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Vonn says will defy injury and hunt for medals at Olympics

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**GOLF**

# Schaper and Reed lead elite field at 29th Qatar Masters

DGC may present a slightly different challenge this year, with several new and upgraded tee complexes

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The International Swing on the DP World Tour reaches its midway point as a strong field has been assembled for the 29th edition of the Qatar Masters, which will be held from tomorrow through Sunday in Doha.

This week's host, Doha Golf Club (DGC), has staged the event in 26 of its 28 editions, becoming a regular and popular stop for players. This year's field is headlined by Race to Dubai Rankings leader Jayden Schaper of South Africa and his nearest challenger, 2018 Masters champion Patrick Reed of the United States.

Andy Sullivan, Julien Guerrier, Daniel Hillier and Nacho Elvira will also be looking to continue their impressive starts to the season as they vie for the Mother of Pearl Trophy. The international stars will be joined by a trio of Qatari amateurs aiming to impress - Saleh al-Kaabi, Ali al-Shahrani and Daniil Sokolov.

"Twenty-nine years is an incredible run and what we always do is work closely with our friends at the Qatar Golf Association and the Qatar Olympic Committee, whose support is so crucial," said Tom Phillips, Head of Middle East at the DP World Tour, while addressing a press conference yesterday.

"Next year marks 30 years, which will be a huge landmark, and we look forward to reaching it and celebrating properly. This tournament continues to grow stronger every year. We have seven past champions teeing it up this week, along with three winners from the Race to Dubai so far this season. Another significant milestone will also be celebrated, as three-time major champion and 2003 winner Padraig Harrington is set to make his 500th DP World Tour start, which is remarkable. We are delighted to mark that achievement here," he added.

The course, however, may present a slightly different challenge this year, with several new and upgraded tee complexes - notably at the first, sixth, eighth, 13th and 15th holes - allowing greater flexibility in set-up while enhancing turf quality and visual definition.

These improvements support a more strategic test for players while ensuring consistency across all tournament rounds. Operating in a desert environment, sustainability remains a core focus of course management, with DGC utilising warm-season turfgrasses selected for heat tolerance, reduced water demand and long-term durability.

Irrigation practices are closely monitored and data-driven, ensuring water is applied efficiently and only where required, while ongoing soil health programmes



FROM LEFT: QGA Board Member Mohammed Faisal al-Naimi, QGA General Secretary Fahad Nasser al-Naimi, QGA President Hamad al-Mana, Head of Middle East for the DP World Tour Tom Phillips, DP World Tour Senior Tournament Director Mikael Eriksson and QGA Technical Director Mike Shouairy pose after a press conference.

help minimise inputs without compromising performance. "The forecast is looking very good. There may be a bit of wind on Thursday afternoon, but for the rest of the week conditions should be sunny with very light winds. We could see a little bit of rain over the weekend, but not very much," said DP World Tour Senior Tournament Director Mikael Eriksson.

"I have been coming here for around 12 years and I do not think I have ever seen the course in such immaculate condition. I received several messages from key players saying how grateful they are to be back and to see how much the course has improved over the past few years. We are looking forward to a very good and challenging week."

Speaking about the participation of Qatari players, Qatar Golf Association General Secretary Fahad Nasser al-Naimi expressed optimism. "We have three players from our national teams and they are in very good shape. This tournament is a significant opportunity for them and we truly hope they benefit from the experience," he said.

Al-Naimi also praised the strength of the field and confirmed that DGC is in perfect condition to host the event. "The Qatar Masters is one of the most significant sporting events held in Qatar. Once again, we have a strong 144-player field featuring many regulars from the circuit," he said.

**QATAR STARS LEAGUE**

## Belmadi targets vital points as Duhail face struggling Umm Salal

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Al Duhail head coach **Djamel Belmadi** has underlined the importance of securing maximum points when his side takes on bottom-placed Umm Salal today at Al Khor Stadium in the Qatar Stars League.

Al Duhail, last season's runners-up, come into the match in sixth place with 20 points after being held to a 1-1 draw by Al Rayyan in the previous round. With the race for the top four intensifying, Belmadi stressed that his side must capitalise against teams lower down the table to remain in contention. "The difficulty of this match lies in the position of the opponent and the presence of a new coach," Belmadi said. "Umm Salal will be fighting to escape their situation, and that requires us to play with full commitment and focus."

Belmadi also highlighted the challenges his team has faced this season, particularly a spate of injuries. Key absentees have included Brazilian defender Lucas Silva, captain Almoez Ali and first-choice goalkeeper Salah Zakaria, all of whom have missed significant periods. Despite the setbacks, Belmadi insisted Al Duhail are determined to push forward and finish the season as strongly as possible. Umm Salal, meanwhile, remain rooted to the bottom of the standings with nine points. The club recently parted ways with French coach Patrice Carteron and appointed Spaniard Ruben Albis, but results have yet to improve, with a 4-2



**TITLE RACE INTENSIFIES**

Meanwhile, leaders Al Gharafa will look to defend their narrow advantage at the top of the table. Al Gharafa, who have 31 points, face Al Sailiya tomorrow at Hamad Bin Khalifa Stadium as they attempt to bounce back from a 3-1 defeat to Al Sadd in the previous round. The loss denied them the chance to take a significant step towards a first league title since the 2009-2010 season.

Al Sailiya, tenth on 12 points, head into the fixture buoyed by improved form, having beaten Qatar SC 2-1 before holding Al Shamal to a goalless draw. Al Sadd, just two points behind the leaders on 29, will aim to keep the pressure on when they host Al Shahaniya at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium tomorrow. The defending champions have reignited the title race with six consecutive victories, including last round's crucial win over Al Gharafa.

Third-placed Al Shamal, on 25 points, face a tricky away test against an in-form Al Arabi at Al Thumama Stadium. Al Arabi climbed to fifth with 23 points after a 4-2 victory over Umm Salal, continuing an impressive run under coach Cosmin Contra.

**رالي قطر الدولي**  
QATAR INTERNATIONAL RALLY

تخدير

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PREVIEW

# England, Brook seek redemption at T20 WC

AFP  
London

England are in search of a fresh start at the T20 World Cup after their Ashes debacle and a series of failures at global white-ball events, with captain Harry Brook under scrutiny on and off the field.

The 2010 and 2022 champions, who boast an impressive roster of destructive batsmen and match-winning bowlers, are aiming to win the trophy for a record third time.

Brook takes charge at a global tournament for the first time since he replaced Jos Buttler as white-ball skipper last year.

Buttler stood down following England's early exit from the 50-over Champions Trophy in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

That came after an embarrassing title defence at the 50-over World Cup in India in 2023 and a semi-final exit at the 2024 T20 World Cup in West Indies and the United States.

The 26-year-old Brook, one of England's most gifted all-format players, has recently been in the headlines for the wrong reasons.

Last month the Yorkshireman

apologised after he was involved in an altercation with a nightclub bouncer during England's tour of New Zealand before the recent Ashes series in Australia, admitting to a "terrible mistake".

Brook was fined and warned over his conduct by the England and Wales Cricket Board, admitting he was fortunate to keep his job.

Now the richly gifted run-scorer has an early chance to shift the focus back on to his batting as he prepares for England's opener against Nepal in Mumbai on Sunday.

## BATTING FIREPOWER

England boast a wealth of explosive talent at the top of the batting order, with Buttler, Phil Salt and Ben Duckett all options as openers at the tournament in India and Sri Lanka.

Buttler is now 35, but remains one of the most feared players in limited-overs cricket and is a seasoned campaigner in the Indian Premier League, which is also 20 overs per side.

In the middle order, Brook and Tom Banton have the ability to change the game in the blink of an eye while rising talent Jacob Bethell is one of several versatile all-rounders. If there is a potential



England's Harry Brook and Liam Dawson during the third Twenty20 International at Pallekele International Cricket Stadium in Kandy yesterday. (Reuters)

weakness, it may among the pace bowlers. Mark Wood is unavailable because of injury while Jofra Arch-

er, another express quick, has only just returned after suffering a side strain during the Ashes. But Josh

Tongue has been rewarded for his impressive performances in Australia with inclusion in the 15-man

squad. Luke Wood and Sam Curran provide England with left-arm pace options, while fellow seamer Jamie Overton, is also dangerous with the bat.

Vastly experienced leg-break bowler Adil Rashid leads the spin attack, with all-rounders Liam Dawson, Will Jacks and Rehan Ahmed giving Brook a range of slow-bowling options.

England head coach Brendon McCullum and managing director of men's cricket Rob Key will be desperate for success after the recent 4-1 Ashes thumping raised serious questions about their respective futures.

England will start the tournament with their tails up after beating co-hosts Sri Lanka in both one-day international and T20 series - they have lost just one T20 series since the 2024 World Cup.

There has been a significant turnover of personnel since England's white-ball purple patch, during which they claimed the 2019 50-over World Cup and the 2022 T20 crowns.

But Brook still has plenty of experience to call upon and, if England's new generation also make their mark, his team could challenge for another title.

CRICKET

# 'Mystery bowler' Bethell picks up 4 as England win

The visitors clinch the final T20I by a slim margin of 12 runs

Reuters  
Kandy

Spinners Jacob Bethell and Will Jacks led the way as England beat Sri Lanka by 12 runs in a low-scoring match yesterday to sweep their Twenty20 series 3-0 ahead of the World Cup.

England posted a meagre 128-9 with the bat, their lowest total against Sri Lanka in the format, as pace bowler Dushmantha Chameera bagged a five-wicket haul, but all-rounders Jacks (3-14) and Bethell (4-11) produced their best bowling performances in the format to restrict the hosts to 116.

"We've shown we can adapt to surfaces... the way the spinners bowled, 16 overs against Sri Lanka in their own conditions was an awesome effort," England captain Harry Brook said.

Ben Duckett was dismissed for a golden duck by Chameera, and Bethell, Tom Banton and Brook fell cheaply, leaving England struggling at 34-4 in the sixth over.

Jos Buttler (25) was beaten by Maheesh Theekshana's sharp turn off Kandy's spin-friendly track, which found the gap between the England opener's bat and pad to hit the stumps.

Player of the match Sam Curran made a battling 58 to lift England to a respectable total and Luke Wood removed Kamil Mishara for a duck in the first over.

The spinners then took over,



England's Jacob Bethell celebrates with teammates after taking the wicket of Sri Lanka's Dasun Shanaka, stumped by England's Jos Buttler, during the third and final Twenty20 International at Pallekele International Cricket Stadium in Kandy yesterday. (Reuters)

with Liam Dawson getting Pathum Nissanka caught at cover for 23

Adil Rashid bowled Pavan Rathnayake, before Jacks worked through Sri Lanka's middle order, dismissing Kusal Mendis (26), Kamindu Mendis (14) and Janith Liyanage (17) to reduce Sri Lanka to 97-6 in the 16th over.

Bethell took three wickets in the 18th over and with Sri Lanka needing 14 to win from the last

over Theekshana's attempt to hit Bethell for six got him caught as the hosts were all out with three balls remaining.

## 'GREAT WIN TO BE PART OF'

"Great win to be part of, the way the boys kept fighting to the end... the World Cup is here, so when we have the opportunity to play here we have the experiences to carry over," Brook said.

England, twice world cham-

pions in the format, will fly to Mumbai to begin their T20 World Cup campaign against Nepal in Group C on Sunday, the same day Sri Lanka face Ireland at Colombo in Group B.

## BRIEF SCORES

**England 128 for 9 off 20 overs** (Curran 58, Chameera 5-24) **beat Sri Lanka 116 off 19.3 overs** (Bethell 4-11, Jacks 3-14) **by 12 runs**

ANNOUNCEMENT

# MCC changes law on laminated bats as cost of willow rises

Reuters  
London

Cricket bats previously deemed illegal for adult amateur players are to be permitted after a change in the law brought about by the rising cost of English willow.

The Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), custodian of the laws of cricket since 1787, announced the move yesterday as one of 73 changes that will come into effect this year.

Laminated bats - known as Type D bats - had only been permitted in junior cricket.

Type A, B and C bats are made from one piece of high-grade willow while laminated bats are made from three pieces of wood, not necessarily willow, meaning less prime willow is required.

"This is part of an attempt to slow the rising costs of bats around the world," the MCC said in a

statement.

"Laminated bats can use up to three pieces of wood, allowing for more of the best quality willow trees to be used, and for lower-quality willow to be glued to a high-quality face."

Concerns that laminated bats could give a performance advantage are unfounded, according to the MCC.

"MCC has spent considerable time testing these bats, and it is not felt that laminated bats will give a significant performance advantage," it said.

"However, it is expected that, at the top level of the game, bats will remain a single piece of willow," the MCC said.

The best cricket bats are made from a specific type of willow grown in England, which is lightweight and tough but takes years to mature.

Costs of elite bats have spiralled in recent years with price tags often approaching £1,000 (\$1,365).

## Haas signs former Alpine driver Jack Doohan as reserve

**London:** Former Alpine racer Jack Doohan signed with Haas as a reserve driver for the 2026 Formula One season. The team announced his signing yesterday and said he will join Ryo Hirakawa of Japan as reserves for the American team. Doohan, a 23-year-old from Australia, was a reserve for Alpine in 2023 and most of 2024. He was a team driver for seven races - one in 2024 and the first six races of 2025 - before being dropped from the lineup. Doohan's best finish last season was 13th at the Chinese Grand Prix on March 23. Alpine replaced him with Franco Colapinto of Argentina, who remains with the team in 2026. Doohan still was under contract but the team said on Jan. 13 that

it reached a "mutual agreement with Jack Doohan to not continue his driving services with the team for the 2026 FIA Formula One world championship season and allow him to pursue other career opportunities." Doohan continued to work with Alpine as a test driver and a reserve after being demoted. Alpine finished last among the 10 teams in the F1 constructors' standings. He had been with Alpine since 2002 after coming up through the Red Bull Junior program from 2017-21. "I'm thrilled to be joining TGR Haas F1 Team," Doohan was quoted as saying yesterday in a news release. "It's the ideal place to continue my Formula 1 career."

MOTOGP

# Reigning world champ Marquez fastest on opening day pre-season test



Ducati Lenovo Team's Spanish MotoGP rider Marc Marquez takes a corner during the first day of the 2026 MotoGP pre-season test at the Sepang International Circuit yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Sepang, Malaysia

Reigning world champion Marc Marquez came in fastest on the opening day of pre-season testing in Malaysia after the Spaniard clocked 1 min 57.018sec at the Sepang circuit yesterday.

The 32-year-old Ducati Lenovo ace, who missed the final four races of last season after suffering a collarbone injury at Indonesia's Mandalika circuit, surged top of the timesheets on his 18th lap to replace Italy's Fabio Di Giannantonio who finished a fraction behind in 1 min 57.274sec.

Maverick Vinales completed the top three after the Spaniard secured 1 min 57.295sec on his 27th lap on a clear and scorching day in Sepang.

Marquez's younger brother Alex

Marquez topped the morning session's practice, but finished the day fourth fastest.

The day belonged to his seven-time world champion sibling, who opted for short stints on track having just returned from injury.

"We did short runs, 2-3 laps to avoid extra fatigue. I knew with experience if you use too much energy having come back from an injury, you can suffer a lot," Marquez said.

"I try to take care of my physical condition because if I feel well, the speed is there," added Marquez, who added the aim is to feature at the 2026 season opener in Thailand next month.

The morning session witnessed 2021 champion Fabio Quartararo crashing and requiring a medical check, but the Frenchman was able to return for the afternoon session and finish in the top 10.

## Yesterday's pre-season test times recorded at the Sepang Circuit (5.543km)

1. Marc Marquez (ESP/Ducati) 1 min 57.018 sec
2. Fabio Di Giannantonio (ITA/VR46 Ducati) 1 min 57.274 sec
3. Maverick Vinales (ESP/Red Bull KTM) 1 min 57.295 sec
4. Alex Marquez (ESP/Ducati) 1 min 57.487 sec
5. Marco Bezzecchi (ITA/Aprilia) 1 min 57.524 sec
6. Luca Marini (ITA/Honda) 1 min 57.569 sec
7. Joan Mir (ESP/Honda) 1 min 57.693 sec
8. Francesco Bagnaia (ITA/Ducati) 1 min 57.720 sec
9. Fabio Quartararo (FRA/Yamaha) 1 min 57.869 sec
10. Franco Morbidelli (ITA/VR46 Ducati) 1 min 58.068 sec



SPOTLIGHT



# Vonn says will defy injury and hunt for medals at Olympics

**Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy:** Lindsey Vonn will attempt to defy the odds and compete at the Winter Olympics despite a ruptured knee ligament, the US ski icon insisting yesterday that she will be at the starting gate when the women's events get underway at the weekend.

Vonn's Olympic return after eight years, at the age of 41 and with a titanium implant in her right knee, has been one of the storylines of the Milan-Cortina Games.

And she has been forced into another fightback after her other knee bore the brunt of a heavy crash in a World Cup downhill in Crans Montana, Switzerland, on Friday.

After gingerly making her way into a press conference in Cortina d'Ampezzo, where the Olympic women's alpine skiing events will be held, Vonn told reporters that she had "completely ruptured" her anterior cruciate ligament, or ACL.

She added that she had also suffered bone bruising and meniscus damage from her fall in a race which

was abandoned early due to awful conditions which caused two other crashes. "Today I went skiing and considering how my knee feels, I feel stable, I feel strong," said Vonn.

"My knee is not swollen and and with the help of a knee brace, I am confident that I can compete (in the downhill race) on Sunday.

"This is not obviously what I had hoped for... I know what my chances were before the crash and and I know my chances aren't the same as it stands today.

"But I know there's still a chance, and as long as there's a chance I will try."

The women's programme gets underway with the downhill, the discipline in which Vonn won her sole Olympic gold in 2010 and in which she was hotly tipped to repeat the feat 16 years later.

Vonn has finished on the podium in every World Cup downhill race this season, including two victories in St. Moritz and Zauchensee, and has claimed two more top-three finishes in the super-G.

"I think this would be the best comeback I've done

so far. Definitely the most dramatic, that's for sure," said Vonn. "I've been through a lot and this is, this is another amazing chapter. I don't know if it's the best chapter, but a pretty damn good comeback if I can pull it off."

STILL GOING FOR MEDALS

Vonn's has been in phenomenal form this season, against some skiers who are nearly half her age like Germany's rising star Emma Aicher, and she insisted that she was still gunning for a fourth Olympic medal "to close out my career".

As well as the Olympic downhill, Vonn said she is aiming also to compete as previously planned in the team combined event on February 10 and the super-G two days later.

"I know what my knee has felt like with previous injuries in the gym and what it's felt like during all the physical tests, and I can say that I feel a lot better right now than I have in the past," she said.

"I feel a lot better right now than I did in 2019 for the

World championships and I still got a medal there with no ACL and three tibial plateau fractures."

Her successes have been all the more remarkable because she only returned to alpine skiing in November 2024, five years after announcing the end of a stellar career which had taken her body to its very limit. She underwent surgery earlier that year to partially replace her right knee following persistent pain.

But it could end up being her other knee which denies Vonn the chance of breaking her own record for the oldest Olympic medal winner in women's alpine skiing.

Vonn established that record by taking bronze in the downhill at the Pyeongchang Winter Games in 2018.

"In the past, there's always a moment where you break down and you realise... that your dreams are slipping through your fingers, but I didn't have that this time," said Vonn.

"I'm not letting this slip through my fingers. I'm I'm gonna do it. End of story." (AFP)

COMMENT

# Rahm wishes Reed 'nothing but the best' after LIV exit

'WE'RE FREE TO CHOOSE WHERE WE WANT TO PLAY GOLF'

Reuters  
Riyadh

As the league's two-time defending individual champion, Jon Rahm has quickly become the face of LIV Golf.

That makes the Spaniard's opinion on the uncertain state of LIV amidst a valuable one as the tour kicks off its 2026 season this week in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Brooks Koepka sent shockwaves when he left LIV last December and made his PGA Tour return over the weekend at the Farmers Insurance Open.

Patrick Reed, while not yet back with PGA officially, announced his LIV departure last week and is set to return to the more prominent tour later this year.

The PGA Tour announced a "returning member program," the criteria of which made only four LIV players eligible for immediate reinstatement: Koepka, Bryson DeChambeau, Australian Cameron Smith and Rahm.

Instead, Rahm elected to stick with LIV for a third season as the captain of defending team champion Legion XIII.

But Rahm admitted he doesn't hold any ill will towards Reed for his decision.

"I think each one is going to do whatever he thinks is best for them. At this point, I just wish him nothing but the best of luck. Hopefully it all goes well," Rahm said when asked about Reed's decision yesterday.



Jon Rahm of Spain gives an interview ahead of the LIV Golf season opener in Riyadh.

"We're free to choose where we want to play golf. At least that's how it should be. And he's made his choice, obviously. Nothing really against him. He's been playing fantastic golf, and if he wants to go back, he should have

the chance to do so." This week's event in Riyadh also marks the beginning of a new era for LIV, which will move from 54-hole events to the more traditional 72 holes this season.

The hope is that this change

will allow for LIV events to begin counting for points in the Official Golf World Rankings, which they have not since the league's 2022 launch.

A decision on that front is reportedly expected soon from OWGR's board, potentially paving an easier path for LIV competitors to qualify for major championships.

Rahm, a two-time major champion, sees the change as a positive on all fronts.

"I'm happy about it. I would say I was one of the people that pushed for it. So obviously I'm happy about it," Rahm said. "I think the more golf we play, the better for stronger teams and stronger players, and I think it will benefit us four individuals and as a team."

Another potential LIV change this season is the league pushing for the DP World Tour to stop fining competitors for missing events due to LIV event conflicts.

That's affecting Rahm more than many, as he said recently that he's been fined approximately \$3mn for missing DP events since joining LIV ahead of the 2024 season.

"I don't know what it may be or what it's going to look like, but I'm happy to see that looking for a path forward for LIV players to be able to play on both tours and not to get penalised," Rahm said yesterday.

"The fact that they're looking at a positive way to figure it out, I think it's only good for us, and I think it's good for the DP World Tour as well."

FOCUS

# New LIV golfer Ben An using AI to acclimate to global schedule

Reuters  
New York

Byeong Hun An is new to the whole LIV Golf experience. And a new lifestyle apparently calls for the use of some new technology.

An, also known as Ben An, was one of the new additions to the 2026 LIV roster and the captain of the newly rebranded Korean Golf Club. Everyone on the four-man team has Korean heritage (Danny Lee was born in South Korea but competes under the New Zealand flag).

"We're all good friends, and hopefully we can play good golf," An said yesterday at an introductory press conference.

"I'm very excited for the season. It's my first year; feels like the first school year."

An pointed out that Korean Golf Club will spend a lot of time together, including travel. The season opens this week in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and the LIV schedule features events in Australia, Asia, Africa, Europe and North America.

That includes the second year of LIV Golf Korea, an event technically unconfirmed on the schedule but expected sometime in May.

An, who previously competed on the PGA Tour and spent most of his playing season in the United States, said he's relying on artificial intelligence to plan his travel now.

"I use ChatGPT and Gemini," he said.

"I put in my flight schedule and everything, what time of day we're playing because it's set every week because it's a shotgun. I try to utilise that a lot because I don't know much about how to get my body ready.

"Especially this week, I put in all the flights and numbers and everything, so it's like, 'All right, sleep at this time, try to do this and that to maximise the performance on the golf course at 6:05 p.m.'"

"That's what I did, and I'll probably do that again the next couple of events because we'll be go different time zones, and with the longer flights, it helps, and with the physio on our team.

"We'll probably utilise that a lot because we've got the resources and all the info is out there, so I'll try to use that as much as I can and hopefully get my body ready for the tournament days."

An, 34, was best known for being the youngest winner of the US Amateur in 2009 at age 17.

His world ranking rose as high as No. 22 in late 2024 after he won the Genesis Championship in his home country.

He beat countryman Tom Kim in a playoff at Jack Nicklaus Golf Club Korea.

An never won on the PGA Tour, but tied for fourth at the Baycurrent Classic in Japan this past October for his third top-10 finish of 2025.

## POLAND'S FORMER OLYMPIC CHAMPION KASPRZYK DIES AGED 86

**Warsaw:** Poland's Marian Kasprzyk, who won gold in boxing's welterweight division at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, has died aged 86, the Polish Boxing Association (PZB) announced yesterday.

Kasprzyk, known for his unconventional style and tactical intelligence, represented Poland in three Olympics, also winning

bronze in light welterweight at the 1960 Games.

He worked as a coach and youth educator after his retirement from boxing. "Marian Kasprzyk will be remembered as an athlete and a man whose achievements and attitude have left a lasting mark on the history of Polish boxing. A legend of our sport," the PZB said in a statement.

## BENCIC, SVITOLINA MAKE HISTORY AS MOTHERS INSIDE TENNIS TOP 10

**Melbourne:** Belinda Bencic and Elina Svitolina have made history as the first mothers ranked inside the WTA Tour's top 10 at the same time, with the governing body hailing it as "an incredible moment for women's sport".

Switzerland's Bencic returned to the top 10 in January for the first time since stepping away from the court in September 2023 to give birth to daughter Bella.

In the latest rankings released on Monday she was joined by Svitolina, mother of Skai, after the Ukrainian's run to the semi-finals at the Australian Open last week.

The WTA has made efforts in recent years to help players maintain their professional careers and become parents with its Family Focus Program.

It includes ranking protection during pregnancy, postpartum support with a return to play and paid maternity leave.

"Two mothers ranked inside the WTA's Top 10 rankings for the first time is an incredible moment for tennis and for women's sport," said WTA chief executive Portia Archer.

"Not only does this highlight the exceptional achievements of Belinda and Elina, it reaffirms the WTA's commitment to

creating an environment where mothers can continue to compete and succeed, at the very highest level of sport - or any profession."

Bencic and Svitolina both took advantage of the Special Ranking Rule for returning mothers.

"Coming back to the WTA Top 10 one year after returning to competition after maternity leave is something I am incredibly proud of," said Bencic, ranked nine.

"Very few people know or have experienced how difficult that journey is, but my family, my team and I have put all of

our energy, work and dedication into it to accomplish this goal."

Tenth-ranked Svitolina added: "It's a dream to return to the WTA Top 10. "Doing it as a mother means so much to me. I'm proud of my fight and resilience."

Aryna Sabalenka and Iga Swiatek retained their spots as world numbers one and two in the rankings, with newly-crowned Australian Open champion Elena Rybakina jumping two places to three.

Amanada Anisimova, Coco Gauff, Jessica Pegula, Mirra Andreeva and Jasmine Paolini fill out four to eight respectively.



Belinda Bencic



FOCUS

# Al-Attiyah targets more glory at Qatar International Rally

'IT HAS BEEN A FANTASTIC START TO THE YEAR. WE'VE HAD THREE VERY GOOD PERFORMANCES'

By Sports Reporter  
Lusail

Fresh from a remarkable run of international successes, Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah will headline this weekend's Qatar International Rally, the second round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship organised by the Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF).

Eight drivers, including championship leader and home hero al-Attiyah and former champion Abdullah al-Rawahi, joined QMMF's Executive Director Amro al-Hamad at the pre-event press conference at the Lusail International Circuit yesterday.

Qatar's veteran racer Nasser Khalifa al-Atya, Mohammed al-Marri and Rashid al-Mohannadi, Jordan's current FIA MERC2 leader Shaker Jweihan, his Kuwaiti rival Jassim al-Muqahwi and Saudi Arabia's young Hamza Bakhshab were also in attendance.

QMMF President Abdulrahman al-Mannai was then called forward at the conclusion of the press conference to present a cake to al-Attiyah on behalf of the QMMF to celebrate the Qatari's recent sixth success in the Dakar Rally.

Should the multiple regional champion achieve glory this weekend, it will be his fourth international win in as many weeks to follow on from the Dakar success, victory in the opening round



Qatar's off-road icon Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah was presented with a celebratory cake by QMMF President Abdulrahman al-Mannai for the sixth Dakar rally title that he won last month.

of this championship in Oman and a triumph at last weekend's Saudi Baja, round one of the FIA World Baja Cup. Al-Attiyah spent much of the morning in the service park at Lusail with his Autotek team discussing the car set-up, a new livery for his Skoda and in-car camera fitment.

Upbeat after winning last weekend's Saudi Baja, the Qatari said: "It has been a fantastic start to the

year. We've had three very good performances - Dakar, Oman and Saudi Baja - and we are leading three different championships. Now it's my home event in Qatar.

"We will miss some top European drivers coming here this year, but we need to focus and manage with the drivers from the Middle East. We will try to win this race. We will check out the new stages on Wednesday. It's really good this

year that we have a compact rally. Sometimes we lost a lot of time travelling to Lusail or the Corniche for the start or the finish. Now, at Lusail, we have the start here, the podium, the service park and a Qualifying Stage and no super special. We really pushed for the Qualifying Stage from a long time. It will be really nice. Now you can choose your start position to an extent. The Shakedown is also



Autotek technicians apply the finishing touches to Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah's car ahead of the Qatar International Rally.

very important now."

Oman's al-Rawahi finished second at the opening round in his home nation less than two weeks ago and is upbeat about his chances this weekend. He said: "I am happy to be here. I wasn't sure if I was going to make it. We are trying our best to do all the championship. With the budget it is quite tough. I think we are better prepared this time with the set-up. It's going to be fast but we are getting closer and closer to Nasser every year. We are always aiming to get the podium. We are going to push from the beginning and see what we can do."

Young Qatari Mohammed al-Marri has made the transition to a Rally2 car this weekend after

engine issues put a damper on his progress in Oman last month. Al-Marri said: "We had a disappointment in Oman after a strong start. We lost the engine but now we want to come back stronger and here I will drive a Citroen in Rally2. It's a new beginning. I will be trying to compete with the guys at the same time as learning the car. We tested already and are getting better and better every time. It's one of the best cars in Rally2. Hopefully, we can achieve a good result."

Today the crews will carry their reconnaissance of the special stages in the north of Qatar, while scrutineering checks are carried out on the race vehicles at the Lusail International Circuit.

FOOTBALL

## Nagelsmann backs Ter Stegen for World Cup despite 'cruel' injury

AFP  
Berlin

Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann yesterday backed **Marc-Andre Ter Stegen** in his bid to regain fitness ahead of the 2026 World Cup, after the goalkeeper's latest injury setback.

Playing his second match for Girona on Saturday, having joined on a six-month loan from Barcelona in hope of more playing time ahead of the showpiece tournament, the 33-year-old suffered a muscle injury in his thigh.

Girona said Ter Stegen will "undergo further tests" but the goalkeeper looks set to miss several months with injury, including Germany's two March friendlies against Switzerland and Ghana.

"This is unbelievably cruel," Nagelsmann told AFP subsidiary SID on Monday. "Marc had just returned and was on a good path. We were very much awaiting his return in the national team.

"Right now all that matters is that he gets healthy in peace, without any additional pressure. We're all behind him."

Long Germany's number two behind World Cup winner Manuel Neuer, Ter Stegen took over between the sticks after the former's retirement in 2024, but has suffered a series of injury setbacks.



He missed much of last campaign with a knee injury and was sidelined this season with a back complaint.

His injury woes have contributed to him being forced out of Barcelona, where the 2015 Champions League winner became third choice behind Joan Garcia and Wojciech Szczesny.

Nagelsmann and German FA (DFB) sporting director Rudi Voller have continually reaffirmed Ter Stegen remains Germany's number one option if fit, but emphasised the need for match prac-

tice ahead of the tournament.

In Ter Stegen's absence, Hoffenheim goalkeeper Oliver Baumann has filled in, but calls for Neuer's return to the side have grown louder.

A veteran of four World Cup campaigns including victory in the 2014 event in Brazil, Neuer will be 40 by the time the tournament starts in the United States, Canada and Mexico on June 11.

Neuer remains captain of club side Bayern Munich and has played 16 of the club's 20 Bundesliga matches this season.

## Morocco to appeal AFCON bans, fines after final chaos

Morocco's football federation said it will appeal disciplinary sanctions and fines imposed by the Confederation of African Football (CAF) after the chaotic scenes at the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) final against Senegal last month. The Royal Moroccan Football Federation (FRMF) was fined a total of \$315,000 last month, added to bans against two of its players. In a statement, the FRMF said it would lodge an appeal "in order to preserve all rights guaranteed by the regulations", citing "non-conformity of these sanctions with the extent and seriousness of the incidents that occurred". The AFCON final on January 18 took a series of dramatic turns from late in regular time when an Ismaila Sarr goal was disallowed for a foul on 2025 African player of the year Achraf Hakimi. Morocco were then awarded a

penalty when forward Brahim Diaz was fouled, sparking furious Senegalese protests. Morocco missed the long-delayed penalty with a weak shot from Diaz saved by Edouard Mendy. The match then went to extra time and Pape Gueye scored to give Senegal a second AFCON title. While play was halted over the disputed penalty, some Senegal supporters threw projectiles and others temporarily invaded the pitch before police and security staff intervened. Morocco was fined \$200,000 for the "inappropriate behaviour of the stadium ball boys". Another fine of \$100,000 was imposed for the "improper conduct" of players and technical staff who invaded the VAR review area and obstructed the work of the Congolese referee. There was also a \$15,000 fine after Moroccan supporters used

lasers to try and distract Senegalese players. And for "unsporting behaviour", Moroccan forward Ismael Saibari was handed a three-match ban and a fine of \$100,000, while captain and defender Achraf Hakimi was suspended for two matches. The Senegal Football Federation (FSF), which was fined a total of \$615,000 for various offences during the final and whose head coach Pape Thiaw was banned for five games, also said it would appeal the sanctions. Two players from the Senegalese contingent, Iliman Ndiaye and Sarr received two-match bans for "unsporting behaviour towards the referee". Senegal's sanctions included the "unsporting conduct of their players and technical staff in violation of the CAF disciplinary code principles of fair play, loyalty and integrity".

SPOTLIGHT

## Howe trusts Tonali will not follow Isak lead out of Newcastle

AFP  
London

Newcastle manager Eddie Howe is confident **Sandro Tonali** will not try to engineer a move away from the Magpies despite speculation linking the Italian international to Arsenal.

Rumours of a shock deadline day move to the Gunners on Monday were quickly quashed after reports in Italy claimed a representative of Tonali had contacted Arsenal.

Newcastle's preparations for the season were dogged by the saga surrounding Alexander Isak's conduct before he forced through a Premier League record £125 million (\$171 million) move to Liverpool in September.

Howe was asked whether he feared a similar situation with Tonali come the summer window, but backed the 25-year-old to remain committed.

"I don't think so, but lots of things happen without my knowledge," Howe said yesterday.

"As far as I'm aware, we've got a player that's an outstanding footballer, an outstanding person. He's very happy here, he's got a great relationship with me, his teammates, he seems really, really happy within himself,



so that would surprise me. "But our best players will always be attracting glances from other clubs, that's just the reality of football.

"We want to keep the group together, we want to keep being progressive and of course Sandro plays a part in that, trying to hit his best levels and play as well as he can to help the team."

Howe could not hide his frustrations at not being able to add to his squad during the transfer window, despite injury problems and a packed schedule with Newcastle still involved in four competitions.

Despite being backed by the Saudi sovereign wealth fund, Newcastle's ability to invest have been hampered by financial sustainability rules.

"We were left with no other

option really," he added. "We have only been active in one transfer window in the last four or five so I think we are under financial restrictions, we have to be really smart and we have decided to wait until the summer."

Newcastle's defence of the League Cup hangs by a thread ahead of Wednesday's semi-final, second leg away to Manchester City. Howe's men ended a 70-year wait for a domestic trophy by winning the competition last season but have to overturn a 2-0 first-leg deficit against Pep Guardiola's men away from home.

"It's going to be an almighty challenge and there's no bigger challenge than Manchester City away," said Howe. "But we believe in ourselves and we're going to give it a good go."

## Benzema moves to Al Hilal following Al Ittihad departure

Karim Benzema has joined Al Hilal, the Saudi Pro League leaders announced on Monday, following the termination of his contract with Al Ittihad. Local media reported that the move to Al Hilal came after Benzema rejected an offer to extend his contract with Al Ittihad. The former France striker had missed the team's previous two league matches.

"Al Hilal signed French star Karim Benzema on a free transfer to represent the football team for one and a half years," the Saudi club said in a statement. Benzema had a successful spell with the Jeddah-based Al Ittihad, leading them to the league title and the King's Cup last season. It was the first domestic double in Al Ittihad's history. "This journey gave me a lot, both personally and professionally," Benzema, who joined Al Ittihad on a free transfer in 2023 after 14 years with Real Madrid, said on X. "I leave with my head held high, proud to have worn these colours and of everything we shared."

The former Real Madrid striker, 38, scored 16 goals in 21 matches for Al Ittihad in all competitions this season. Al Hilal sit top of the league standings with 47 points, one point ahead of Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr. Al Ittihad are sixth with 34 points.

