things that I don't like to talk business and stuff while I'm playing, and so it's like Monday through Wednesday is the only time to really talk about it." McIlroy, who is ranked second in the world, also was asked about the rumoured changes to the PGA Tour, including a shortening of the schedule. "We've all heard the rumblings without really knowing what's been said in those rooms and what they're thinking of," he said, "but obviously I think we've all heard

starting maybe after the Super Bowl and then going through the end of August before the football season starts again. That seems very condensed to me. Seems like a lot of golf in a pretty short amount of time, depending on how many events they want to play. But that does open up an opportunity for the other five months of the year around the world. I'm a DP World Tour member, a very proud one, and I think that opens an opportunity for them to showcase some of their biggest events in that time of the year." McIlroy, 36, owns a career grand slam among his 29 PGA Tour victories.



CRICKET

England's explosive batting ends Sri Lanka's home run

ENGLAND CLINCH THREE-MATCH SERIES 2-1 AFTER COMMANDING WIN IN THE FINAL ODI

AFP
Colombo

Harry Brook's blistering 57-ball hundred proved the difference as England romped to a famous 53-run victory over Sri Lanka yesterday to clinch the series and end the hosts' five-year-long unbeaten ODI home run. Sri Lanka had gone 12 series unbeaten at home, winning 11 and drawing one, but Brook's counter-punch knocked them off their perch and swung the momentum decisively England's way. "It was a lot better pitch than we expected. It was an awesome effort from everyone involved," said Brook, the England captain. "Joe Root in particular was sensational. We are pretty pleased with the way the spinners went about things and that's a good sign ahead of the World Cup." Chasing a daunting 358 at Colombo's R Premadasa Stadium, the hosts came out all guns blazing, racing to 104 inside ten overs of the Powerplay. But once the field spread, the boundaries dried up. In a bid to keep up with the required run-rate, Sri Lanka's batters took the aerial route and paid the price, as England snapped up catches with sharp work in the deep. Young Pavan Rathnayake stood tall amid the collapse, unfurling a maiden international hundred



England's Joe Root and captain Harry Brook run between the wickets during the third one-day international against Sri Lanka in Colombo yesterday. (AFP)

that underlined his promise. He was the last man out for 121 off 115 balls, striking 12 fours and a six, as Sri Lanka were bowled out for 304 in 46.4 overs. England, who had stumbled in the opening ODI, found their rhythm as the series wore on, adapting quickly to oppressive heat and turning tracks. After squaring the contest on Saturday, they delivered a polished all-round display when it mattered most.

The defeat saw Sri Lanka slip one place to sixth in the ICC ODI rankings, with South Africa moving up to fifth. Brook's brutal 136 not out off just 66 balls was an exhibition of clean hitting that left the home attack gasping for air and the 4,000-strong English contingent of supporters in raptures as the tourists finished on 357 for three, having opted to bat first. Brook's 11 fours and nine sixes was power hitting with a surgeon's

precision, a blend of muscle and timing that gave England the advantage. Brook had walked into the series under the microscope following revelations that he was fined £30,000 after a nightclub altercation in New Zealand last October. But he looked to have put the incident behind him in posting his third ODI hundred. The platform was laid by an unbroken 191-run stand with former skipper Joe Root for the fourth



Sri Lanka's Pavan Rathnayake plays a shot during the third ODI in Colombo yesterday. (AFP)

wicket, a partnership that gave England total control. With 130 runs scored in the last 10 overs, England turned a strong total into a mountainous one. Root's own milestone, his 20th ODI hundred, was overshadowed by Brook's masterclass. The former captain remained unbeaten on 111, continuing his role as Sri Lanka's chief tormentor after half centuries in the first two ODIs. Earlier, a 126 run stand between Root and Jacob Bethell for the third wicket had set the stage for the late innings carnage. Sri Lanka's bowlers simply had no answers. It was England's highest score against Sri Lanka in ODIs.

It was also the fourth-highest score at the venue, where anything north of 300 is usually a match-winning one. "Harry Brook just took the game away from us. It was a stunning knock," said Sri Lanka skipper Charith Asalanka. "But (there were a) lot of positives for us. Pavan Rathnayake has been scoring heavily in domestic cricket and he showcased what he can do today."

BRIEF SCORES
England 357 for 3 (Brook 136*, Root 111*, Bethell 65) **beat Sri Lanka 304** (Rathnayake 121, Nissanka 50, Jacks 2-43) **by 53 runs**
Man of the Match: Harry Brook

MOTORSPORT

Former Red Bull boss Horner eyeing Formula 1 return as Alpine investor

Reuters
London

Christian Horner's absence from Formula One may be short-lived. Horner, the famed former Red Bull boss who was fired by the company in July, is among a group eyeing a possible investment into F1 team Alpine. The French outfit confirmed Horner's interest in a statement Sunday. In December 2023, Alpine finalised the sale of a 24% stake to American sports investment firm Otro Capital and a group of investors that included golf pro Rory McIlroy, NFL stars Patrick Mahomes and Travis Kelce, boxer Anthony Joshua and actor/businessman Ryan Reynolds. Otro in recent months has explored selling its stake, meeting with potential investors. Enter Horner. "It is no secret that Otro Capital has held preliminary talks to sell its stake in the team," Alpine said in the Sunday statement. "The team is regularly approached and contacted from potential investors, particularly given Otro Capital declared exploratory talks have taken place. One of those parties to express an interest is a group of investors, which also includes Christian Horner." Reports of Otro's potential interest in selling surfaced in October of last year, with Markets Group reporting that Otro's initial investment of roughly \$900mn in 2023 would likely fetch far more money in a sale. Horner, 52, led Red Bull for 20



years but was officially terminated on Aug 13, 2025, after being dismissed by the team's parent company, Red Bull GmbH, after the British Grand Prix a month earlier. In his time at Red Bull, Horner oversaw 124 Grand Prix wins, eight driver titles – four by Max Verstappen and four for Sebastian Vettel – and six constructors' titles. No official reason was given for Horner's dismissal at the time, though the team was struggling to keep up with McLaren in the standings as questions arose about

the future of Verstappen and rumours swirled about a power struggle between Horner and some other senior leaders at Red Bull. Additionally, Horner – who is married to Geri Halliwell of Spice Girls fame – had been embroiled in scandal over inappropriate behaviour with a female colleague multiple times, allegations he denied. Horner's settlement with Red Bull at the time of his termination (he was under contract into the 2030s) was believed to be worth as much as \$100mn. After finishing last in the F1 team standings last season, Alpine is switching from Renault to Mercedes for its power programme for 2026. "Currently, the primary focus for the team is to be more competitive on track in 2026 which, with the new regulation era, presents a unique opportunity to show a sustainable recovery of performance," Alpine added in its statement.

ANNOUNCEMENT

India and England team up to boost mixed disability cricket in new move

AFP
New Delhi

Cricket heavyweights India and England are swinging behind a push to popularise mixed disability cricket, launching a five-match T20 series this week in a bid to take the format global. The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) and India's governing body BCCI hope the series will accelerate efforts to stage the first Mixed Disability Cricket World Cup in India in 2028. The format, which brings together cricketers with physical, hearing and intellectual disabilities, took formal shape only last

year when England hosted India in a pioneering seven-match tour. "Going forward, what we're hoping for is more countries joining because the format makes sense to the cricket boards," Ian Martin, the ECB's head of disability cricket, told reporters in New Delhi. "And hopefully in the future we will have more bilateral series, obviously leading into World Cups and hopefully the Paralympic Games," he said. "We believe we've got a format now that can work internationally and get more disabled people playing the game." England coach Jason Weaver said he had been inspired by his

"special" players, adding: "The standard has gone through the roof. It is really good cricket." The Differently Abled Cricket Council of India (DCCI), backed by the powerful BCCI, is hosting the series across two venues with support from Jindal SAW Limited. The first three T20s will be staged on the outskirts of New Delhi before the teams move to Jaipur for the final two games. The first game will be played on Thursday. India's para-cricket movement has been gaining momentum, highlighted by the women's blind team winning the inaugural T20 World Cup in December last year.

England's Sciver-Brunt becomes WPL's first centurion

Bengaluru: Nat Sciver-Brunt said she was determined not to join the list of batters who had fallen just short of recording the first century in the Women's Premier League (WPL) after the England captain hit an unbeaten 100 for the Mumbai Indians on Monday. Australian Georgia Voll came close last year when she hit 99 not out against the Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB) while New Zealander Sophie Devine was also one run short against Gujarat Giants in 2023, the WPL's inaugural season. All-rounder Sciver-Brunt smashed her 100 off 57 balls as Mumbai secured a 15-run victory over RCB, the 33-year-old reaching the landmark in the WPL's 82nd match. "I'd seen a few players get out in the 90s, so I didn't want to replicate that," Sciver-Brunt said after the first innings. "It's my first T20 hundred, so I'm really happy to get over that milestone, and hopefully it's not the last." In the men's edition, the Indian Premier League, a



century was scored in the inaugural match, Brendon McCullum hitting an unbeaten 158 for Kolkata Knight Riders against RCB in 2008. Since then, the IPL has seen 110 centuries, with Virat Kohli leading the count by scoring eight. The WPL's fourth season concludes with the final scheduled for February 5.

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Alcaraz shines as Sabalenka beats the heat to make semis

Alcaraz breaks new ground at Melbourne Park, top seed Sabalenka crushes teenager Jovic



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz hits a return to Australia's Alex De Minaur during their Australian Open quarter-final in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Melbourne

Carlos Alcaraz sizzled under the bright lights at the Australian Open and blazed into the semi-finals yesterday after fellow top seed Aryna Sabalenka remained cool in the unforgiving Melbourne heat to stay on course for another title.

Alexander Zverev was briefly made to sweat under the roof of Rod Laver Arena before overcoming Learner Tien, but a frustrated Coco Gauff unravelled in a racket-smashing meltdown following a stunning defeat by the resurgent Elina Svitolina. That preceded Alcaraz's dominant 7-5 6-2 6-1 victory over Alex de Minaur on the

main showcourt, as the Spaniard dashed his sixth-seeded opponent's hopes of ending a five-decade Australian wait for a homegrown men's champion.

The 22-year-old – a six-times major winner – is seeking his own piece of history at Melbourne Park, where he can eclipse Don Budge and become the youngest man to lift all four Grand Slam trophies. “It was a great match in terms of level, in terms of the intensity. I played the best match so far in the tournament,” Alcaraz told reporters.

“This is my first official tournament of the year and sometimes I’m not that patient. In the first match I really wanted to play at my best level. This is almost impossible. You have to get the rhythm of

the competition again.” Sabalenka, chasing her third title in four years, also got into a high gear for a dominant 6-3 6-0 win over 18-year-old Iva Jovic on a sweltering Centre Court, where the roof was open with the “Heat Stress Scale” not at its highest threshold.

Shortly after her victory, though, tournament organisers invoked the extreme heat policy as temperatures crossed the 40 Celsius (104F) mark, prompting the suspension of play on the outer courts and the closure of roofs on the main ones.

“It was hot out there. I guess as women, we are stronger than the guys, so they had to close the roof for the guys, so they don’t suffer,” Sabalenka joked.

“I knew going into this match

they won’t let us play in crazy heat. If it would reach five (on the Heat Stress Scale) they would close the roof.” The four-times Grand Slam champion was less pleased with the Australian Open’s ban on wearable fitness tracking devices after some players were told to remove them before matches.

Up next for Sabalenka is Ukrainian 12th seed Svitolina, who took full advantage of Gauff’s woes on serve and reached her first Australian Open semi-final with a 6-1 6-2 victory in under an hour. “It was a good day in the office,” said Svitolina, who is finding her best form after a mental health break last year. “Very pleased with the way that I’ve been playing, not only this match, but I think the tournament overall.”



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka reacts during her quarter-final against USA's Iva Jovic yesterday. (AFP)

Gauff later looked for a place without cameras to channel her frustration and was unhappy to find out that a video of her obliterating her racket on a concrete floor inside Melbourne Park was broadcast to viewers worldwide. “I kind of have a thing with the broadcasters,” she said. “I feel like certain moments – the same thing happened to Aryna after I played her in final of the US Open in 2023. I feel like they don’t need to broadcast it.”

While Gauff battled through her own storm, Melbourne Park wilted earlier as the temperature touched 45 Celsius at around 4.30pm and fans were largely absent from concourses across the usually buzzing venue. The day session attendance was 21,226, less than half Monday’s 50,010 for the corresponding

session. The decision to close the roof made conditions easier for the players, but Zverev was unable to get into his comfort zone against Tien, losing the second set to the American and being taken to a tie-break in the fourth. Despite being tested, Zverev said he was confident he could get past Tien in what he called perfect conditions.

“It was difficult physically, but it was not difficult with the conditions.”

The German third seed, runner-up to Jannik Sinner last year, secured a 6-3 6-7(5) 6-1 7-6(3) victory to stay on course for a first Grand Slam trophy but the path will get tougher with Alcaraz up next.

FOCUS

Third edition of Al Thumama Ramadan football tournament announced



Head of the Organising Committee Hassan al-Ishaq and Executive Director of the Qatar Sports for All Federation Abdullah al-Dosari speak at a press conference organised to announce the third edition of the Al Thumama Ramadan Football Tournament.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Organising Committee of the Al Thumama Ramadan Football Tournament has officially announced the details of the third edition of the championship, reaffirming its position as a flagship community football event for young players in Qatar.

The announcement was made during a press conference held at the headquarters of the Ministry of Sports and Youth, where officials outlined the tournament's objectives, format, and growing popularity. In cooperation with the Qatar Sports for All Federation, the tournament will take place at Al Furjan Stadium in the Al Thumama area, coinciding with the start of the holy month of Ramadan.

The championship is dedicated exclusively to age groups from 10 to 14 years old, covering players born between 2012 and 2016, making it the only tournament of its kind in Qatar for this specific age category. Registration for participating teams has officially opened and will continue until February

10 through the Qatar Sports for All Federation application.

The tournament offers a competitive and rewarding platform, with the first-place team set to receive a cash prize of QR7,000, along with the championship trophy and gold medals. The second-place team will earn QR5,000 and silver medals, while the third-place team will receive QR3,000 and bronze medals. Individual excellence will also be recognised, with the best player awarded QR500, and the top scorer and best goalkeeper each receiving the same amount. In addition, the best ideal team will be awarded a financial prize of QR2,000.

Head of the Organising Committee, Member of the Municipal Council Hassan al-Ishaq, emphasised the tournament's unique status and increasing demand. He noted that despite players' academic commitments, there is a strong and growing eagerness among teams to participate. Al-Ishaq revealed that requests to take part in this year's edition have increased, including a proposal to stage the tournament more than once annually, which is currently

under consideration. He also confirmed that a team from one of the Gulf Co-operation Council countries has expressed interest in participating, with the request presently under review. Building on the tournament's inclusive spirit, he added that a team from Gaza, which participated in the previous edition, is expected to return for the second consecutive year.

Executive Director of the Qatar Sports for All Federation Abdullah al-Dosari highlighted that the Al Thumama Ramadan Football Tournament represents a distinguished launch for the 2026 neighbourhood championships. He stressed that the event reflects a sustained commitment to organising community sports initiatives that serve various segments of society, particularly youth aged between 10 and 14. Al-Dosari described the tournament as a successful model for investing in neighbourhood sports facilities to promote an active lifestyle, encourage fair competition, strengthen social interaction, and discover emerging talents, especially during the spiritually significant month of Ramadan.

Brazil to bid for 2029 Club World Cup as Lula meets Infantino

Brazil intends to bid for the 2029 Club World Cup, Brazilian Football Confederation head Samir Xaud confirmed on Monday following a meeting between the country's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and FIFA chief Gianni Infantino.

The announcement was made after a high-level gathering at the Planalto Palace in Brasilia, which included Sports Minister Andre Fufuca and Brazil coach Carlo Ancelotti.

"We believe Brazil is capable of hosting this grand event, but it requires a lot of discussions and adjustments. However, Brazil will indeed submit its bid for 2029," Xaud told the country's official news agency Agencia Brasil.

FIFA has yet to open the bidding for the 2029

tournament. The first expanded version of the Club World Cup was held last year in the United States, with Chelsea emerging as champions. Rival bids are expected from Spain, Morocco and Qatar.

While Spain and Morocco - plus Portugal - will stage the 2030 World Cup, the selection of hosts for the Club World Cup operates independently. This marks a departure from past practice, where tournaments like the Confederations Cup often served as test events for the World Cup.

Infantino's visit to Brazil coincided with events related to the 2027 Women's World Cup, which Brazil will host for the first time. On Sunday, FIFA unveiled official branding for the event, which will feature 32 teams competing between June and July.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Liverpool's Slot eyes progress amid poor form, injury woe

Reuters
Liverpool

Liverpool manager Arne Slot said his team's five-match winless run in the Premier League had dampened spirits ahead of today's Champions League clash against Qarabag, despite their strong performances in Europe.

A victory over the Azeri side at Anfield would secure Liverpool a top-eight finish and a direct spot in the round of 16, avoiding the knockout playoffs. Yet Saturday's 3-2 loss at Bournemouth saw the English champions drop to sixth in the Premier League, 14 points adrift of leaders Arsenal. "It is going to be really difficult to quiet outside noise with the position we are in the league," Slot told reporters. "It's impossible to shut down the noise at a club like this if you are not competing for the league."

A growing list of injuries has become a major concern for Slot, with centre back Joe Gomez sidelined after Saturday's loss, and Ibrahima Konate also unavailable following the death of his father. Centre back Giovanni Leoni has been out since September with a cruciate ligament tear, meaning captain Virgil van Dijk is Liverpool's only available senior central defender. Right back Conor Bradley is also recovering from knee surgery. "For sure at centre back tomorrow there will not be a centre back. I can only play a midfielder as there are no centre backs available apart from Virgil," Slot said. "It is not an easy balance to find but you can see with the recent injuries it is not a good balance, that is obvious."

But the manager added that left back Andy Robertson would be available despite recent media re-



Liverpool manager Arne Slot during a press conference in Liverpool yesterday. (Reuters)

ports linking him with a move to Tottenham Hotspur. "It's hard to say anything definite in this world we are in but I expect him to stay," Slot said about the Scotland international. Qarabag, who drew with Chelsea in November, clinched a late win over Eintracht Frankfurt last week to rekindle their hopes of progressing in the Champions League, and a win at Anfield would guarantee them a spot in the top 24 and a place in the knockout rounds.

"They have shown this season that they are a very good team and a hard team to beat. Chelsea they kept to 2-2," Slot said.

"If you look at our Champions League this season, we've had a lot of strong teams to face and have done really well but that's brought us some problems in the Premier League a few days later."

PREVIEW

PSG hoping Newcastle visit can spark another run to glory

‘This will be the hardest game we could have played, so we have to rise to the occasion and be at our very best’

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique insisted he would accept losing to Newcastle in their final league-phase outing of this season's Champions League if they can go on to win Europe's elite club competition for the second year running.

PSG and Newcastle come into today's decisive encounter at the Parc des Princes in sixth and seventh place respectively in the 36-team standings, level on 13 points but with the reigning champions having scored more goals. Whoever wins will be guaranteed a top-eight finish, which grants direct qualification for the last 16.

However, a draw could knock both sides out of the top eight, depending on results elsewhere – the nine sides directly beneath them in the table are all within two points. The latter scenario would leave PSG and Newcastle facing an extra two-legged play-off round next month, which is what PSG came through last season before going on to win the title in style.

“This is a competition that we clearly like, which is a positive thing. Of course our aim is to finish in the top eight, and to beat a very good Newcastle team who have a different style, brave and physical,” Enrique told reporters on the eve of the match in the French capital.

PSG and Newcastle met in the old group stage of the Champions League two seasons ago, with the English side winning 4-1 at St James' Park before a 1-1 draw in



PSG's defender Lucas Hernandez and forward Khvicha Kvaratskhelia attend a training session at the Campus Paris Saint-Germain in Poissy, in the western outskirts of Paris yesterday, on the eve of the UEFA Champions League match against Newcastle. (AFP)

France. “We know them from having played them before, so it will be very difficult,” Enrique added.

“This is a key point in the season for us, but not as important as the future, because our objective is to win the competition. I would take a defeat or a draw if it meant us going on to win the Champions League. The real Champions League begins after this and we are an incredible team in knock-

out ties.” The coach said that full-back Achraf Hakimi would be in the squad for the first time since returning from helping hosts Morocco reach the Africa Cup of Nations final – he has not played for his club since early November.

Eighteen-year-old Spanish midfielder Dro Fernandez, signed on Monday from Barcelona on a four-year deal for a reported fee of eight million euros (\$9.6mn), is

likely to make his first appearance in the squad in PSG's Ligue 1 trip to Strasbourg on Sunday.

Newcastle braced for ‘ultimate test’ against PSG
Newcastle coach Eddie Howe warned that clash with Paris Saint-Germain will be the “ultimate test” of his side's ability after their pre-match preparations were disrupted by stormy weather.

“They are a team we really admire, especially the style – they are quite unique in the way they play, athletic players in every position, technically very good, tactically very interesting,” Howe told reporters in Paris.

“It is the ultimate test for me in Europe. This will be I think the hardest game we could have played, so we have to rise to the occasion and be at our very best.”

Whoever wins will be guaranteed a top-eight finish, which grants direct qualification for the last 16. However, a draw could knock both sides out of the top eight, depending on results elsewhere – the nine sides directly beneath them in the table are all within two points.

That would leave them facing an extra two-legged play-off round next month, which is what PSG came through last season before going on to win the title in style, beating several English sides along the way.

Newcastle lost in Marseille on their last trip to France in November, but they have happy memories of playing PSG – the teams met in the group stage in the 2023/24 season, with the Magpies winning 4-1 at home and only having to settle for a 1-1 draw in France after conceding a late penalty.

“That was a really great night for us because it was a great test of our development. I think the experiences we had two years ago definitely helped us for this time around,” said Howe.

“We have gone in with higher self-esteem, to first attack the competition and try to get through to the knockout stage. We are on our way to doing that.”

Howe's media duties were held up by an hour after the Newcastle squad's departure from the north-east of England was delayed because of stormy weather.

Newcastle come into the game having won just two of their last 10 away matches in all competitions, and will be without Brazilian midfielder Joelinton for the match, while his compatriot Bruno Guimaraes is a doubt.

Guardiola blames Man City team for Haaland struggles

Manchester City's players must step up to help Erling Haaland end his goal drought, manager Pep Guardiola said on the eve of his team's crucial Champions League match against Galatasaray. The Norwegian last scored against Brighton on the penalty spot in early January but has not found the net from open play since before Christmas. Guardiola

recently said his star forward, who remains top of the Premier League goalscoring charts with 20 goals despite his lean spell, was “exhausted”. He left the 25-year-old out of his starting line-up for Saturday's 2-0 win against bottom club Wolves, explaining the decision was to “clean his mind, his body”. Guardiola, speaking at his pre-

match press conference, said his team needed to “play better” to help Haaland. “Create more chances, he will score,” he said. “Never underestimate the strikers, because always they will make you silent. We want him to score for the rest of his life, that's for sure.”

(AFP)

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Barcelona host Copenhagen with top-eight spot at stake

Reuters
Barcelona

Barcelona welcome FC Copenhagen in the Champions League yesterday knowing a top-eight finish and direct ticket to the last 16 are on the line in their final group stage fixture.

Hansi Flick's side moved up to ninth on 13 points after last week's dramatic comeback win at Slavia Prague, leaving them level with seven other sides battling for a top-eight finish, suggesting goal difference is likely to be a major factor in deciding the final placings.

Their Danish visitors, who are 26th and currently in the elimination zone on eight points, will hope to secure a knockout-phase playoff spot, being tied with four other teams targeting a top-24 finish.

Barca's task has grown in difficulty as they prepare to navigate the match without two key midfielders.

Creative lynchpin Pedri is sidelined with a leg muscle injury sustained against Slavia, which will keep him out for several weeks, while Frenkie de Jong is suspended.

Speaking to the media yesterday, Flick acknowledged the challenge of the crucial fixture against the Danish side but expressed optimism about his squad's depth and determination.

“I hope the team is feeling good



Barcelona coach Hans-Dieter Flick attends a press conference yesterday on the eve of the UEFA Champions League match against Copenhagen at the Joan Gamper training ground in Sant Joan Despi, near Barcelona. (AFP)

and confident,” said Flick. “We have to respect Copenhagen. The most important thing is that we do our job and play at our best. It won't be an easy match. The goal is to finish in the top eight.”

“We're concentrating on our own game, on what we have to do. This is the Champions League and it's about reaching our highest level. We'll have a tough game, and we won't make excuses. We're eager and confident in our style of play.”

Addressing Barcelona's weakened midfield, he added: “We

have a good team, also on the bench. We play as a team, and we're eager to compete. It's very important for us. That's what I want to see.”

The Catalan side will be looking to build on their hard-earned momentum from the victory over Slavia Prague, which boosted their qualification campaign.

Wednesday's match offers a chance for Barca to reaffirm their status among Europe's elite after reaching the semi-finals last term for the first time since the 2018-19 season.

FOCUS

Shahania, Markhiya and Bidda enter QSL Cup quarter-finals

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Shahania, Al Markhiya and Al Bidda booked their places in the quarter-finals of the QSL Cup after contrasting victories in play-off matches.

Al Shahania edged past Al Shamal 1-0 at the Hamad Bin Khalifa Stadium, with a freak own goal in stoppage time sealing their progress. With the match goalless deep into added time, Yousef Raisi's long-range effort was punched into the air by Al Shamal goalkeeper Oumar Barry. The ball struck the top of the right post on its way down and ricocheted back over the line in the 90+2 minute, handing Al Shahania a dramatic win despite late pressure from Al Shamal.

At the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium, Al Markhiya came from behind to defeat Al Khor 2-1. Sofiane Hammi put Al Khor ahead from the penalty spot in the 20th minute, but Lucas Gabriel restored parity shortly before the break. Mouhamadou Naby Sarr netted the winner in the 57th minute, with both sides reduced to ten men after red cards in stoppage time.

Earlier, Al Bidda produced a commanding display to beat Al Sailiya 3-1 at the Grand Hamad Stadium. Tiku Cosmas struck twice, opening the scoring in the 12th minute and adding a second after the interval, while Cristian Del Bello made it 3-0 in the 66th minute. Salem Sultan scored a late consolation for Al Sailiya, who exited the competition despite finishing seventh in the league with 18 points.



COMPARING YAMAL TO MESSI ‘CRAZY’: BARCA’S OLMO

Barcelona midfielder Dani Olmo said yesterday it is “crazy” to compare teenage winger Lamine Yamal to club great Lionel Messi.

Like Barca's all-time top goalscorer Messi, Yamal came through the club's famed La Masia youth academy and has often drawn comparisons to the Argentine forward, which he has tried to play down. Yamal, 18, scored a brilliant acrobatic goal on Sunday as Barcelona beat Real Oviedo 3-0 to move top of La Liga. “I think Lamine has his path and he knows it. Comparing any player playing now with Messi is crazy,” Olmo told a news conference ahead of Barcelona's Champions League match against Copenhagen today.

“Lamine is a ‘spectacle’, he is very young, what he’s

giving us now is incredible and in the future it will be a lot more.” Yamal made his Barcelona debut at the age of 15 and has broken several records in his first seasons at the club, including becoming the youngest La Liga goalscorer. The winger lifted the Euro 2024 trophy with Spain and was vital in Barca's run to the Champions League semi-finals last season. “(Yamal) is calm, he has his path and his idea. We will be there to help him, that's our job,” added Olmo. “It's a collective thing in the end. If Lamine plays well, wins, scores goals, then the team will win.” Barcelona host Copenhagen today, needing to win and hope other results go their way to seal a top eight league phase spot to progress directly to the last 16.