

To subscribe
GULF TIMES
Newspaper
Please call
444 666 35



CRICKET | Page 2

Curran claims hat-trick as England trump Sri Lanka



CHAMPIONS LEAGUE | Page 4

Real Madrid to play Benfica, PSG face Monaco in play-offs

To advertise here,
PLEASE CALL
444 666 21

Saturday, January 31, 2026
Sha'ban 12, 1447 AH

GULF TIMES SPORT



TENNIS

Djokovic sets up Alcaraz showdown for Australian Open title and his 25th Slam

Page 3

SHOWJUMPING

Vanderveen stars as HH The Father Amir's Prix nears finale

American rider proved untouchable, guiding 12-year-old gelding Bull Run's Jireh to a flawless victory

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Kristen Vanderveen stamped her authority in the final round of the HH The Father Amir's Prix, delivering a standout victory in the CSI5* Table A jump-off over 155cm at Al Shaqab yesterday

The American rider proved untouchable in a high-speed barrage, guiding 12-year-old gelding Bull Run's Jireh to a flawless round in 40.14 seconds, a time that proved unbeatable until the very end. Switzerland's Nadja Peter Steiner came closest to denying Vanderveen, producing two clear rounds with Clearround IL Mondo but finishing just fractions behind in 40.53 seconds.

Brazil's Marlon Modolo Zanotelli completed the podium after a faultless jump-off aboard Charly Heart in 41.02 seconds. Janne Friederike Meyer-Zimmermann narrowly missed out on the top three, placing fourth with My Lady Lavista in 42.08 seconds, while Britain's Harry Charles rounded out the top five with Fighting Phil in 42.30 seconds.

The CSI5* Six Bar competition over 150cm delivered a dramatic test of power and scope as the fences rose round by round, eventually producing a clear winner. Millie Allen claimed the honours with Quickly D vh Ijzerenlindehof, the only combination to remain fault-free throughout the competition. Philipp Weishaupt finished second with Lady Concern du Rezidal, while third place was shared between Juan Carlos Garcia on Django du Marais, Mustafa Saed with Kalliope Lvp Z and Max Kuhner riding Eic Cooley Jump The Q, all of whom recorded a fault in the last round after strong earlier performances.

In the CSI5* Faults and Time class over 145cm speed and precision took centre stage again, where Germany's Philipp Weishaupt set the benchmark with a sharp clear round on Karaldo in 59.87 seconds, the only combination to dip under one minute. Saudi's Abdullah Alsharbaty followed in second place aboard Valentino in 62.33 seconds, with American Eve Jobs completing the podium after a faultless run on Kannandillo in 62.44 seconds.

Steiner continued her strong form to finish fourth with Nice Van't Zorgvliet in 62.68 seconds, while Vanderveen closed out the top five with another clear performance, riding Starbucks 27 to a time of 62.80 seconds, underlining the narrow margins that defined the class.

Meanwhile, Abdullah Alsharbaty topped the CSI3* Faults and Time class over 1.45m, delivering a composed and faultless round with Quisandro to take victory in 60.55 seconds. Qatar's Faleh Su-



Kristen Vanderveen celebrates with her 12-year-old gelding Bull Run's Jireh after winning the CSI5* jump-off 155cm class during the final round of the HH The Father Amir's Prix at Al Shaqab yesterday. The winners of the class were presented trophies by Abdullah al-Qashouti, the tournament's Marketing and Communications Director.

wead al-Ajami followed closely in second place aboard Wathnan Qapella, also clear in 61.20 seconds, while Italy's Emanuele Gaudiano completed the podium with Julius.D after stopping the clock at 61.48 seconds.

Gaudiano returned to dominate the CSI3* Jump-Off class over 1.40m, claiming both first and second places. The Italian rider secured the win with a double-clear performance on Diarouge Blue PS in 37.06 seconds, before repeating the feat with Chabrello PS to finish second in 37.73 seconds. Iraq's Zayed Ali finished third after a steady double-clear round with Quirani van de Maltahoeve in 39.37 seconds.

The CSI3* Special Two-Phase competition over 1.30m saw Britain's Oliver Fletcher emerge on top, producing a sharp double-clear round with Krack Bleu C to win in 32.78 seconds. Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Alasaker placed second aboard

Scoobylenky Theyss in 34.43 seconds, with Egypt's Abdallah Haitham close behind in third on Consagros after crossing in 34.68 seconds.

Saudi riders claimed the top two spots in the CSI1* Faults and Time class over 1.25m, with Abdullah Abdul Aziz al-Alsheik leading the way aboard Lalla Aicha in a clear 55.41 seconds. Mohammed Aldalaan followed in second on Sarina Del Valle in 55.85 seconds, while France's Jean Francois Rondoux finished third with Inter-Larus after a clear round in 59.49 seconds.

Young riders took centre stage in the CSICh-B Special Two-Phase over 1.05m, where Halah Alrasheed of Saudi Arabia claimed victory with a double-clear effort on Cruising On The Ridge in 23.68 seconds. Qatar's Abdulla Ahmad al-Musafri finished second aboard Celia Z in 24.71 seconds, while Sharida Nasser S S al-Kaabbi completed the podium with Mazzeltot in 26.77 seconds.



Millie Allen claimed the honours in the CSI5* Six Bar competition over 150cm with Quickly D vh Ijzerenlindehof at Al Shaqab.



Germany's Philipp Weishaupt won the CSI5* Faults and Time class on Karaldo.

In the CSI1* Faults and Time class over 1.15m, Fahad Alshammari of Saudi Arabia delivered the fastest clear round with Le Garde to win in 53.13 seconds. Qatar's Mohammed Eisa al-Bukhari placed second on Canao du Lohic in 53.95 seconds, followed by Saad Waheed Al Kuwari in third with Galatee de La Trigale in 54.71 seconds. Qatari riders dominated the National Competition Optimum Time class over 80cm, with Ghanim Thamer al-Maadadi claiming top honours aboard Kroaat after finishing just 0.02 seconds inside the optimum time. Moza Hamza al-Kuwari followed closely in second with Senna on 0.03 seconds, while Salha Khalid al-Obaidli secured third place with Violet after finishing 0.08 seconds outside the optimum.

Sheikh Talal bin Khalid al-Thani, Assistant Tournament Director, said the HH The Father Amir's Prix has confirmed its

standing as one of the leading events on the international equestrian calendar, following four rounds marked by intense competition and elite participation.

He noted that the championship brought together a select field of the world's top riders, headed by world number two Scott Brash, alongside a strong presence of local competitors who consistently reached the podium across multiple classes.

This balance, he said, reflects both the global appeal of the event and the continued progress of Qatari riders at the highest level.

Today's fourth and final round will feature a full programme of Grand Prix competitions across three categories. The main outdoor arena will host the CSI3* Grand Prix over 150 cm with a jump-off, followed by the CSI5* Grand Prix over 160 cm with a jump-off.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Al Rayyan frustrate Al Duhail in 1-1 stalemate; Sailiya hold Shamal

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Rayyan held Al Duhail to a 1-1 draw in a high-intensity round 14 clash of the Qatar Stars League at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium yesterday. Adil Boulbina scored for Al Duhail in the 13th minute while Wesley Ribeiro Silva shot home the equaliser for Al Rayyan in the 34th minute. Al Rayyan got a reprieve in the 72nd minute when a penalty was overturned following VAR after Boulbina had stumbled with Al Rayyan goalkeeper Mahmoud Abunada getting his fingertips at the ball.

It was the Red Knights who attacked from the word go. In the very 6th minute of play a strong Karim Boudiaf header off a corner

kick was blocked by Abunada. Minutes later, another Al Duhail attempt found the bottom of the left post but only for the ball to move out. Soon, Boulbina found the net converting a Bourigeaud Benjamin cross from the right. The Lions hit back with Wesley moving the ball centre just outside the box before making a successful strike into the net.

While Al Rayyan tried to push hard in the second session, they were unable to find a finish. Al Duhail kept the tempo trying to encash on opportunities but they too failed to convert a second time. Al Duhail moved up to sixth place with 20 points, while Al Rayyan climbed to fourth on 24 points.

Duhail goalkeeper Salah Zakaria described the draw against Al Rayyan as disappointing. Speaking after the match, Zakaria said:

"We put in a great effort against a strong team, but we were unable to capitalise on our scoring opportunities. That is what we lacked to secure the victory and collect the three points."

He added: "The draw is not a satisfactory result for us, as we were aiming for a win to strengthen our title challenge. We need to maintain our winning streak, and that is something we must achieve going forward."

Earlier, Al Shamal and Al Sailiya played out a goalless draw at the Al Shamal Stadium. The results meant that Al Shamal remained in third place with 25 points and Al Sailiya in tenth with 12 points.

Today, Al Ahli will lock horns with Qatar SC at Al Thumama Stadium at 5:45pm before Al Gharafa take on Al Sadd at the Thani Bin Jasim Stadium at 7:45pm.



Al Rayyan and Al Duhail players battle for the ball at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium yesterday.

2025-2026 MINI BASKETBALL WORLD CUP

Eight teams secure quarter-final berths

The race for glory continues as eight schools booked their places in the quarter-finals of the Mini Basketball World Cup 2025-2026 after securing victories in the second phase of the Round of 16.

The advancing teams represent the Lebanese School, Al Andalus Private School, Philippine International School, Global Academy International - Muaither Branch, DPS-Modern Indian School, Edison Global Academy - Lusail, GEMS American Academy - Qatar, and Lycee Bonaparte French School - Doha. All matches took place at the Qatar Basketball Federation courts.

The quarter-final stage will take place on February 4, followed by the semifinals on February 11 and the third-place playoff on February 12.

The championship will conclude with the final match on April 30 at Aspire Academy Stadium, in parallel with the conclusion of the

Schools Olympic Program season.

In recognition of their final standings, each school will be entitled to select the jersey of one of the national teams qualified for the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027 during the second season of the Mini World Cup.

The tournament is a pioneering sporting event, held for the first time in the Middle East and North Africa under the supervision of FIBA, in collaboration with the Qatar Basketball Federation and the Qatar School Sports Association.

Its innovative competitive format mirrors the atmosphere of the highly anticipated FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027, blending elite sportsmanship with a holistic educational experience.

The Mini Basketball World Cup is part of the Schools Olympic Program for the 2025-2026 and 2026-2027 seasons, serving as both a sporting and educational milestone.



In the first edition, schools compete under their official names, while in the second edition in 2027, students will represent the national teams qualified for the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027, reinforcing a sense of pride, identity, and connection to the global

basketball stage.

The championship aims to integrate sport and education through a unique national experience, connecting students with one of the world's most prestigious sporting events.

It provides them with the opportunity to participate in real competition, develop teamwork, discipline, and collaboration, while opening doors to community engagement and volunteerism.

Complementary interactive activities offer students a comprehensive journey into the preparations for the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027, fostering a love for the game and promoting a sustainable sports and cultural legacy that inspires youth in Qatar and beyond.

A total of 32 secondary schools from across Qatar are taking part in the championship, competing under their official names: 1 - American Academy School, 2. Alpha Cambridge School, 3. Al Khor International School - British Curriculum, 4. Al Khor International School - CBSE, 5. Institute for Religious Studies Preparatory and Secondary School for Boys, 6. Al Andalus Private School, 7. Beverly Hills International School, 8. Beta Cambridge

School, 9. Belgravia High School, 10. DPS-Modern Indian School, 11. Edison Global Academy - Lusail, 12. GEMS American Academy - Qatar, 13. Global Academy International - Al Waab Branch, 14. Global Academy International - Muaither Branch, 15. Harvard American School, 16. Hassan Bin Thabit Independent Secondary School for Boys, 17. Ibn Taymiyyah Independent Secondary School for Boys, 18. The Jordanian School, 19. Lycée Français Bonaparte - Doha, 20. Loyola International School, 21. The Lebanese School - Abu Hamour Branch, 23. Monarch International School (DPS), 24. Newton International Academy, 25. Philippine International School - Qatar, 26. Podar Pearl School, 27. Qatar-Finland International School, 28. Rajagiri Public School, 29. Stafford Sri Lankan School - Doha, 30. Cambridge School, 31. Next Generation Private School - Al Wakra, and 32. Birla Public School.

CRICKET

Rashid, Curran shine as England beat Sri Lanka

Left-arm bowler Curran claims hat-trick as England take 1-0 lead

Reuters
Colombo

Sam Curran claimed a hat-trick as England beat Sri Lanka by 11 runs under the Duckworth-Lewis method in their rain-marred opening Twenty20 International in Pallekele yesterday.

The left-arm seamer became the second Englishman, after Chris Jordan, to claim a hat-trick in T20 Internationals as England bundled out Sri Lanka for 133 with four deliveries still left in the innings.

Phil Salt led England's successful chase with 46 off 35 balls as the tourists clinched the low-scoring match that had been reduced to a 17-overs-a-side contest following rain.

Earlier put into bat, Sri Lanka cruised to 76-1 in seven overs with Kusal Mendis (37) and Pathum Nissanka (23) in the middle.

Spinner Adil Rashid (3-19) triggered a batting collapse as he removed both the set batters and Dhananjaya de Silva too as Sri Lanka slumped to 98-6 in the 12th over.

Curran mowed down the Sri Lankan tail in the eventful 16th over with his hat-trick.

Dasun Shanaka was snared at mid-off, Maheesh Theekshana perished at long on and Matheesha Pathirana had his stumps rearranged.

Sri Lanka lost their last four wickets for four runs in a spectacular meltdown.

Jofra Archer, returning from a side strain, returned figures of 3-0-22-0.

When England came out to bat, Jos Buttler (17) hit Ehsan Malinga for four fours in a row before losing



England's Adil Rashid celebrates the wicket of Sri Lanka's Dhananjaya de Silva with teammates during their first T20I at Pallekele International Cricket Stadium yesterday. (Reuters)



England's Sam Curran celebrates after taking the hat-trick wicket of Sri Lanka's Matheesha Pathirana. (AFP)

ing his stumps to the pacer. Malinga also removed Jacob Bethell

and Salt could have been dismissed too but Kamil Mishra

dropped a sitter at deep mid-wicket. Tom Banton fell after a breezy 29 but Sri Lanka's sloppy catching was on display again as Nissanka dropped a regulation catch in the deep in a major relief to England captain Harry Brook when the batter was on 11.

England were 125-4 in 15 overs when rain stopped play with the visitors comfortably ahead of their target at that stage.

The second T20 International of the three-match series is scheduled tomorrow.

BRIEF SCORES
England 125 for 4 (Salt 46) **beat Sri Lanka 133 all out** (Kusal 37, Rashid 3-19, Curran 3-38) **by 11 runs - DLS**

SPOTLIGHT

Missing Ballesteros statue found chopped in pieces in Spain

Reuters
Madrid

A statue of the late golfer Seve Ballesteros, which had vanished from his hometown of Pedreña in northern Spain's Cantabria region, was found chopped into pieces as the alleged thief prepared to sell it for its bronze, police said yesterday.

Valued at around €30,000 (\$35,820) but holding significant sentimental importance for locals and fans, the statue was discovered in a storage room in Santander.

It had been cut in half at the waist. While the torso and head remained intact, the arms were broken into several pieces.

A 22-year-old man with a criminal record for copper theft was arrested on Thursday, police said,

adding that more individuals could be involved.

Police had focused their investigation on metal trading centres, suspecting the thieves planned to sell the bronze for profit.

The 100kg (220.46lb) statue, depicting Ballesteros in a signature pose celebrating his 1984 British Open win at St Andrews in Scotland, was torn from its base location in La Barqueria Park earlier this month before being dragged across grass and dismembered for transport.

Created in 2009 by sculptor Salvador Garcia Ceballos, it was permanently installed in Pedreña in 2017.

Ballesteros, who won five major titles during his career and became a fan favourite for his capacity for digging himself out of trouble on the golf course, died in 2011 aged 54 after a battle with cancer.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Former Sri Lanka player Jayasuriya in US squad for T20 World Cup

Reuters
New York

Former Sri Lanka international Shehan Jayasuriya is set to debut for the United States in next month's Twenty20 World Cup, after the US named him in their 15-member squad for the global championship yesterday.

All-rounder Jayasuriya, 34, played 12 one day internationals (ODIs) and 18 T20 matches for Sri Lanka, and represented the country in the 2016 edition of the T20 World Cup, before announcing his retirement from all forms of cricket in the South Asian nation in 2021.

The left-handed batter and right-arm spinner later relocated to the US with his family and has since played in several franchise-based T20 leagues, including the Major League Cricket in the US.

Pakistan-born Mohammad Mohsin is eyeing his US debut as well and Shubham Ranjane, grandson of former India international Vasant Ranjane, has also been named in the squad captained by Monank Patel.

The US, who are playing in their second T20 World Cup after reaching the super eight stage on home soil in 2024, face defending champions India, who are co-hosting the competition with Sri Lanka, in their first Group A match on February 7.

US SQUAD

Monank Patel (captain), Jasdeep Singh, Andries Gous, Shehan Jayasuriya, Milind Kumar, Shayan Jahangir, Saiteja Mukkamala, Sanjay Krishnamurthi, Harmeet Singh, Nosthush Kenjige, Shadley van Schalkwyk, Saurabh Netravalkar, Ali Khan, Mohammad Mohsin, Shubham Ranjane

FOCUS

Star boxer Joshua speaks on camera for the first time since Nigeria crash

AFP
London

Anthony Joshua on Thursday broke weeks of public silence and spoke on camera for the first time since a car crash which killed two of the former world heavyweight champion's close friends.

In a video posted on his YouTube channel, Joshua held back tears at one point as he reflected on the loss of backroom team members Latif Ayodele and Sina Ghami, describing the pair as his "brothers".

The British fighter was a passenger in an SUV that collided with a stationary truck on a busy highway linking Lagos and Ibadan in Niger-

ia on December 29, and sustained minor injuries in the accident that claimed their lives.

"I know what I have got to do," Joshua said in the video shared Thursday evening, speaking directly into the camera.

"I'm going to do what is right by them, do what is right by their family and it is about what is important."

Joshua added that he understood what the pair had "wanted to do for their families" and that his goal "is to continue to help them achieve their goals".

Ayodele was the personal trainer of the former two-time unified heavyweight champion while Ghami was Joshua's strength and conditioning coach.

Both died at the scene of the crash.

In his video, Joshua gave little away about his boxing plans, but noted "the mission must go on".

"It ain't about legacy, it's just about doing what is right and I know I am going to do what is right by them," he reiterated.

The accident occurred weeks after Joshua stopped YouTube-turned-boxer Jake Paul in Miami to stay on course to face old foe Tyson Fury this year.

Fury has since announced his eagerly anticipated return to the ring and is set to face Arslanbek Makhmudov on April 11.

The fate of the mooted all-British battle between the two heavyweights Joshua and Fury remains

unclear, with speculation the former could now retire.

But promoter Eddie Hearn has said the 36-year-old Joshua would be given all the time he needed to cope with the loss.

Earlier this month, Joshua shared online footage of himself returning to the gym, hitting pads with a trainer for what he called "mental strength therapy".

In the video posted Thursday, Joshua said: "One day my time will come and I'm not scared either at all. It's actually comforting knowing that I've got two brothers on the other side.

"I've lost people before, but I don't think I've lost people like that, my left and my right, you know?"



AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Djokovic reaches final, one win away from 25th Slam

THE SERB STUNS SINNER IN FIVE SETS AS ALCARAZ EDGES ZVEREV IN A MARATHON CLASH



Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates winning his semi-final match against Italy's Jannik Sinner at the Australian Open in Melbourne. (Reuters)

Reuters
Melbourne

Novak Djokovic turned back the clock to dethrone Jannik Sinner in a five-set classic and set up a final showdown with world number one Carlos Alcaraz after the Spaniard slogged through the longest Australian Open semi-final against Alexander Zverev.

Stopped in the semi-finals of the last four Grand Slams, Djokovic sent the Italian double defending champion packing with a 3-6 6-3 4-6 6-4 6-4 win completed in the early hours of Saturday morning.

Less than four months before his 39th birthday, the 10-times champion eclipsed Ken Rosewall as the oldest man to reach the final in the professional era, while snapping a five-match losing streak to Sinner.

He will bid for a record-extending 11th title at Melbourne Park and the unprecedented 25th major crown that has eluded him against Spaniard Alcaraz, who needed five hours and 27 minutes to fell Zverev 6-4 7-6(5) 6-7(3) 6-7(4) 7-5 earlier at Rod Laver Arena.

"I saw Carlos after the match and he told me 'I'm sorry to delay the start' and I told him 'I'm an old man, I need to go earlier to sleep,'" Djoko-

vic said on court. "Looking forward to seeing him in a couple of days."

At a tournament short on thrillers and major upsets, all four semi-finalists played their part to deliver drama in spades.

Djokovic needed to draw on 20 years of Grand Slam experience and his famed mental toughness to hold out Sinner, who was relentless in attacking the Serb's serve but failed to convert eight break-point chances in the final set.

"I had my chances... Many break points, couldn't use them," said Sinner. "He came up with some great shots. I know he's won 24 Grand Slams. We know each other very well, how we play. I feel like he's the greatest player for many, many years."

ALCARAZ BATTLES CRAMP

Alcaraz fought through a leg cramp to deny Zverev and whereas Djokovic can become the oldest winner, the Spaniard will bid to become the youngest man to complete the career Grand Slam with his first Melbourne title.

The semi-finals overwhelmed Alcaraz and Djokovic physically, with both vomiting during the matches. Two sets up, Alcaraz struggled to move at 4-4 in the third set and had a medical timeout (MTO) at the change of ends to have work on his right thigh.

It left Zverev, last year's runner-up to Sin-

ner, raging at the supervisor, given players are banned from MTOs for cramp. Alcaraz glugged pickle juice and soldiered on, losing the next two sets but still conjuring enough shot-making brilliance to make Zverev work for them.

The Spaniard's prospects dimmed when he double-faulted to drop serve in the opening game of the fifth. But he looked reborn when he chased down a drop-shot and pulled off a winner at full stretch.

Zverev fought grimly to keep Alcaraz at bay, saving a slew of break points as his exhaustion grew. He served for the match at 5-4, only to see it slip through his fingers as Alcaraz claimed the last three games in a stunning finish.

With victory secured, Alcaraz lay flat on his back on the court in disbelief.

No stranger to marathon battles after his 2025 French Open final win over Sinner, Alcaraz said belief was the key to making it through the longest Australian Open semi-final.

"I always say you have to believe in yourself no matter what," Alcaraz said. "I was struggling in the middle of the third set. Physically it was one of the most demanding matches I've played in my short career. But I've been in this situation before. I had to put my heart into the match. I did it and fought until the last ball... I'm extremely proud of that and the way I came back in the fifth set."

Exhausted Zverev criticises Alcaraz medical time-out after semi-final loss

Melbourne: Alexander Zverev condemned officials for allowing Carlos Alcaraz a medical time-out for a leg problem after falling in an epic five-setter to the Spaniard in the Australian Open's longest semi-final yesterday.

World number one Alcaraz was struggling to move at 4-4 in the third set and was allowed treatment on his right thigh at the change of ends, leaving German Zverev incensed.

Zverev was adamant Alcaraz was struggling with cramp which is out-of-bounds for medical time-outs.

Alcaraz dropped the next two sets but was back running at full pelt in the fifth to close out an epic 6-4 7-6(5) 6-7(3) 6-7(4) 7-5 win in five hours and 27 minutes. "Yeah, I mean, he was cramping, so normally you can't take a medical time-out for cramping," third seed Zverev said at his post-match press conference.

"What can I do? It's not my decision. I didn't like it, but it's not my decision."

On court, Zverev lashed out at a match supervisor in profanity-laden German as Alcaraz underwent treatment.

"I just said it was non-sense, basically," he said later of the exchange, noting that Alcaraz finished full of running.

"He took like an hour and a half off where he wasn't moving

almost at all. So again, maybe I should have used that better in a way.

"Maybe I should have won the games and won the sets a bit quicker.

"Then moving into the fifth, maybe he wouldn't have had so much time to recover.

"But the fifth set, the way he was moving, was incredible again."

Runner-up to Jannik Sinner last year, Zverev was serving for the match at 5-4 in the fifth set of yesterday's semi-final but Alcaraz won the next three games to leave the German with another near-miss at the Grand Slams.

Still chasing an elusive first major title, Zverev said he had more regrets about dropping the second set than his surrender in the fifth.

"I was hanging on for dear life, to be honest.

"I was exhausted," he said, rating the match as probably the toughest physically of his career.

"I think we both went to our absolute limits, so somewhat I'm also proud of myself the way I was hanging on and came back from two sets to love.

"Of course it's disappointing but this is the start of the year, so if I continue playing that way, if I continue training the way I train, if I continue working on the things that I've been working in the offseason, I do believe it's going to be a good year for me."



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz (right) reacts after beating Germany's Alexander Zverev in their singles semi-final at the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters)

FOUR MEMORABLE SHOWDOWNS BETWEEN ALCARAZ AND DJOKOVIC

Melbourne: Ahead of tomorrow's Australian Open final in Melbourne, Novak Djokovic leads Carlos Alcaraz by five wins to four in their head-to-head matches. Here's a look back at four memorable moments in their rivalry.

MADRID 2022

At just 19, Alcaraz crossed paths with Djokovic for the first time in the semi-finals of the Madrid Masters. The Serbian was world No 1, while the rising star from Murcia was ranked ninth.

He had just beaten his illustrious compatriot Rafael Nadal in the quarter-finals.

Fresh from his first Masters 1000 title in Miami, Alcaraz won 6-7 (5/7), 7-5, 7-6 (7/5) on the Madrid clay before crushing Alexander Zverev in the final.

"There are eight players ahead of me before I can become the best player in the world," proclaimed the ambitious Spaniard after his victory over Djokovic.

Four months later, he won his first Grand Slam title at the US Open and became the youngest world No 1 since the ATP rankings were created in 1973.

WIMBLEDON 2023

Beaten by Djokovic in the semi-finals of Roland Garros in 2023, Alcaraz fought back in the Wimbledon final. On the hallowed grass of the All England Club, Alcaraz beat the four-time defending champion 1-6, 7-6 (8/6), 6-1, 3-6, 6-4 and claimed his second major trophy on the turf where the Serb was so at home.

"Beating Novak at his best, in this stage, making history, being the guy to beat him after 10 years unbeaten on that court, it's something that I will never forget," said the right-hander from Murcia, the only player to beat Djokovic in a Grand Slam in 2023.

"It's great for the new generation, as well, I think to see me beating him and making them think that they are capable to do it, as well," added Alcaraz, who would

again beat Djokovic, who had just returned from injury, in the 2024 Wimbledon final.

PARIS 2024

A few weeks after being forced to withdraw from his quarter-final at Roland Garros with a knee injury, Djokovic returned to Paris, in search of the only piece missing from his already impressive list of achievements, which includes a Davis Cup victory and 24 Grand Slam titles: an Olympic gold.

In the final, the indomitable Serb beat Carlos Alcaraz 7-6 (7/3), 7-6 (7/2) to further cement his place in tennis history at the age of 37.

"This is probably the biggest sporting success I have ever had and the most special feeling," said the winner, after shedding a few tears.

"In a way losing heavily to Alcaraz at Wimbledon probably worked in my favour as I knew I couldn't play any worse than that," said Djokovic.

Alcaraz also cried, convinced that he had "disappointed the Spanish, who were expecting gold".

MELBOURNE 2025

Although Djokovic and Alcaraz have not met in a final since the Olympic Games, they faced each other for the first time in Melbourne in the quarter-finals of the 2025 edition.

In a difficult position after losing the first set and suffering an injury that turned out to be a torn muscle in his left thigh, Djokovic pulled off a heroic victory (4-6, 6-4, 6-3, 6-4) after more than three and a half hours of battle. "Just one of the most epic matches I have played on this court, any court really," said Djokovic, who was "concerned" about his injury and forced to retire after one set in the semi-finals against Zverev.

Alcaraz took his revenge in the US Open semi-finals, winning 6-4, 7-6 (7/4), 6-2 in a one-sided match on his way to his sixth major title.

SPOTLIGHT

Olympic dream 'not over', Vonn says after crash

AFP
Crans-Montana, Switzerland

US speed queen Lindsey Vonn insisted her dream of competing at next week's Winter Olympics was "not over" despite a crash during the Crans-Montana downhill yesterday.

"I crashed today in the downhill race in Switzerland and injured my left knee," the 41-year-old American said on social media.

"My Olympic dream is not over."

Three training runs for the women's Olympic downhill in Cortina d'Ampezzo are scheduled on consecutive days between February 5-7.

At least one of those must be completed for a skier to be able to compete in the medal event slated for February 8.

Vonn added: "I am discussing the situation with my doctors and team and will continue to undergo further exams. This is a very difficult outcome one week before the Olympics... but if there's one thing I know how to do, it's a comeback.

"It's not over until it's over..."

Vonn, the 2010 Olympic downhill champion and one of the most recognisable faces in world sport, lost control on a turn and skidded out into the safety netting during Friday's race, the final downhill before the February 6-22 Milan-Cortina Olympics.

While she was able to ski down

to the bottom of the Swiss piste after her crash, she appeared to be in great discomfort from her left knee, stopping several times.

After embracing teammate Jacqueline Wiles in the finish area, seemingly in tears, Vonn was promptly evacuated by helicopter for medical checks. Vonn was set to be one of the faces of the Milan-Cortina Games, having taken this season by storm with seven podium finishes in eight races, including two downhill victories in St Moritz and Zauchensee.

The race in Crans-Montana - the site of a deadly fire a month ago that killed 40 young people and injured 116 - was the final downhill before the Olympics.

Vonn was one of three crash vic-

tims among the first six skiers who took to the downhill slope in the Swiss resort: Austria's Nina Ortlieb and Marte Monsen of Norway also both bombed out.

Organisers decided to cancel the race after Vonn's crash because of "adverse conditions".

"Following difficulties experienced by the first six racers, the jury interrupted the race due to growing safety concerns. Athlete safety remained the top priority, with the jury ultimately deciding to cancel the competition," FIS announced.

Women's World Cup race director Peter Gerdol said that worsening visibility was behind the decision.

Athletes, he said, "couldn't see



Lindsey Vonn of the US being airlifted to the hospital after sustaining an injury following a crash during her run at the FIS Alpine Ski World Cup in Crans-Montana, Switzerland, yesterday. (Reuters)

the race line properly and it caused mistakes". Vonn intimated that the race should not have even started.

A women's super-G is set to go ahead today with a men's downhill tomorrow.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Madrid set for Benfica rematch in play-offs

Reigning champions Paris Saint-Germain will face domestic rivals Monaco

AFP
Paris

Real Madrid were handed a quick rematch with Jose Mourinho's Benfica in the draw for the Champions League play-off round, while reigning European champions Paris Saint-Germain will face domestic rivals Monaco.

Benfica beat Real 4-2 in their final game of the league phase on Wednesday, with a 98th-minute goal by goalkeeper Anatoliy Trubin proving decisive in allowing the Portuguese side to snatch the last play-off spot ahead of Marseille, who were eliminated altogether. The defeat also nudged Madrid out of the top eight places in the league standings, which give direct access to the last 16, forcing them into this extra round.

Benfica staged a remarkable recovery to take a play-off place – they finished 24th in the 36-team league phase, the last qualifying spot – by winning three of their last four matches after losing their opening four games.

Mourinho, 63, returned to the Lisbon giants for a second spell as coach in September. He was in charge of Real from 2010 to 2013 and won one La Liga title and one Copa del Rey while also taking them to the Champions League semi-finals in each of his three campaigns. The clubs played each other in the 1962 European Cup final, with Benfica winning 5-3 to claim the last of their two titles to date.

PSG slipped out of the top eight after winning only one of their last five outings in the league phase and finishing in 11th place. They will go to Monaco for the first leg and will be wary of the principality side who beat them there in Ligue 1 in November. However, 2004 Champions League finalists Monaco have been in poor form, with just one win in six games since the turn of the year. They are 10th in Ligue 1, 21 points behind leaders PSG. However, a 0-0 draw with Juventus on Wednesday allowed them to secure a play-off place in Europe.

PSG also beat French opposition in the play-off round last season, hammering Brest 10-0 on aggregate before going on to lift the trophy for the first time in their history.

Elsewhere, Newcastle United will be strong favourites against surprise packages Qarabag of Azerbaijan, with the first leg to



Real Madrid's Thibaut Courtois (second left) hugs Benfica's goalkeeper Anatoliy Trubin, who scored a goal in 98th-minute which proved decisive in allowing the Portuguese side to snatch the last play-off spot ahead of Marseille. (AFP)

come in Baku. PSG and Newcastle know that if they win, they will play either Barcelona or Chelsea in the last 16. Real's possible last-16 opponents are Manchester City or Sporting, which would mean yet another trip to Lisbon in the latter case.

Bodo/Glimt, Norwegian champions in four of the last six years, were also surprise qualifiers for this stage and have been rewarded with a tie against last season's runners-up Inter Milan. Juventus will take on Galatasaray, while Atletico Madrid face Club Brugge. Borussia Dortmund play Ata-

lanta and Bayer Leverkusen were drawn against Olympiacos.

The two-legged play-off ties will take place in February, with the winners advancing to the last 16 in March. Already through to that stage are the top eight teams from the league phase, including five English Premier League sides in Arsenal, Liverpool, Tottenham Hotspur, Chelsea and City, as well as Bayern Munich, Barcelona and Sporting.

This season's Champions League final will be played in Budapest on May 30.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE KNOCKOUT PHASE PLAY-OFF ROUND DRAW

Benfica (POR) v Real Madrid (ESP); Bodo/Glimt (NOR) v Inter Milan (ITA); Monaco (FRA) v Paris Saint-Germain (FRA); Qarabag (AZE) v Newcastle United (ENG); Galatasaray (TUR) v Juventus (ITA); Club Brugge (BEL) v Atletico Madrid (ESP); Borussia Dortmund (GER) v Atalanta (ITA); Olympiacos (GRE) v Bayer Leverkusen (GER)

First legs to be played February 17/18, second legs on February 24/25

Forest face Fenerbahce, Celtic draw Stuttgart in Europa League play-offs

Paris: Nottingham Forest face a daunting trip to Istanbul after being drawn to play Fenerbahce in the knockout phase play-offs of the Europa League, while Celtic must take on German giants VfB Stuttgart. Forest, who sit just above the relegation zone in the Premier League, finished 13th out of 36 teams in the Europa League and so were seeded for the play-off draw.

However, Fenerbahce promise to be a tough test as they are unbeaten in the Turkish Super Lig this season, even if they sit three points behind leaders Galatasaray in the table. Their squad includes former Manchester City goalkeeper Ederson, Spain star Marco Asensio and France midfielder Matteo Guendouzi.

Forest, who will be hoping to return to the Turkish city for the final in May, will nevertheless draw encouragement from the fact Aston Villa beat Fenerbahce 1-0 at their Sukru Saracoglu stadium just last week. The winner of that tie will play either Real Betis or Midtjylland in the last 16 – Forest lost at home to the Danes in the league phase in October. Celtic secured qualification for the play-offs after beating Dutch side Utrecht 4-2 on Thursday to finish 21st. They will host Stuttgart, currently fifth in the Bundesliga, in the first leg on February 19 before the return in Germany on February 26. The winners will play Portuguese opposition in the last 16, with either Porto or Braga waiting for them.

Other ties in the play-offs include Bologna of Serie A playing Brann Bergen of Norway and Lille taking on Red Star Belgrade. Aston Villa are among the eight teams straight through to the last 16, and will play one of Lille, Red Star Belgrade, PAOK or Celta Vigo in that round.

Europa League knockout phase play-offs draw

Dinamo Zagreb (CRO) v Genk (BEL); Ludogorets Razgrad (BUL) v Ferencváros (HUN); Celtic (SCO) v VfB Stuttgart (GER); Brann (NOR) v Bologna (ITA); Panathinaikos (GRE) v Viktoria Plzen (CZE); PAOK (GRE) v Celta Vigo (ESP); Fenerbahce (TUR) v Nottingham Forest (ENG); Lille (FRA) v Red Star Belgrade (SRB)

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arsenal's Arteta shrugs off title pressure

Reuters
London

Mikel Arteta is keen not to let Arsenal's three-match winless streak in the Premier League affect the players, calling for his team to stay grounded as they pursue their first English top-flight title since 2003-04.

Sunday's home loss to Manchester United shaved Arsenal's lead at the top to four points over Manchester City and Aston Villa. But Arteta said that Arsenal should focus on the overall picture of their season so far.

"It's about understanding where you are," Arteta told reporters, before their trip to Leeds United today. "Certainly when you lose a game you have a lot of feelings, especially this group of players because they are so competitive. They search for excellence and when you don't reach it, you ask questions, and we did that. My role there is to bring optimism and reality of where we are. Our club has a long, long history and to find the position we are in February, it's hard to find."

Arsenal, who beat Kairat Almaty 3-2 on Wednesday, won all eight of their Champions

League matches, reaching the round of 16 as the top team in the league phase. The north Londoners are also gunning for the FA Cup and the League Cup. "We're doing a lot of things so well and let's focus mainly on that and for sure, we want to improve... but with that sense of self-confidence and conviction that we're on the right path," Arteta said.

Defenders Jurrien Timber and William Saliba were rested for the Kairat game due to minor injuries and are fit for the trip to Leeds, the manager said. Max Dowman, their 16-year-old right winger, remains the only Arsenal player sidelined with injury.

Leeds lost 5-0 at Arsenal in August, but they have since beaten Chelsea, held Liverpool twice and drawn with Manchester United to move six points clear of the relegation zone, losing only one of their last 11 matches in all competitions.

But Arteta said he wanted his players to shrug off the pressure of expectation and play with "freedom and enjoyment", knowing that they have the full backing of the manager and his staff. "We need to make sure the journey is beautiful because what lies ahead is great and everyone needs to be part of that, but in a good sense and with good humour, good optimism and looking forward to it," he added.



SPOTLIGHT

Carrick calls for calm after flying start to Man United reign

AFP
London

Michael Carrick has warned his Manchester United players not to get carried away by their impressive wins against Manchester City and Arsenal ahead of their match against Fulham tomorrow.

Carrick has made a flying start to his spell as interim manager with a 2-0 victory against City followed by a thrilling 3-2 win at Premier League leaders Arsenal. After those surprise results against the Premier League's current top two, United will be favoured to see off seventh-placed Fulham at Old Trafford this weekend.

A third successive United victory would equal Ruben Amorim's best league run in a turbulent reign that ended with the sack earlier this month, giving Carrick the opportunity to return to Old Trafford until the end of the season.

"The feeling around the group, around the squad and the results that we have had, the perform-

ances and going into the next game, I don't think the past is too relevant in that respect," Carrick said of his strong start. "We understand it and what has worked before and what hasn't, but really I think the boys are in a good place going into the game. All of a sudden it is a different game, it's Fulham and just because we are at home taking anything for granted is bang out of order, really."

Carrick said fourth-placed United are monitoring the transfer market ahead of Monday's deadline after wing-back Patrick Dorgu limped off with a hamstring issue at Arsenal. The in-form 21-year-old will be "out for a period of time", according to Carrick after reports said his absence could last 10 weeks.

"Never say never, of course, because a lot can happen and situations can be thrown up. Sometimes it's in our control, sometimes it's maybe something that's out of our control that we got to deal with," Carrick said. "We're calm, I'm pretty calm. I think we've shown what we're capable of doing as a team and we'll just see what the next few days bring."



Michael Carrick has made a great start to his spell as interim manager with victories over Manchester City and leaders Arsenal.

Mateta omitted from Palace squad to face Forest

London: Jean-Philippe Mateta will not be in Crystal Palace's squad for trip to Nottingham Forest as the France striker reportedly looks to leave Selhurst Park. AC Milan have emerged as frontrunners to sign the 28-year-old, who has also been linked with Forest, before the transfer window shuts on Monday. "I can confirm JP will not be in the matchday squad," Palace manager Oliver Glasner told reporters.

"It's nothing right now to do with transfers, he's just not in the right place right now to play. To protect the team and protect him, that's why he will not travel to Nottingham. The second thing to confirm is there will be no new player in the matchday squad."

Palace have reportedly made a bid for Wolves striker Jorgen Strand Larsen, who could be a direct replacement for Mateta. Glasner confirmed earlier this month that he would be leaving the south London club at the end of the season. Palace, who won the FA Cup last season, are winless in their past 11 matches across all competitions, leaving them eight points clear of the relegation zone. They also suffered a humiliating FA Cup third round defeat at sixth tier Macclesfield.

GORETZKA TO LEAVE BAYERN MUNICH AT END OF SEASON

German international Leon Goretzka will leave Bayern Munich at the end of his contract this summer, the midfielder announced. The announcement puts an end to rumours of the 30-year-old departing the Allianz Arena during the winter transfer window, with La Liga's Atletico Madrid reportedly among Goretzka's suitors. Goretzka will become a free agent on July 1.

Reigning champions Bayern hold a healthy eight-point lead atop the Bundesliga and are still in the German Cup and have qualified directly for the Champions League last 16.

After coming through the academy at Bochum, where he turned professional in 2012, Goretzka transferred to Schalke a year later, before joining Bayern in July 2018.

There he has notably won six German league titles, as well as lifting the Champions League in 2020.

The 67-time German international had formed one half of Bayern's undisputed first-choice defensive midfield duo alongside Joshua Kimmich for many seasons, but now faces competition from youngster Aleksandar Pavlovic.

EVERTON'S GREALISH SET TO MISS REST OF SEASON IN WORLD CUP BLOW

Everton winger Jack Grealish is set to miss the rest of the season with a fractured foot that puts his hopes of making the World Cup in severe doubt.

Grealish, on loan from Manchester City, is likely to undergo surgery after suffering the stress fracture in Everton's 1-0 win against Aston Villa on January 18.

Grealish's last England cap came against Finland in October 2024, but his impressive Everton form had catapulted him back into World Cup contention.

England boss Thomas Tuchel spoke with him after Everton's win at Manchester United in November. But now he is unlikely to be fit in time for the tournament, which will be held in the United States, Canada and Mexico from June 11.

Grealish had been thriving at Everton, with two goals and six assists in 20 Premier League appearances.

The 30-year-old appeared to be approaching peak form again after a disappointing period at City, during which time he fell out of favour with boss Pep Guardiola.