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Sabalenka and Rybakina set up Australian Open final showdown



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Holders PSG, Real Madrid among clubs awaiting play-offs draw



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SHOWJUMPING

Kuhner claims CSI5* class as HH Father Amir's Prix finale begins

Riding Greece 5, the Austrian rider stopped the clock at 65.91 seconds under the Faults and Time format

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Max Kuhner produced a blistering clear round to claim top honours in the CSI5* 150cm class on the opening day of the fourth and final round of the HH The Father Amir's Prix at Al Shaqab.

Riding Greece 5, the Austrian rider stopped the clock at 65.91 seconds under the Faults and Time format, where speed proved decisive among a competitive field of 37 starters. Thirteen combinations finished in the placings, highlighting the fine margins at the top of the leaderboard.

Scott Brash settled for second place after guiding Hello Jefferson to a clear round in 66.56 seconds, narrowly missing out on victory. Portugal's Duarte Seabra completed the podium, delivering another polished performance aboard Fernhill Leonardo to finish clear in 67.98 seconds.

Italy's Emanuele Gaudiano finished just outside the podium in fourth place with Esteban de Hus, clocking 68.70 seconds, while Brazil's Marlon Modolo Zanotelli rounded out the top five on Charly Heart in 68.89 seconds.

Meanwhile, Kristen Vanderveen continued her strong run at Al Shaqab by topping both the CSI5* and CSI3* classes as he recorded three wins on the day.

In the CSI5* Two Phases 140cm, the American rider claimed victory aboard Starbucks 27 after stopping the clock at 28.08 seconds in the second phase. Britain's Millie Allen followed in second place on Quick Diamant HR in 28.87 seconds, while Qatar's Mohammed Khalifa al-Baker completed the podium with Dukhan 3 in 28.91 seconds.

Vanderveen also dominated the CSI3* Special Two-Phase 135cm, guiding Bull Run's Lioness to the top step in 30.46 seconds. Qatar's Suhaime Hamad al-Yafei finished second on Flash du Puits, with Iraq's Zayed Ali taking third aboard Quirani van de Maltahoeve.

The American made it a treble by winning the CSI3* Faults and Time 120cm,



Max Kuhner rides Greece 5 during the opening day of the fourth and final round of the HH The Father Amir's Prix at Al Shaqab yesterday.

with Bull Run's Mary, clocking 57.56 seconds. Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Alasaker placed second on Stago CC Z, while Egypt's Omar Mohamed Ahmed finished third with Kameila DS.

In the CSI3* Two Phases 140cm, France's Lara Tryba edged a closely fought contest to win aboard Flash de Talma in 24.73 seconds. Italy's Emanuele Gaudiano finished second on Diarouge Blue PS, just ahead of Britain's Oliver Fletcher, who took third with Krack Bleu C.

Saudi riders dominated the CSI3* Special Two-Phase 110cm, with Fahad Alshammari claiming victory on Le Garde. Abdullah Ibrahim Abdullah followed in second aboard Erosa, while Qatar's Saad Waheed al-Kuwaiti secured third place with Galatee de La Trigale.

In the CSI3* Faults and Time 120cm,

Khalid al-Hadi of Saudi Arabia topped the class on Hurry Up, ahead of Qatar's Ali Omar al-Ansari riding Nikita Eindeken Z, while Suhaime Hamad al-Yafei added another podium finish in third with Gamin Raye.

The National Competition Optimum Time 60cm was won by Qatar's Fatima Khalid al-Salem aboard Romio, with Essa Sultan al-Maadeed finishing second on Klara De Vinck and Salman Talal al-Hassan taking third with Janne.

Championship sporting director Salmeen al-Suwaidi praised the strong local participation and spectator turnout, noting that the opening day of the final round attracted a large audience and reflected the growing profile of the championship.

The action continues today with a full



Bader bin Mohammed al-Darwishi, President of the Qatar Equestrian Federation, presented the trophies to podium winners of the CSI5* 150cm class. Max Kuhner won the event, ahead of Scott Brash and Duarte Seabra.

American rider Kristen Vanderveen recorded three wins on the day, topping both the CSI5* and CSI3* classes.



programme of CSI3* and CSI5* classes, including a 1.55m jump-off and the debut of the CSI5* six-obstacle 1.50m class,

alongside junior, one-star and national competitions across the venue's indoor and outdoor arenas.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Berkane brace helps Wakrah rout Shahania; Arabi beat Umm Salal

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Redouane Berkane scored twice as Al Wakrah thrashed Al Shahania 4-0 in the Qatar Stars League at Saoud Bin Abdulrahman Stadium yesterday. Berkane opened the scoring from the penalty spot in the 21st minute and added his second early in the second half, flicking home an Ayoub Assal cross in the 51st minute.

Assal then made it 3-0 with a close-range finish two minutes after a near-miss from Berkane, who had raced through on goal but failed to hit the target. Yusuf Abdurisag completed the scoring in the 64th minute, capitalising on a loose pass back to the goalkeeper to slot home between the posts.

Al Wakrah dominated the contest throughout and punished Al Shahania for defensive errors, moving to 19 points with the victory. Al Shahania remain on 11 points.

In the other match of the day, Al Arabi claimed a 4-2 win over Umm Salal at Al Khor Stadium. Pablo Sarabia opened the scoring from the penalty spot in the 38th minute after Umm Salal's Abdulrahman Fayed was sent off for handball.

Al Arabi took control after the break, as an own goal by Jean-



Al Wakrah's Redouane Berkane (left) celebrates after scoring against Al Shahania at Saoud Bin Abdulrahman Stadium yesterday.

Eudes Aholou doubled the lead in the 48th minute. Karl Toko Ekambi (58) and Isaac Lihadji (62) added further goals to make it 4-0.

Naim Laidouni pulled one back for Umm Salal in the 69th minute, but Al Arabi were reduced to ten men in the 75th minute when Al Hashmi al-Hussain's yellow card

was upgraded to red following a VAR review.

Umm Salal reduced the deficit to two in the 88th minute through Antonio Mance, who later missed a penalty in added time. The result lifted Al Arabi to 23 points, while bottom-placed Umm Salal stayed on nine.

SPOTLIGHT

Lopetegui inspects Qatar's World Cup base in California

Manager Julen Lopetegui conducted an inspection tour of the Qatar national football team's planned training base in Santa Barbara, California. The visit is a key part of the Maroons' preparations for their upcoming campaign at the 2026 FIFA World Cup, which will be held in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Lopetegui assessed the training facilities and accommodations to ensure their readiness. This follows Qatar's qualification for the 2026 tournament, a historic achievement as it marks the team's first time reaching the World Cup through the qualifica-

tion process, rather than as hosts.

The choice of Santa Barbara highlights the Qatar Football Association's focus on optimal preparation.

The city's mild climate and modern facilities are intended to create an ideal environment for the squad's final preparations before the tournament.

Drawn into Group B for the 2026 World Cup; Qatar will face Canada, Switzerland, and the winner of European Play-off 1. The Maroons will begin their campaign against Switzerland in San Francisco on June 13. They then play Canada in Vancouver on June 18, before concluding the group stage against the European play-off winner in Seattle on June 24.



Qatar's manager Julen Lopetegui (left) visits team's training base in Santa Barbara, California.



SPOTLIGHT

Combat sports set to make 'dream' Doha debut at Katara

'This is a dream come true for Qatar in combat sports. It's a great honour to host these fighters'

By Rizwan Rehmat
Doha

Combat sports is set to make its much-awaited debut in Qatar tomorrow when two WBA Muay Thai titles will be decided alongside a couple of MMA bouts also lined up.

Two WBC Muay Thai fights are also on the playing roster tomorrow, this was announced by Sheikh Fahad bin Khalid al-Thani, President of the Qatar Boxing Federation (QBF), at a press conference that also featured the fighters, yesterday.

Ali Aliev will take on Chip Moraza-Pollard in the Cruiserweight WBC Muay Thai World Title fight while Sajad Sattari is lining up a potential win against Kaonar in the WBC Welterweight Muay Thai Diamond Title bout, Sheikh Fahad said.

In two MMA bouts, Qatar's Ruslan Satie will take on Bairam Shammadov while Kerimkhhan Kerimkhhanov will fight against Abdulwahab Mashareqi.

In two WBC Asia Boxing Title fights, Idriss Labidi will lock horns with Rivo Rengkung while Jadali Medeiros vs Shirin Shabani is also on the list of fighters.

"This is a dream come true for Qatar in combat sports," Sheikh Fahad, Qatar's retired professional boxer, said yesterday.

"It's a great honour to host these fighters. Such an event has been a dream of mine for a long time. Every WBC fighter dreams of winning belts. There are four belts on offer. I am sure fighters will showcase a new era of combat sports in Qatar," Sheikh Fahad said.

Aliev, who is primed to take on Moraza-Pollard, said yesterday: "It's a dream come true to have such events in Qatar. It's a unique and prestigious sport. Our vision is to promote combat sports. We want to go teach self-discipline to young fighters. We have great champions here. Before coming here, I had intense training. I am ready."

Moraza-Pollard said: "Ali is one of the best fighters in the world. I am ready for the 5 rounds and put



Sheikh Fahad bin Khalid al-Thani, President of the Qatar Boxing Federation (QBF) and Ghanem Saleh al-Kuwari, Head of Boxing at the QBF, pose with international fighters at a press conference in Doha yesterday.

on a good show. I've already had this belt. I lost it. It's an honour to fight for it again."

The Venum Fight 3 roster will be held alongside the eighth edition of the 8th Katara Boxing Championships. The first two days will be dedicated to local boxing, with 65 boxers from three age categories (senior, youth, and junior) representing 15 sports clubs from Qatar and one team from Lebanon, competing in 10 weight classes.

The final day's action will feature professional combat sports bouts, making the championship a focal point for international combat sports enthusiasts. Sheikh Fahad added that the championship matches will be officiated by eight referees.

"We met a year and a half ago with Mehdi. It was my dream to

have a gladiator feel in Qatar so we chose the Katara Amphitheater as the venue," Sheikh Fahad said.

Sattari said of his bout against Kaonar: "It's a prestigious title. Only 12 or 13 fighters battle for this title. I will do my best."

Ghanem Saleh al-Kuwari, Head of Boxing at the QBF, said participation in the previous seven editions was limited to members of the Qatari national teams and home club fighters. Al-Kuwari stated that this year's edition will be entirely different as QBF President has enhanced the tournament by introducing international bouts on the final day, featuring world-class professional boxers from various combat sports.

Al-Kuwari pointed out that the Qatari participation on the first two days, between national team

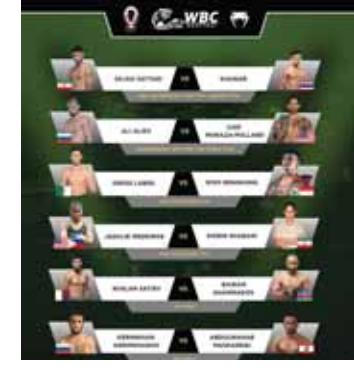
members and club boxers, aims to raise their level through competition with players from different clubs looking to gain experience.

He explained that the Qatari boxers have prepared for this tournament through intensive training

camps and by competing in international tournaments. Al-Kuwari said that QBF looks forward to further developing its tournaments in the future, in line with its ambitious plans to cultivate new generations of Qatari boxers capable of



Sheikh Fahad bin Khalid al-Thani, President of the Qatar Boxing Federation (QBF), at a press conference in Doha yesterday.



raising the national flag at various major regional and international sporting events.

"My message to boxing fans and combat sports athletes in Qatar is do not miss this opportunity. Please come on Saturday. It is going to be an amazing event. Action starts at 4 o'clock," Sheikh Fahad said. "Free entrance for all," Sheikh Fahad added.

VENUM FIGHT 3 MATCHUPS

Sajad Sattari vs. Kaonar - **WBC Welterweight Muay Thai Diamond Title**
Ali Aliev vs. Chip Moraza-Pollard - **Cruiserweight WBC Muay Thai World Title**
Idriss Labidi vs. Rivo Rengkung - **WBC Asia Boxing Title**
Jadali Medeiros vs. Shirin Shabani - **WBC Asia Boxing Title**
Ruslan Satie vs. Bairam Shammadov - **MMA Bout**
Kerimkhhan Kerimkhhanov vs. Abdulwahab Mashareqi - **MMA Bout**



CRICKET

Ayub star in Pakistan's win over Australia in first T20I in Lahore



Pakistan's opener Saim Ayub plays a shot on the leg side during the first Twenty20 international against Australia in Lahore yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Lahore, Pakistan

All-rounder Saim Ayub starred in Pakistan's spin-assisted 22-run win over Australia in the first Twenty20 international in Lahore yesterday.

Ayub top-scored in Pakistan's 168-8 with a 22-ball 40 that included two sixes and three fours, while Salman Agha added four sixes and a four in his 27-ball 39.

The tourists managed 146-8 in their 20 overs with spinners taking six wickets for Pakistan.

With the ball, Ayub dismissed Australian openers Matthew Short (five) and Travis Head, who hit two sixes and two fours in his 13-ball 23.

Cameroon Green resisted with a 31-ball 36 but Australia succumbed to spin with Abrar Ahmed taking 2-10 while Mohammad

Nawaz and Shadab Khan took a wicket apiece. Both teams were tuning up for the Twenty20 World Cup starting in India and Sri Lanka from February 7.

Pakistan skipper Agha praised a team effort.

"It was a great game with complete team effort," said Agha. "We started well with the bat but couldn't finish the way we wanted," he added.

"It became challenging after the first 10 overs as the ball stopped coming onto the bat, but I think we were outstanding with the ball."

Head, standing in for regular skipper Mitchell Marsh who rested, showed disappointment over batting.

"It was disappointing, but that's how batting goes sometimes," said Head.

"We felt like we dragged it back well after the first 10 overs but as the ball got softer, it became harder to score."

Earlier, Ayub led Pakistan's batting after the home team won the toss and chose to bat.

Pacer Xavier Bartlett jolted Pakistan by dismissing Sahibzada Farhan with the first ball of the match.

But Ayub and Agha restored the innings with a second wicket stand of 74, but spinner Adam Zampa put the brakes on Pakistan's progress with 4-24.

Zampa dismissed both Ayub and Agha in successive overs before accounting for Babar Azam (24) and Usman Khan (18).

Debutant Mahli Beardman finished with 2-33 as Pakistan managed just 31 in the last five overs.

The last two matches are tomorrow and on Sunday, also in Lahore.

BRIEF SCORES

Pakistan 168 for 8 (Ayub 40, Zampa 4-24, Bartlett 2-26) beat

Australia 146 for 8 (Green 36, Bartlett 34, Abrar 2-10) by 22 runs

PREVIEW

England look to fine tune for T20 World Cup with Sri Lanka series

AFP
Pallekele

Ranked number three in the world, England have most of their boxes ticked ahead of next month's T20 World Cup, with several of their batters and bowlers comfortably sitting inside the top ten of the rankings.

The three-match T20I series against Sri Lanka, all to be played at Pallekele starting today, is less about experimentation and more about fine tuning ahead of the format's showpiece tournament, which will be co-hosted by the island nation alongside neighbours India.

Since their painful semi-final exit at the last World Cup in the Caribbean, England have found their feet in the shortest format, winning four series, drawing two and losing just one.

"We have a good record over the last couple of years and we need to carry that momentum into the World Cup," England opening batter Phil Salt said.

"The key for us is a series win here."

"Any series win away from home is valuable and we are really looking forward to the first game," Salt added, referencing Brook's unbeaten 136 in the third one-day international against Sri Lanka in Colombo on Tuesday.

England have also quietly strengthened their spin bowling stocks, a factor that underpinned their recent success in the ODI series, where they fielded as many as six spin options and in one match, bowled 40 overs of spin.

"It's a huge bonus for us," Salt said. "We play our first-round games in Mumbai and Kolkata (in India) and sometimes you need different options depending on conditions."

"Having that variety is important because we know spin will play a big role in this part of the world."

"The middle order is never the easiest place to bat, but we have versatile guys with very high strike rates who can take the game away from the opposition,"



Sri Lanka's captain Dasun Shanaka addresses a press conference on the eve of their first Twenty20 international against England at the Pallekele International Cricket Stadium in Kandy yesterday. (AFP)

Salt said. "If you look at someone like Harry Brook, he showed everyone what he's capable of in the last game," Salt added, referencing Brook's unbeaten 136 in the third one-day international against Sri Lanka in Colombo on Tuesday.

Perera boasts one of the highest strike rates among Sri Lankan batters and also provides cover behind the stumps.

"Although he didn't play the recent T20 series against Pakistan, given his ability to bat anywhere in the top six, we know his value to the team," Sri Lanka skipper Dasun Shanaka said.

"Hopefully he can do a job for us. His experience is vital."

Fast bowler Dushmantha Chameera also returns after being rested for the ODI series against England.

Leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga, who missed the first two ODIs and struggled late in the third, raised concerns over a recurring hamstring issue, but Shanaka played down the alarm bells.

Chameera, with his pace, can trouble batters and he's accurate, which makes him hard to hit," Shanaka said.

"Hasaranga was just having cramps, nothing serious. With both of them in the squad, our bowling looks strong."

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Sabalenka and Rybakina set up final showdown

SABALENKA DEFEATS SVITOLINA IN STRAIGHT SETS, RYBAKINA GETS PAST PEGULA TO MAKE TITLE CLASH

Reuters
Melbourne

Aryna Sabalenka swept to her fourth successive Australian Open final with a 6-2 6-3 victory over Ukrainian Elina Svitolina yesterday in a semi-final overshadowed by geopolitical tension and will play familiar rival Elena Rybakina next.

Rybalkina set up a blockbuster rematch of the 2023 final at Melbourne Park by overcoming American Jessica Pegula 6-3 7-6(7), as the Russian-born Kazakh ramped up her own hunt for a second major title following her 2022 Wimbledon triumph.

Top-seeded Belarusian Sabalenka will seek her third title at the tournament in four years and fifth Grand Slam trophy overall after another dominant display at what is now firmly her favourite hunting ground. "I just can't believe that. It's an incredible achievement but the job is not done yet," world number one Sabalenka said.

"I'm super happy with the win. She's such a tough opponent and has been playing incredible tennis the whole week."

The defining moment for Sabalenka proved to be a hindrance call from the chair umpire mid-rally in the first set for a late non-standard grunt, a decision that stood following a video review and left the player fuming.

"It was the wrong call, but whatever," Sabalenka said.

"She really – how do I say in a nice way – pissed me off, and it helped me and benefited my game."

"I was more aggressive. I was not happy with the call."

SVITOLINA HOPED TO BRING UKRAINE 'LIGHT'

Since Russia's invasion of its neighbour Ukraine in 2022, for



Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina celebrates her victory over USA's Jessica Pegula in the Australian Open semi-final in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka celebrates victory over Ukraine's Elina Svitolina during their Australian Open semi-final in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

which Belarus has been a staging ground, players from Russia and Belarus have been banned from representing their nations at the Grand Slams and tour events.

Svitolina has been vocal about the strain of playing the countries' players, and said she hoped to bring her country "light" at the Australian Open amid a tough winter.

The 27-year-old Sabalenka, however, crushed those hopes in a furious display of raw power.

She became the third woman in the professional era to reach the Australian Open decider four times in a row following Evonne Goolagong Cawley (1971-76) and Martina Hingis (1997-2002), who each played six finals in a row.

"Gutted not to make it through tonight," Svitolina told reporters. "Of course it's very difficult when

you're playing a world number one on fire."

While 31-year-old Svitolina was comprehensively defeated, she fought hard from the first ball to the last. The 12th seed started with tenacity, hitting a forehand winner down the line on the first point returning serve. Sabalenka wobbled, giving up two break points with a loose backhand, but blasted her way out of danger.

There was tension at 2-1 when Svitolina was awarded a point mid-rally, with Sabalenka penalised for hindrance.

Incensed, she demanded a video review but the point stood. She channelled her frustration into breaking Svitolina, and then held for a 4-1 lead. Pinning Svitolina well behind the baseline, Sabalenka grabbed three set points and converted the third, roaring "Let's

go!" after a sizzling cross-court backhand winner.

After 41 minutes of earth-shaking power, Sabalenka's weapons finally misfired. She dropped the opening service game of the second set with a clutch of errors, raising cheers from a crowd yearning for a contest.

But Sabalenka steadied herself, breaking Svitolina twice in succession. Svitolina never dropped her head and earned a break point when trailing 4-2 to put the match back on serve.

Sabalenka was not to be denied, though. After thrashing a forehand winner down the line to save the break point, she proved unstoppable.

Grabbing two match points with a huge serve, Sabalenka closed it out in style, swooping forward with a forehand cross-court win-

ner to book her chance of claiming a third trophy at Melbourne Park.

RYBAKINA'S TRADEMARK HEAVY HITTING

Fifth seed Rybakina later made a blazing start on Rod Laver Arena as the 26-year-old dictated terms with her trademark heavy hitting to pile the pressure on American Pegula, who looked out of sorts under the lights.

Sixth-seeded Pegula settled her nerves and stayed in touch at 4-2 down after saving break points, but Rybakina dialled up the intensity again and took the opening set with a cross-court winner to put one foot in the final.

Having finished her 2025 campaign by toppling Sabalenka in the season-ending WTA Finals to lift the trophy, Rybakina looked in a hurry to book her 15th clash with

the Belarusian as she broke Pegula for a 2-1 lead in the second set.

The clean forehand winner that put Rybakina ahead drew a frustrated response from Pegula, who composed herself to break back and later saved three match points to draw level at 5-5.

Rybalkina responded immediately, assisted by the net cord, but a determined Pegula did not give in and forced a tiebreak where she squandered two set points before finally fading away.

"It was an epic second set. Jessica played so well, fought to the end and I'm happy to be in the final," Rybakina said.

"It was really, really stressful. I had an epic tiebreak here (in 2024) ... a little flashback came to me. I'm happy it turned my way and looking forward to playing on Saturday."

HORSE RACING

Waajidd claims Wadi Al Sail Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Waajidd produced a polished late-running performance to land the Wadi Al Sail Cup at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

The four-year-old bay gelding, owned by Khalid bin Ghanem al-Kuwari and trained by Zuhair Mohsen, bounced back to form to get off the mark with authority, drawing clear by 1 1/2 lengths under Szczepan Mazur to win the Thoroughbred Premium Maidens contest for 3-7-year-olds over 1200m.

Settling midfield after the break, Waajidd was ridden with patience as Fine Art Dealer pressed forward to assume control and dictate the pace through the early and middle stages.

He was closely tracked by Mockirr, Saniyaat's Star and Beach Breeze, with the leading quartet opening up a clear gap on the remainder of the field as they approached the final bend.

Turning for home, Mockirr moved up assertively to take the lead from Fine Art Dealer and the pair appeared set to fight out the finish. However, the decisive move was still to come. From the middle of the pack, Waajidd was unleashed with a sustained and telling run, producing a sharp turn of foot to sweep past the leaders and assert quickly.

Inside the final 100m, Waajidd extended his advantage with each stride, pulling clear to secure a decisive victory. Manos Arriba, racing for Al Eida Racing and trained by Jassim al-Ghazali, finished strongly from the rear under Marco Casamento to take second, edging Mockirr by a neck. The Al Jasra Stud runner, trained by Abdulla al-Mulla, stayed on under Ivan Rossi to claim third.

Earlier in the day, Alnoor continued her solid run of form with a decisive success in the fifth race, a Purebred Arabian Handicap for fillies and mares rated 65-85, for four-year-olds and up over 2000m, Class 4, contested by five runners. The five-year-old



PICTURES: Juhaim



Connections of Waajidd celebrate after the four-year-old bay gelding won the Wadi Al Sail Cup yesterday.

RESULTS

43rd Al Uqda Race Meeting - Wadi Al Sail Cup

Jockey

1 - Wadi Al Sail Cup, Thoroughbred Premium Maidens

Waajidd, Zuhair Mohsen, Szczepan Mazur

2 - Thoroughbred Handicap (O-60)

Perfect Approach, Mohammed al-Ghazali, Lukas Delozier

3 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (45-65)

La Quyood, Julian Smart, Pierre Charles Boudot

4 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (O-55)

Malhog, Fahad bin Mubarak bin Jassim al-Groon, Salman Fahad al-Hajri

5 - Thoroughbred Handicap (55-75)

Future Man, Mohd Ahmed Mohd Hasan al-Sulaiti, Fayos Martin Borja

6 - Purebred Arabian Handicap, Fillies and Mare

Alnoor, Julian Smart, Pierre Charles Boudot

7 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (65-85)

Al Mutaghatri, Julian Smart, Pierre Charles Boudot

ATHLETICS

Assefa, Hassan and Jepchirchir to face off in London Marathon

Reuters
Manchester

Defending champion Tigist Assefa of Ethiopia will renew her rivalry with Olympic gold medallist Sifan Hassan and world champion Peres Jepchirchir when the trio line up for the 2026 TCS London Marathon on April 26.

Assefa smashed the women's world record at the 2022 Berlin Marathon in clocking two hours, 11 minutes and 53 seconds, and returns to the capital where she claimed her first London title last year in a women's-only world record run of 2:15.50.

Her only recent defeats have come at the hands of the women she will face again in April.

Kenya's Jepchirchir edged Assefa in sprint finishes at both the 2025 London Marathon and the 2025 World Championships in Tokyo, while Dutch runner Hassan out-sprinted Assefa at the 2024 Paris Olympics.

"For the first time since Paris, all three of these extraordinary athletes will be on the same start line," said Hugh Brasher, CEO of London Marathon Events. "With the calibre of athletes coming to

London, it would be no surprise if the women-only world record is broken again."

Assefa said she is eager to avenge recent losses.

"Winning last year's London Marathon was one of the proudest moments of my career," she said. "To do it again, I know I'll have to beat great champions like Peres and Sifan. We've had some great battles – I hope this year I can come out on top."

Hassan, the 2023 London champion, arrives with one of the most formidable CVs in the sport, having won in Chicago (2023) and Sydney (2025).

Jepchirchir, meanwhile, holds world titles in both the marathon and half marathon and has previously won in Boston, New York and at the Tokyo Olympics.

The elite field will also feature Kenya's Joyciline Jepkosgei and Hellen Obiri. Jepkosgei ran the fourth-fastest women's marathon in history – 2:14:00 – to win Valencia last year, while Obiri, a two-time New York City champion, is making her London debut. Obiri won bronze in the Paris Olympic marathon.

They join a strong domestic line-up, featuring Britain's Eilish McColgan, Jess Warner-Judd and Abbie Donnelly.

LIV Golf adds 10 spots to secured 'Lock Zone' as part of suite of changes

LIV Golf is adjusting its rules to increase the number of players who qualify for the next season, ensure performance has more immediate consequences and distribute points across the entire field. Beginning in 2026, LIV's protected "Lock Zone" will grow from 24 players to 34, giving roughly 60% of the 57-man league guaranteed status for the following year. The "Open Zone" will shrink by two spots and now includes the top 46 players who are free to change teams but are not necessarily guaranteed a spot in the league. Anyone finishing 47th or worse falls into relegation territory. The move arrives with the Official World Golf Ranking board meeting this week, with LIV's pursuit of ranking points still a central backdrop for the Saudi-funded circuit.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

PSG, Real among clubs awaiting play-offs draw

'I don't think anyone else can be considered favourites more than us'

AFP
Paris

Title-holders Paris Saint-Germain and record 15-time winners Real Madrid are among the European giants who will have to come through the play-off round of this season's Champions League after missing out on direct qualification for the last 16.

The draw for the knockout stage play-offs takes place today from 1100 GMT after the league phase concluded on Wednesday with the eighth and final round of games.

There was real drama on the last night, in particular in Lisbon where Jose Mourinho's Benfica beat his former side Real 4-2, goalkeeper Anatoliy Trubin scoring a 98th-minute goal that allowed the Portuguese giants to snatch the last spot in the play-offs and nudged their opponents out of the top eight.

Europe's elite club competition is now more bloated than ever since the expansion last season to 36 teams in the Champions League proper.

That means 144 matches are now required to eliminate just 12 teams, with the top eight in the overall standings going through to the last 16 and the next 16 teams advancing to the play-offs.

At the end of it all, there are few real surprises, with the top 17 berths all occupied by clubs from the so-called big five European leagues of England (six), Spain (three), Italy (three), Germany (three) and France (PSG), with one exception in Portuguese giants Sporting.

Some big names did fall by the wayside, with Italian champions Napoli being bundled out along with three former champions in Marseille, PSV Eindhoven and Ajax. Athletic Bilbao, Villarreal and Eintracht Frankfurt were eliminated too.

The play-offs take place over two legs in February, with the eight winners completing the line-up for the last 16.

The most remarkable achievements in reaching the play-offs belong to Qarabag - the champions of Azerbaijan who advanced



PSG's head coach Luis Enrique reacts as Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (left) leaves the pitch after an injury during the Champions League match against Newcastle United at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

despite losing 6-0 to Liverpool in their final outing - and, above all, Bodo/Glimt. Champions of Norway in four of the last six years, the outfit from north of the Arctic Circle beat Manchester City and Atletico Madrid in their last two matches to go through - despite their domestic season finishing at the end of November.

"We should be extremely proud," said their coach Kjetil Knutsen, and Bodo/Glimt can now look forward to a glamour tie against either Real or last season's beaten finalists Inter Milan.

The other possible tie for Madrid is an immediate rematch with Benfica, while other potential match-ups on Friday include PSG having to face domestic rivals Monaco and Borussia Dortmund having to play Bayer Leverkusen in all-Bundesliga showdown.

"We will have to take the long

route, but I don't think anyone else can be considered favourites more than us," said PSG coach Luis Enrique of having to face an extra knockout tie, mindful that doing so last year did not stop the French side from going on to win the title.

"We deserve to be in this situation today," admitted Real star Kylian Mbappe after his side's loss in Lisbon saw them drop into the play-offs. "Now we have to play two more play-off games. It hurts to have to play those, we wanted to have the time in February to work on our game."

Real came through the play-offs last season, beating Manchester City before eventually losing to Arsenal in the quarter-finals.

This time City are one of their potential opponents in the last 16 in March, along with Sporting, should they make it through the play-offs. Meanwhile, PSG

already know they will play either Barcelona or Chelsea in the last 16, assuming they reach that stage - the Parisians beat Barcelona away earlier this season but lost to Chelsea in the Club World Cup final last July.

Arsenal, having finished first in the league phase, will take on one of Dortmund, Leverkusen, Atlanta or Olympiacos in the last 16.

PLAY-OFF DRAW TEAMS

Seeded: Real Madrid (ESP), Inter Milan (ITA), Paris Saint-Germain (FRA), Newcastle United (ENG), Juventus (ITA), Atletico Madrid (ESP), Atalanta (ITA), Bayer Leverkusen (GER)

Unseeded: Borussia Dortmund (GER), Olympiacos (GRE), Club Brugge (BEL), Galatasaray (TUR), Monaco (FRA), Qarabag (AZE), Bodo/Glimt (NOR), Benfica (POR)

Qatar settle for silver after defeat to Bahrain in Asian handball final



Qatar claimed the silver medal at the 22nd Asian Handball Championship after losing 29-26 to Bahrain in the final in Kuwait yesterday. Despite the defeat, Qatar secured qualification for the 2027 World Championship in Germany, marking their 11th appearance on the global stage. Bahrain led 14-11 at halftime before Qatar mounted a strong comeback in the second half to level the score at 24-24 and force extra time. Bahrain moved 27-25 ahead in the first extra period and held on as Qatar's efforts to equalise in the second extra period fell short. Earlier, Kuwait secured the bronze medal with a narrow 33-32 victory over Japan in the third place playoff. Qatar missed out on a seventh consecutive Asian title, having won the continental crown in the previous six editions in 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022 and 2024. South Korea remain the most successful team in the history of the championship with nine titles, followed by Qatar with six, Kuwait with four, Japan with two and Bahrain, who lifted the trophy for the first time in their history.

FOOTBALL

Benfica's Mourinho hails goalkeeper's last-gasp goal

Reuters
Lisbon

Benfica manager Jose Mourinho described the last-gasp goal scored by his Ukrainian goalkeeper Anatoliy Trubin to secure the Lisbon side a Champions League last-16 place by beating Real Madrid 4-2 on Wednesday as a "historic" achievement.

Frustated Real coach Alvaro Arbeloa, meanwhile, highlighted a litany of shortcomings in his side's performance after their hopes of automatic qualification were dashed and they had to settle for a place in the two-legged playoffs.

For Mourinho, it was an emotional night at the Estadio da Luz, capped by an extraordinary 98th-minute header from Trubin that ensured Benfica snatched a last-16 spot on goal difference.

The Portuguese manager was visibly moved as he spoke to Movistar Plus after Benfica's stunning victory.

"It's normal for me to be emotional. I think it was deserved," Mourinho said, reflecting on the intensity of the contest and the dramatic finale.

"For Benfica, it's obviously incredible prestige to beat Real Madrid. The two clubs hadn't faced each other since the fantastic years, so many years ago. And now, for Benfica's prestige, for the players' prestige, it's something fantastic."

The teams last played each other in the European Cup in the quarter-finals in 1965, when Benfica went on to lose the final, and also met in the 1962 showpiece won 5-3 by the Portuguese.

Mourinho heaped praise on 24-year-old Trubin, whose header from a stoppage-time

free kick sent the crowd into raptures.

"I knew we weren't through yet, that 3-2 wasn't enough, and we were lucky with a set piece," Mourinho said.

"Our goalkeeper Trubin, who is two metres tall, went into the box and scored a fantastic goal, a historic goal ... It felt like the stadium was going to collapse. Incredible."

In contrast, Real's Arbeloa was left to rue a poor display by his side that saw them lose a 1-0 lead and finish with nine men after Raul Asencio and Rodrygo were sent off in added time.

The defeat sends the 15-times Champions League winners into the playoff round, where they must attempt to salvage their European campaign.

"Of course we are far from happy. Quite the contrary," Arbeloa said.

"In a match where we knew what was at stake, we simply didn't rise to the occasion."

"I'd like to tell you that it was just one thing that led to this defeat, but I think there were many aspects - adversity in duels, issues with the ball and without the ball. We were a long way from the version of ourselves that we should be."

Addressing the red cards, Arbeloa said tensions boiled over. "Sometimes these are situations where you can't control your emotions, knowing what was at stake. That's all there is to it."

For Mourinho, the victory was as much a boost for the club's stature as it was for their Champions League prospects.

Arbeloa must now prepare his side for the playoffs as he attempts to get Real's season back on track after former manager Xabi Alonso's sacking and the team being knocked out of the Spanish Cup last-16 by second-tier Albacete two weeks ago.



Benfica's goalkeeper Anatoliy Trubin celebrates after scoring his team's fourth goal during the UEFA Champions League match against Real Madrid at Estadio da Luz in Lisbon. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Senegal coach Thiaw gets 5-match ban after AFCON final chaos

AFP
Johannesburg

Senegal coach Pape Thiaw has been banned for five Confederation of African Football (CAF) matches after a chaotic Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) final against Morocco this month, it was announced on Wednesday.

A CAF statement said the tactician was guilty of "unsporting conduct" and "bringing the game into disrepute" during the decider in Rabat on January 18, which Senegal won 1-0 after extra time. Senegalese forwards Iliyan Ndiaye and Ismaila Sarr, who play in the English Premier League, received two-match bans for "unsporting behaviour towards the referee".

The Senegal Football Federation (FSF) was fined a total of \$615,000 for various offences during the final.

These included the "unsporting conduct of their players and technical staff in violation of the CAF disciplinary code principles of fair play, loyalty and integrity".

For "unsporting behaviour", Moroccan forward Ismael Saibari was handed a three-match ban and a fine of \$100,000, while captain and defender Achraf Hakimi was suspended for two matches. The Royal Moroccan Football Federation (FRMF) was fined \$200,000 for the "inap-



ropriate behaviour of the stadium ball boys".

An additional fine of \$100,000 was imposed for the "improper conduct" of players and technical staff who invaded the VAR review area and obstructed the work of the Congolese referee.

There was also a \$15,000 fine after Moroccan supporters used lasers to try and distract Senegalese players, bringing the total to \$315,000.

The AFCON final took a series of dramatic turns from late in regular time when a Sarr goal was disallowed for a foul on 2025 African player of the year Hakimi.

- Furious protests -

Morocco were then awarded a penalty when star forward Brahim Diaz was fouled, sparking furious Senegalese protests.

TV coverage of the final showed Thiaw gesturing towards his players. This action was widely interpreted as him telling his team to leave the field.

Most of the team walked off

and went to the change room, but star forward Sadio Mane did not follow them and later persuaded his teammates to return to the pitch so that play could resume.

Morocco missed the long-delayed penalty with a weak shot from Diaz saved by Edouard Mendy. The match then went to extra time and Pape Gueye scored to give Senegal a second AFCON title.

While play was halted over the disputed penalty, some supporters wearing Senegalese colours threw projectiles and others temporarily invaded the pitch before police and security staff intervened.

The bans of Thiaw and the four players relate to CAF matches. They will not affect preparations by Senegal and Morocco for the 2026 World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Senegal are in Group I with France, Norway and the winners of inter-continental play-offs involving Bolivia, Suriname and Iraq.

Morocco, who in 2022 became the first African or Arab country to reach the semi-finals of a World Cup, will face Brazil, Scotland and Haiti in Group C.

Thiaw will be barred from the dugout for five of the six 2027 AFCON qualifying matches involving Senegal in September, October and November. The players will miss the first two qualifiers.