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ATHLETICS

# Meet record bonus returns for Doha Diamond League

‘By continuing to award bonus payments for new meeting records we are incentivising athletes to perform’

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Organisers of the Doha Diamond League Meeting on May 8 have confirmed that athletes who set new meeting records at the 2026 event will be awarded a \$5,000 bonus, an innovative concept that was first introduced in 2025.

The Diamond League series broke new ground in 2025 with \$9.84mn awarded in prize money across the series as a whole, the largest prize pool in Diamond League history.

While the introduction of meeting record bonus payments in Doha provided another welcome incentive for athletes, the high standard of past-performances meant that only Bahrain's Olympic silver medallist Salwa Eid Naser came close. Her winning time of 49.83 in the women's 400m matched the meeting record set by Allyson Felix of USA in 2008, but it wasn't quick enough for the outright best required to meet the criteria for the \$5,000 bonus payment.

Mohammed al-Fadala, Qatar Athletics Federation president, said: "The Doha Meeting has established itself as one of the leading Diamond League fixtures and feedback from our athletes, their coaches and their managers, repeatedly tells us that our exceptional hospitality is a key factor in them wanting to return.

"As Mutaz Barshim said in last year's press conference, track and field isn't an easy job, so it's very important that we



Multiple Olympic and world champion Mondo Duplantis of Sweden has confirmed he will compete in Doha.

value our athletes and take care of them, as well as providing the perfect stage for top quality competition. By continuing to



Qatar Athletics Federation president Mohammed al-Fadala.

for their efforts.

"Mutaz acknowledged that change is positive and that as a meeting, and across the sport as a whole, we were moving in the right direction. We in Doha remain committed to innovation and change and that remains crucial if we're to continue to grow our reputation and profile globally."

Earlier, multiple Olympic, world and European champion Mondo Duplantis of Sweden confirmed he will compete in Doha. The 26-year-old, a two-time Olympic gold medallist and six-time world champion, is also the meeting record holder in Doha with 6.02m, set in 2022. He arrives following another standout season,

having broken the world record for the 14th time, most recently with 6.30m at the World Athletics Championships in Tokyo.

Duplantis is unbeaten in this Doha Diamond League fixture, but it's been far from plain sailing. The 2020 event was postponed due to the pandemic (he won the rescheduled competition with a best of 5.82m), while in 2022 the men's pole vault was delayed by one day and moved indoors due to high winds. Duplantis cleared 6.02m for the win on that occasion – a mark that still stands as the meeting record.

"We've had a couple of challenges in the past for sure, but I've always loved coming to Doha," said the 2025 World Athlete of the Year. "Last year was amazing for me. I ticked off a couple of really big goals, stuff that was high up on my bucket list, but my hunger and motivation is still 100% there. My training has gone well over the winter and I'm looking forward to competing indoors – it's important to have something new to aim for, and for me, I want to successfully defend my European title.

"Doha will follow and it's the perfect meet to kick off my outdoor season. I definitely prefer the warm weather to the cold, so hopefully conditions will be conducive to jumping high, challenging my meeting record, and setting a solid benchmark – and new goals – for the year ahead."

The Doha Meeting is the opening meeting of the 2026 Wanda Diamond League. The series comprises 15 of the most prestigious events in global track and field across four different continents. It concludes with a single final across two days in Brussels on September 4 and 5.

**Al-Naimi and al-Qubaisi share spoils in Qatar Superstock 600**

The fourth and penultimate round of the Qatar Superstock 600 (QSTK 600) Championship delivered another weekend of thrilling action as the title race tightened up at the Lusail International Circuit. In QSTK 600, Mashal al-Naimi opened the round with a commanding victory in Race 1, completing 12 laps in 25:18.209 to lead in his Yamaha R6. Russia's Dmitry Sedin finished second on a Kawasaki ZX-6, while Abdulla al-Qubaisi completed the podium. Sedin booked another podium spot when he topped the QSTK Trophy Class while India's Jonathan Emmanuel came second and Hungary's Marton Belleli finished third. Race 2 saw al-Qubaisi strike back in style, taking a dominant win in 20:48.010 in the 10-lap race ahead of al-Naimi and al-Mutawa who finished second and third respectively. This time, Emmanuel topped the QSTK Trophy class ahead of Belleli and Russia's Yuri Nekrasov. After Race 2, al-Naimi and al-Qubaisi are locked at the top of the Superstock 600 standings on 180 points each, with Geoffrey Emmanuel third on 115. In Supersport 300 category, Mahmoud Elbanna leads the championship standings with 157 points, followed by Andrea Giaccherio (109) and Nolan Macary (100), with riders now heading to the final round which will take place on February 27-28.

SPOTLIGHT

# Katara International Arabian Horse Festival from tomorrow



Director General of the Katara Cultural Village Foundation and Chairman of the Katara International Arabian Horse Festival Prof Dr Khalid bin Ibrahim al-Sulaiti and Tournament Director and Organising Committee member Bader Mohammed al-Darwish address a press conference yesterday.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Under the patronage of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, the Katara International Arabian Horse Festival will begin tomorrow at Katara Cultural Village.

Against a backdrop of striking cityscapes and the beautiful Katara shoreline, the event will honour the grace, power, and timeless tradition of the Arabian horse. With a total prize fund of \$1,050,000, the Doha stage stands amongst the most prestigious events of the season.

The Katara Cultural Village Foundation announced the sponsors of the festival during a press conference held yesterday, attended by Professor Dr Khalid bin Ibrahim al-Sulaiti, Director General of the Foundation and Chairman of the Festival Organising Committee.

In his address, Dr al-Sulaiti said the patronage of His Highness the Amir reflects the esteemed position of the Arabian horse in Qatari and Arab culture as a symbol of identity and

authentic heritage. He noted that the sixth edition of the festival continues a sustained journey of development, adding that the event has evolved beyond a seasonal occasion to become a firmly established fixture on the Arabian horse calendar.

He highlighted that six years of continuous progress have been reflected in growing attendance and rising confidence among breeders, owners, and enthusiasts from Qatar and abroad. This position, he stressed, is the result of a clear vision and cumulative effort built on discipline and consistency.

Dr al-Sulaiti revealed that the 2026 edition features 545 horses registered across two championships – the Arabian Horse Tour and the Arabian Peninsula Purebred Championship. He explained that the diversity of bloodlines and artistic characteristics across both championships adds depth and balance to the festival, reinforcing the Arabian horse as a living cultural value rather than a relic of the past.

Tournament Director and Organising Committee member Bader Mohammed al-Darwish said the achievements of the sixth edition reflect a clear strategic vision to strengthen the

festival's global standing and enhance the international presence of Arabian horses.

He confirmed that the Arabian Horse Tour – Doha returns for the second consecutive year as the centrepiece of the festival, with more than 200 horses competing for qualification towards the World Arabian Horse Championship Supreme title.

Al-Darwish noted that the Doha leg holds particular significance within the global tour, given its historical association with Arabian horses and traditional horsemanship.

He added that the Doha round follows the season opener in Abu Dhabi and coincides with a renewed celebration of the breed in a country regarded as a major centre for Arabian horses. The festival will also host the Arabian Peninsula Purebred Championship, featuring 180 horses. The Katara International Arabian Horse Festival 2026 will run from tomorrow until February 12 and remains one of the flagship events organised by the Katara Cultural Village Foundation, reflecting its mission to preserve Arab heritage and promote the Arabian horse as a timeless symbol of authenticity and belonging.

SPOTLIGHT

# Fans divided after boycott decision hits T20 World Cup

Boycott deepens freeze in India-Pakistan cricket relations after Islamabad’s decision on Sunday

Reuters  
Karachi

Pakistan’s decision to boycott its Twenty20 World Cup match against India has drawn widespread support from fans and administrators who hailed the move as a long-overdue stand in a rivalry in which sport and geopolitics have collided.

The government on Sunday cleared Pakistan to take part in the tournament beginning February 7 but barred the team from playing India in a February 15 group match in Colombo, a decision the International Cricket Council (ICC) said was not in the interests of the global game.

The boycott deepened a long freeze in bilateral cricket between the nuclear-armed neighbours – who have not played a full series since 2012-13 and now meet largely at neutral venues – and dealt a blow to the ICC’s marquee event, with India-Pakistan matches the biggest drivers of global viewership and revenue.

## ‘ENOUGH IS ENOUGH’

For many in Pakistan, however, the boycott was less about cricketing issues, with Pakistan forfeiting two points by skipping the match, and

more about symbolism. “Enough is enough,” former Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman Najam Sethi told Reuters, accusing India’s board of politicising the ICC.

“It’s time to challenge this duplicitous approach by exercising PCB’s options in alliance with Bangladesh.”

The Indian government, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) and the International Cricket Council did not respond to requests for comment.

The ICC said it was still awaiting an official communication from the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) conveying their “position of selective participation”.

“While the ICC respects the roles of governments in matters of national policy, this decision is not in the interest of the global game or the welfare of fans worldwide, including millions in Pakistan,” the Dubai-based body said in a statement on Sunday.

The government has not publicly detailed its reasoning, but Mosharraf Zaidi, a spokesperson for Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, linked the move to security tensions with India.

“Nothing is more important than the memory of Pakistani citizens and troops murdered by Indian proxy terrorists over the weekend,” Zaidi said. “With funer-



A man works on a cricket bat to prepare for sale at a sports gear shop in Kolkata, India, yesterday. (Reuters)

als taking place today, this was the least that could be done.”

The remarks followed co-ordinated attacks by Baloch separatist militants across Pakistan’s southwestern Balochistan province over the weekend that killed nearly 50

people. India’s foreign ministry rejected Pakistan’s accusations, calling them “baseless” and accusing Islamabad of deflecting attention from its own internal issues.

Pakistan’s World Cup jersey has been branded the “Markhor Edi-

tion,” after the national animal, a symbol of resilience also used in military iconography, Geo TV reported.

**‘LET CRICKET JUST BE A GAME’**  
On the streets of Pakistan’s major

cities, many cricket fans backed the boycott as a response to what they see as India’s growing influence over global cricket governance.

“This arrogance of India should be broken a little,” said Mohammad Asghar, a fan in Karachi.

“They should realise someone has come forward to challenge them.”

Others drew parallels with Bangladesh’s earlier withdrawal from the tournament over safety concerns, a move that led to Scotland replacing them, and questioned why Pakistan should be held to a different standard.

“If Bangladesh can boycott for one player’s safety, why can’t Pakistan take a stand?” said Ayaz Ahmed.

The decision also sparked heated debate on social media, with users divided between calls for “self-respect” and warnings that skipping the match could further isolate Pakistan in global cricket.

Former Pakistan captain Shahid Afridi agreed.

“Cricket can open doors when politics closes them,” he wrote on X.

“It’s regrettable that Pakistan won’t play India, but this is the moment for the ICC to prove it is impartial,” the former Pakistan skipper added.

MOTORSPORT

# Gasly balances F1 with padel, MotoGP ambitions

Reuters  
Madrid

There is more to life than Formula One, said Alpine driver **Pierre Gasly** as he spent his Saturday in Madrid watching his padel team, Ten Padel, compete in the Hexagon Cup, one of the sport’s premier tournaments.

The 29-year-old has ventured into the business world by making big investments in padel and motorcycle racing.

The Frenchman joins a growing trend of professional athletes broadening their horizons beyond their primary careers, a shift in thinking Gasly credits to increased financial awareness and strong advisory teams around modern athletes.

“I’ve always been a curious person,” Gasly told Reuters.

“Formula One opens many opportunities. While I wake up thinking about F1 and fall asleep thinking about it, there’s more to life. I want to discover other things and mix them with my passions,” he added.

The Hexagon Cup, in its third edition, has transformed Madrid into the global epicentre of padel this weekend, showcasing the sport’s – a hybrid of tennis and squash – rise.

The team-based tournament played across men’s, women’s, and Under-21 categories with a \$1mn prize for the winners, has become a standout event, attracting more than 30,000 fans.

It also features involvement from celebrity owners like former tennis players Rafa Nadal and Andy Murray, Barcelona striker Robert Lewandowski, actor Eva Longoria and Gasly himself.

“These celebrity owners are a gateway to bring attention to padel and what will become the Hexagon World Series,” Gary Davidson, director of operations for organisers 54, told Reuters.

“Padel has been a niche sport in Central and South America, as well as Spain, but figures like Pierre (Gasly) and others help grow the



game’s fan base globally.” Gasly’s commitment to padel stems from his personal passion for the sport, which he plays regularly.

“Padel is something I really enjoy in my daily life, and I believe it’s a sport with incredible business potential,” Gasly said.

“I’m happy to be a part of its growth through my team.”

Gasly recently added motorsport to his portfolio, acquiring a stake in the MotoGP Tech3 KTM team, cementing himself as the first active Formula One driver to invest in a team from motorcycling’s elite racing series.

“I’ve followed MotoGP since I was five years old, so this was an incredible opportunity I had to take,” he said.

“As long as there’s an engine and wheels, it’s something I feel connected to. Thanks to Formula One, you get a lot of opportunities. You can’t do everything, but definitely some

opportunities you can’t say no to.” While Gasly’s entrepreneurial ventures are making headlines off the track, his focus remains on Formula One for the upcoming season against the backdrop of significant regulation changes.

Fresh from this week’s Formula One shake-down in Barcelona and with final pre-season tests set to take place in Bahrain from February 11-13 and 18-20, all eyes are on Alpine as the team prepares for the season-opening Australian Grand Prix on March 6.

“I’m excited about the new season,” Gasly said. “We’re talking about investments and other projects, but my life is still Formula One, and my ultimate goal is to become a Formula One world champion.”

“Regulation changes always bring uncertainty, but it’s also an opportunity to be competitive right from the start.”

COMMENT

# Mercedes ready to win Formula One world title, says Russell

AFF  
London

George Russell believes he has been handed a car ready to win the world championship as Mercedes head into a new era for Formula One as the title favourites.

Under the leadership of Toto Wolff, Mercedes won eight consecutive constructors’ championships and seven drivers’ titles between 2014 and 2021.

Since Russell joined in 2022 they have struggled to keep pace with Red Bull and McLaren.

However, a major upheaval of the sport’s technical rulebook for the new season means a fresh start for all the teams on the grid.

Mercedes caught the eye in last week’s first test at Barcelona’s Circuit de Catalunya by boasting both impressive speed and reliability, with the bookmakers making Russell favourite for his first world title.

“I feel ready to fight for a world championship, and whether we have that tag as favourites above us or not, it doesn’t change my approach one single bit,” said the British driver at Mercedes’ digital launch yesterday.

“There are a lot of things we need to learn very quickly, but I feel I can take advantage of that and I feel confident in myself and in the team.”

Four-time world champion Max

Verstappen will lead Red Bull’s challenge, aiming to regain the title after losing out to Lando Norris last season. Russell and Verstappen have clashed on and off the track in recent years and the former is relishing the prospect of a title battle to add to the feud between the pair.

“I would love that. He is very much going to be in the fight this year,” added Russell. “You obviously wish you had a slightly easier time of it, but it should never be easy, and if you are going to win, you want to have fought for it and won it fair and square on track.”

“The best-case scenario is if you have a number of teams battling it out, and at the moment it does look like Red Bull, McLaren, Ferrari and ourselves are the four teams that are quite close,” Russell said.

Wolff is relieved to have what appears a competitive car at the front of the grid after four seasons of disappointment, but is not getting carried away despite a positive first test session.

“It is always nice if your driver is the favourite with the bookmakers, and he (Russell) deserves it because he is one of the best,” said the Austrian.

“But it is always the best driver and the best car that wins, and we have not proven yet that we have a package that is good enough.”

There will be two three-day tests in Bahrain later this month before the season begins in Australia on March 8.



British F1 driver for Mercedes George Russell at the team’s digital launch yesterday. (@MercedesAMGF1)

ANNOUNCEMENT

# Sri Lanka drop De Silva from World Cup squad

AFF  
Colombo

Sri Lanka yesterday dropped Test captain Dhananjaya de Silva from their 15-man T20 World Cup squad led by Dasun Shanaka.

De Silva had been recalled for a three-match T20 international series against Pakistan early last month after an 18-month absence and played the opening game against England in an ongoing series. But he was dropped for the second T20, while the final match is scheduled today.

Since his recall, he has only scored 43 runs

in three innings and taken one wicket with his off-spin.

Against England at Pallekele last week, he laboured to 11 off 12 balls before being dismissed by Adil Rashid.

Seam bowler Eshan Malinga has been named in the squad despite suffering a shoulder injury against England on Sunday.

The 24-year-old bowler, who has taken eight wickets in eight T20 matches for Sri Lanka.

“Malinga suffered a shoulder dislocation while bowling... he will undergo an MRI scan to assess the extent of the injury and determine the next course of action,” Sri Lanka Cricket posted on Instagram.

Sri Lanka are co-hosting with India the T20 World Cup, which starts on Saturday, and face Ireland in their opening game in Colombo on Sunday.

They will also play Australia, Oman and Zimbabwe in Group B, with the top two teams to qualify for the Super 8 stage.

**Squad:** Dasun Shanaka (captain), Pathum Nissanka, Kamil Mishara, Kusal Mendis, Kamindu Mendis, Kusal Perera, Charith Asalanka, Janith Liyanage, Pavan Rathnayake, Wanindu Hasaranga, Dunith Wellalage, Maheesh Theekshana, Dushmantha Chameera, Matheesha Pathirana, Eshan Malinga.

TENNIS

# Alcaraz: History-maker with shades of Federer

The seven-time Grand Slam champion from Spain draws comparison with Swiss maestro Federer

AFP  
Melbourne

Carlos Alcaraz has an easy charm and broad Tom Cruise-like smile, but underneath the cool exterior is a highly driven individual laser-focused on setting records.

The 22-year-old did just that on Sunday, beating Novak Djokovic in the Australian Open final to become the youngest man to win all four majors, surpassing the legendary Rafael Nadal.

Fellow Spaniard Nadal, who was at Rod Laver Arena in Melbourne to witness it, was 24 when he completed the career Grand Slam.

Alcaraz has immense respect for Nadal and Djokovic, but the world number one's hero growing up was Roger Federer.

"Federer, the class he had, the way he got people to see tennis, that was beautiful," Alcaraz, who has now won seven majors, said in 2023.

"Watching Federer is like looking at a work of art. It's elegance, he did everything magnificently. I became enchanted by him."

Alcaraz shares plenty of the same attributes - daring, range, tactical flexibility, and style.

The modest, muscular star

from the small town of El Palmar in Spain's southeast hit the giant-killing jackpot at Madrid in 2022 when he became the only man to defeat both Nadal and Djokovic at the same clay-court event.

For good measure, he achieved it on back-to-back days on his way to the title.

When he won his maiden Slam, at the US Open the same year, he became the youngest champion of a men's major since Nadal at the 2005 French Open.

He was also the youngest man to ascend to the world number one ranking.

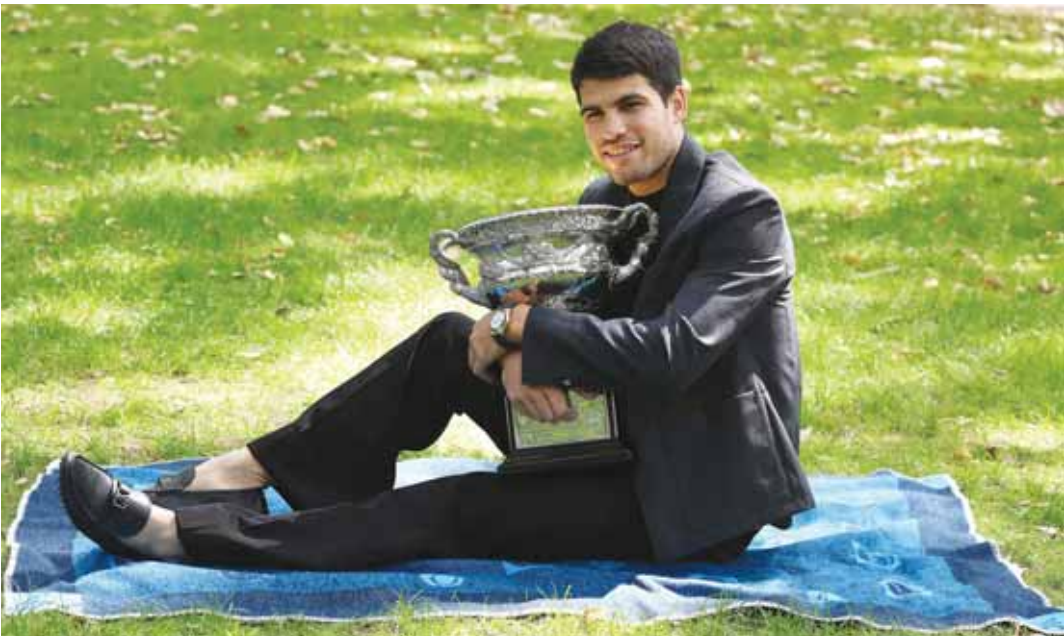
His Roland Garros coronation in 2024 ensured he was the youngest to win Grand Slam titles on clay, grass and hard courts.

Ominously, Alcaraz is still getting better and he has developed nerves of steel, refusing to give up when the odds are stacked against him.

He demonstrated that never-say-die attitude in his semi-final in Melbourne against Alexander Zverev, battling through cramp and a 3-5 deficit in the fifth set to pull off a huge win.

"I just hate giving up. I just don't want to feel that way," he said.

"When I was younger there were a lot of matches that I just



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz poses with the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup trophy at the Royal Exhibition Building following his victory against Serbia's Novak Djokovic in the Australian Open final in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

didn't want to fight anymore or I just gave up.

"Then I just got mature, and I just hate that feeling (losing).

"Every step more, every one second more of suffering, one second more of fighting is always worth it," he added.

**Nadal heir apparent**

At his side for most of his career was coach Juan Carlos Ferrero, the 2003 French Open winner, before they split late last year. Ferrero brought Alcaraz into his academy in Valencia, 120km from El Palmar.

His raw potential soon attracted

sponsors, with marquee brands such as Nike and Rolex rushing to sign up Nadal's heir apparent. The tennis team around the prodigy was expanded and soon included a physical trainer, a physiotherapist and the support of psychologists and doctors. An indication of his

potential was obvious at the Rio clay-court event in 2020 when he was just 16, and ranked 406 in the world.

He shocked Albert Ramos-Vinolas to register his first ATP win, and it set him on the path to superstardom. Alcaraz, who learned the game at a tennis school run by his father, captured his maiden ATP trophy in 2021.

Fiercely protective of his private life, he has many of the same friends he hung out with as a child.

He played doubles with Emma Raducanu at last year's US Open, setting tongues wagging, but the British player has insisted they are "just good friends".

Alcaraz's off-court interests include golf and football, and he is a big Real Madrid fan.

Another hobby is chess, which he has said helps him in his day job.

"I love chess. Having to concentrate, to play against someone else, strategy, having to think ahead.

"I think all of that is very similar to the tennis court," he said in a 2023 *Vogue* interview.

"You have to intuit where the other player is going to send the ball, you have to move ahead of time, and try to do something that will make him uncomfortable.

"So I play it a lot."

MOTORSPORT

## A first for five drivers as Round 4 of ADRL ends



Qatar Racing Club Director General Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani crowned the podium winners after the fourth round of the 2026 Arabian Drag Racing League.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The fourth round of the 2026 Arabian Drag Racing League (ADRL) wrapped up at Qatar Racing Club (QRC), drawing a record 190 racers - 20 more than the previous round. Five drivers won their first-ever titles, intensifying the season title race with just two rounds left.

The championship is held under the patronage of QRC Chairman HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani.

QRC Director General Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani crowned the podium winners.

The Index categories for cars competing over the quarter-mile distance recorded the highest participation, with 63 competitors. In the (INDEX 9.0) category, opening-round champion Sulaiman al-Sanousi claimed his second title of the season after defeating Jarrah al-Mutairi in the final race.

The (INDEX 8.50) category featured an entirely new podium, as Fahad al-Ajmi secured his first title of the season. Fahd al-Sharah finished second, while Saleh al-Misbah completed the podium in third place.

The most intense racing came in the eighth-mile Index categories, peaking in Index 4.0. After losing the opening-round final, Badr Khurshid bounced back to face two-time winner Tareq al-Bastaki in the final. Khurshid won, claiming his first title of the season. In the Index 4.50 category, Ibrahim Abbas Ibrahim and Abdullah al-Yaseen met in their first-ever final, with Ibrahim taking the Round Four title.

Meanwhile, the winner of the previous round, Shaun Langdon, returned to claim his second title of the championship after winning the final race of the (INDEX 4.80) category against Ahmed Saad al-Harbi. Third place on the podium went to the runner-up of the



previous round, Batti al-Ali. As usual, the Pro Modified category stole the spotlight, starting from the qualifying runs, which were topped by last round's winner JR Gray.

Champion of Rounds One and Two, Mike Stavrinou, set the second-fastest time, while fellow American Mike Castellana placed third in qualifying.

However, that did not stop Castellana from advancing past the first round after defeating the runner-up of the previous two rounds, Rashid al-Balushi.

Castellana then faced Gray in the semi-finals and managed to overcome him, setting up a final showdown with Stavrinou, who was aiming for his third title of the championship. The final result, however, delivered Castellana his first-ever title in the series.

In Super Street Pro, last round's winner Jaber al-Maghrabi reached his fourth straight final, but Yousuf al-Ali - winner of the first two rounds - claimed his third title after missing the podium in the previous round.

After two challenging rounds, Turki al-

Dhafeeri reached his second Super Street Outlaw final of the season and beat three-time winner Mustafa Atat, who finished second. Badr al-Sharshani took third, his second podium of the championship.

The final of the most competitive motorcycle category repeated last round's matchup, with Mishaal al-Sabr and Christopher Garner facing off again. Al-Sabr reached his third straight final but finished second once more, while Garner claimed his second title of the season.

Mishari al-Turki returned to winning form by securing his second victory of the season after claiming the Super Street Bike category title with a win over Round Two champion Mohammed Bourashed in the final race.

In the final motorcycle category, Mustafa Mahmoudi continued his dominance by securing his third consecutive title, while Mohammed al-Salem and Abdulwahab Bouqmaz finished second and third respectively.

The fifth and penultimate round will get underway tomorrow.

GOLF

## Korda captures weather-shortened LPGA season opener

AFP  
Miami

Nelly Korda captured her 16th career LPGA title on Sunday at the season-opening Tournament of Champions after the event was shortened to 54 holes by sub-freezing temperatures.

Korda completed an eight-under par 64 in the third round on Saturday at Lake Nona Country Club but six leaders were left on the course when play was halted on the Orlando, Florida, layout.

They finished Sunday afternoon but none could catch Korda, the 27-year-old American winning for the first time since November 2024 in a seven-win season that qualified her for the tournament.

"I really, over the off-season, was motivated to get back in the winner's circle," Korda said.

Tokyo Olympic champion Korda, a two-time major winner, called her Saturday 64 in blustery and cold conditions among her greatest career rounds.

"I would probably say a top-three round of my career," Korda said. "Conditions were brutal and they just got worse and worse throughout the day.

Korda added that holes "17 and 18 were brutal. I think they were probably the hardest holes I've ever played in professional golf."

After consulting with players and the grounds crew on Sunday, officials made the decision to complete 54 holes but cancel Sunday's scheduled final round.



Nelly Korda poses with the trophy after winning Hilton Grand Vacations Tournament of Champions in Orlando. (AFP)

"Play will continue with Lake Nona Golf and Country Club becoming playable in competitive competition at its peak temperature, but conditions will deteriorate later today and tomorrow making it difficult to complete 72 holes," the LPGA said in a statement.

Ricki Lasky, the LPGA chief tour business and operations officer, spoke with players, who struggled to practice in frigid weather.

"As I was driving up this morning it was 23 degrees (-5 Celsius), feels like temperature of 11, so pretty shocking," she said. "The ground was really hard and it was changing the trajectory of their shots as they were practising."

Poor forecasts put a Monday finish out of reach, she said.

### Golfers should be 'free' to play where they want after LIV defections: Rahm

**Riyadh, Saudi Arabia:** Two-time major winner Jon Rahm yesterday said golfers should be free to choose to play "where they want", following the latest defection from LIV Golf ahead of the Saudi-backed circuit's season opener in Riyadh this week.

Rahm's comments came just days after former Masters champion Patrick Reed announced he was ditching LIV and returning to the PGA Tour later this season. The move came after Brooks Koepka said in December he had left LIV and joined a Returning Member Program announced by PGA Tour chief executive officer Brian Rolapp late last year.

"I think each one has got to do what's best for them," Rahm said when asked about Reed's decision to leave LIV. "We're

free to choose where we want to play golf. At least that's how it should be. He's made his choice," he added. "I have nothing really against him."

Rahm's LIV and Ryder Cup teammate Tyrrell Hatton agreed. "He was out of contract and he had options and he decided that for him to move forward he wanted to go back and play on the PGA tour," he told reporters. "If he was playing in LIV still, he makes the league stronger," he said. "He's chosen his path and like Jon said you can only wish him the best moving forward."

Rahm was among the leading players and major winners, including Bryson DeChambeau and Cameron Smith, who committed to stay with LIV Golf in 2026.

LIGUE 1

# PSG reclaim top spot with late win over Strasbourg

‘In the end I don’t know if we deserved to win or not but it was important’

AFP  
Strasbourg

**N**uno Mendes scored a late winner as Paris Saint-Germain survived the second-half sending-off of Achraf Hakimi to beat Strasbourg 2-1 on Sunday and reclaim top spot in Ligue 1.

A dramatic game in Alsace saw PSG goalkeeper Matfei Safonov save Joaquin Panichelli’s early penalty for Strasbourg, before Senny Mayulu gave the visitors the lead.

Guela Doue, elder brother of PSG star Desire, levelled for the home side before the half-hour mark, but Portugal left-back Mendes headed in the winner for the reigning French and European champions in the 81st minute.

Luis Enrique’s team had been reduced to 10 men on 74 minutes as Moroccan star Hakimi was sent off for a high tackle on Panichelli – he was initially shown a yellow card only for the punishment to be upgraded to red after a VAR check.

Having missed out on direct qualification for the Champions League last 16 in midweek following a 1-1 draw with Newcastle United, PSG bounced back here to make it six successive Ligue 1 victories.

As a result, they are two points clear at the top of the table from Lens, who defeated Le Havre 1-0 on Friday.

“We were fortunate to win this match when most people would have thought it was impossible,” said Luis Enrique.

“It was not our best performance. In the end I don’t know if we deserved to win or not but it was very important.”

For Strasbourg, the defeat was their first in four matches under new English coach Gary O’Neil, appointed last month after Liam Rosenior left for Chelsea.

They remain seventh, but are



PSG’s Nuno Mendes celebrates scoring against Strasbourg in the Ligue 1 match on Sunday. (Reuters)

only two points adrift of Lille in fifth. Strasbourg were awarded a penalty following a VAR check after PSG captain Marquinhos blocked a shot with his arm.

However, Safonov dived to his right to keep out the penalty by Argentina striker Panichelli.

“He is the best goalkeeper I have ever worked with when it comes to stopping penalties,” Luis Enrique said of the Russian.

Mayulu then prodded PSG into the lead, only for Doue to finish off a fine move to equalise by turning in Ben Chilwell’s cross.

Strasbourg must have hoped they could go on to win the game after Moroccan star Hakimi was sent off on his first Ligue 1 appearance in three months, but Mendes headed in Warren Zaire-Emery’s cross to take the points back to

Paris. “I am really proud of the team but really disappointed that we somehow found a way to lose, because I thought we were excellent and created the better chances,” said O’Neil.

“Many teams lose to PSG just defending but we were in the game the whole way – it does give us the belief that we can go again.”

Elsewhere, Lyon continued their excellent run of form with a 1-0 win over Lille to make it 10 straight victories in all competitions and further boost their chances of Champions League qualification.

Danish midfielder Noah Nartey scored the only goal late in the opening half, a first for the 20-year-old since his arrival from Brondby last month.

The seven-time French cham-

pions have now won every game since losing at Lorient in early December, including five on the bounce in Ligue 1.

That form has allowed Paulo Fonseca’s side – also boosted by the arrival of Brazil striker Endrick on loan from Real Madrid – to cement their grip on fourth place, which brings with it a spot in next season’s Champions League qualifying rounds.

With 39 points, Lyon trail Marseille in third only on goal difference and are seven clear of Lille, for whom this was a sixth loss in seven matches in 2026.

Marseille followed their exit from the Champions League during the week by squandering a two-goal lead to draw 2-2 at Paris FC on Saturday – OM and OL are nine points worse off than PSG.

FOCUS

## Arteta seeks Arsenal reinforcement for injured Merino

AFP  
London

**M**ikel Arteta said Arsenal are “actively looking” for a replacement for the injured Mikel Merino in the closing hours of the transfer window.

Merino, who has been a valuable contributor in midfield and attack for the Gunners, could miss the rest of the season with a fractured right foot that requires surgery.

Arteta stressed how significant the Spain international’s absence as Arsenal compete to win four trophies.

The Arsenal boss hopes his club can come up with a new signing to fill the void before Monday’s 1900GMT deadline.

“We are actively looking at options and we will continue to do that,” Arteta told reporters yesterday.

“When you lose a big player like this with four months to go, and all the competitions to play for, you need to look and we need to do everything we possibly can to see if a player is available.”

The loss of Merino has been tempered by the return to fitness of Germany forward Kai

Havertz.

There was further good news for Arsenal as Arteta revealed an injury that kept England winger Bukayo Saka out of Saturday’s 4-0 win over Leeds is only minor.

“Today, he (Saka) was better. Let’s see how he responds. It doesn’t look like something too serious,” Arteta added ahead of today’s League Cup semi-final second leg against Chelsea.

“Whether he is available for tomorrow or the weekend, we will have to wait and see.”

Arsenal remain on course for an unprecedented quadruple.

Arteta’s side hold a six-point lead at the top of the Premier League, have progressed to the last 16 of the Champions League and face third-tier Wigan in the FA Cup fourth round.

But the Spaniard is focused on reaching the League Cup final as his side’s first opportunity to end a six-year trophy drought.

Arsenal hold a 3-2 lead over Chelsea ahead of the second leg on home soil at the Emirates Stadium.

“The next one is always the most important one. And it is the closest, at least, to reach a final,” said Arteta.

“We really need to create the atmosphere, the energy, the belief that we’re going to do it.”



Arsenal’s manager Mikel Arteta gestures on the touchline during the Premier League match against Leeds United at Elland Road in Leeds. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

## Barcelona coach Flick ‘not happy’ with Raphinha thigh strain

AFP  
Barcelona

**B**arcelona will be without winger Raphinha for the Copa del Rey clash at second-tier Albacete today because of a thigh strain and coach Hansi Flick said something had to “change” regarding the Brazilian’s preparation.

Raphinha’s injury, sustained in the win over Elche on Saturday in La Liga, is expected to keep him out for only a week, but Flick was notably upset by the issue. The winger missed two months with a hamstring injury earlier this season and is a key player for the Spanish champions. “To be honest I’m not happy with this, really, because he’s a very important player,” Flick told a news conference yesterday.

“We have to see what we have to change and also what he has to change. We’ll speak about

that in the next days because it’s important. “This is the important phase in the season, we need every player to be able to play and when he’s out, it’s not good.”

Barcelona have not lost a match this season which Raphinha has started.

Albacete defeated Real Madrid in the previous round of the competition, and Flick said he was not surprised.

“This is why we love (cup games), there are sometimes unexpected results,” said the coach. “Of course it’s like that – they have nothing to lose, they have only to win.”

According to Spanish reports German goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen, on loan at Girona, has suffered a hamstring injury which could keep him out for two months. “I didn’t speak with him but I’m very sorry for him, but we have to wait for the results and we’ll see what happened,” added Flick.

### Mateta move to Milan scuppered by medical concerns: source

Jean-Philippe Mateta’s potential deadline-day move to AC Milan from Crystal Palace has fallen through for medical reasons, a source told AFP yesterday, confirming Italian media reports. The France striker was left out of Palace’s squad for their Premier League draw with Nottingham Forest on Sunday, in anticipation of a transfer to Milan. “AC Milan requested further tests on his knee, and they did not provide the necessary assurances to finalise the transfer,” the source told AFP, adding that Mateta was previously slated to sign for Milan at the end of the season. “The decision had been made to bring his arrival forward by six months. The move has now been abandoned.” Mateta has scored 56 goals for Palace since joining the London club, initially on loan from Mainz in January 2021, and was a key part of the side which won last season’s FA Cup.

COMMENT

## Rodri rages that officials ‘don’t want’ City to win

AFP  
Manchester

**M**anchester City midfielder Rodri called on referees “to be neutral” in a furious tirade after their Premier League title bid suffered another setback following a 2-2 draw at Tottenham.

City were cruising towards victory in north London at 2-0 up on Sunday, but the momentum swung in Spurs’ favour after a goal by Dominic Solanke was allowed to stand despite the forward appearing to foul Marc Guehi before making contact with the ball.

Solanke then produced a stunning scorpion kick to equalise and leave City six points adrift of leaders Arsenal.

“I know we won too much and the people don’t want us to win but the referee has to be neutral and for me honestly, it’s not fair,” Rodri told Australian broadcaster Stan Sport. “At the end, when everything is finished, we are frustrated because it’s so clear the foul. He kicked the leg and of course with the push of the action on the ball, the ball goes in.

“We have to pay attention to these little things otherwise it’s going to be difficult for everyone because this league is like this – it’s about small details and everything counts, so I think today is a very tough day for us in this sense.”

The controversial call was just the latest decision that City feel has gone against them in recent weeks.

Pep Guardiola claimed last week that the club’s success during his golden era had come “despite” decisions consistently going against his side. “It’s one game and another game and it’s not possible,” added Rodri.

“He anticipated the leg of Marc and it’s a clear foul, but it’s not



The referee (right) looks on as Tottenham Hotspur’s Xavi Simons (left) clashes with Manchester City’s Rodri (centre) during the Premier League match at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in London yesterday. (AFP)

today. It’s two or three games in a row and I don’t know why, honestly.”

However, Guardiola insisted Manchester City will keep fighting for the Premier League title despite blowing the draw at Tottenham.

“The game was well played and sometimes for long balls and second balls you miss it. We would prefer not to have the transition but an emotional issue for the first goal that the referee conceded to Spurs and after that the momentum is difficult to control.”

Guardiola was booked for his protests and looked in disbelief when the incident was played on big screens inside the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium.

City have won just once in their last six league games, allowing

Arsenal to recover from their own recent stumble. The Gunners’ 4-0 win at Leeds on Saturday suggested they are back on track, but Guardiola is adamant City can still catch Mikel Arteta’s men. “With 14 games to play? As much the chance is there, the hopes will always be there,” he said.

“I know that these types of games always in the past you had to capitalise and win but yeah, the difficulties for many things, but players are coming back and I saw incredibly good spirit and many things.

“We had the injuries, one month ago we had a lot with nine or 10 players out but at the same time we are there and all the calendar is what it is.”

Injury-hit Tottenham’s spirited escape act was a welcome boost

for under-fire boss Thomas Frank.

The Dane had faced calls for his sacking in recent weeks, but leading Tottenham into the Champions League last 16 has infused his side with renewed belief.

With 11 players unavailable and Solanke and Archie Gray limping towards the end, Frank hailed the spirit of his depleted group.

“I’m extremely happy that we finally got a point out of a big second half,” he said. “I said it before, this team’s ability to respond to setbacks and show resilience, I think we are growing it bit by bit.

“And we are, by the way, building it with, I don’t know, players dropping left, right and centre to injury. I think that shows everything about the team and what they are building. Very proud of the players.”