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CRICKET

Coach Conrad plots first South Africa World Cup win after Test triumph

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GOLF

Qatar Masters: Battle lines drawn as stars clash at DGC

Three-time major champ Harrington to become 50th player in DP Tour history to make 500 appearances

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The battle at the top of the Race to Dubai Rankings is set to intensify as a strong field assembles for this week's Qatar Masters at Doha Golf Club, marking the midway point of the DP World Tour's International Swing and the final Middle East stop before the season moves towards the Play-Offs.

Race-to-Dubai leader Jayden Schaper arrives in Doha in impressive form after already claiming two victories this season, with nearest challenger Patrick Reed also in the field following his recent triumph at the Dubai Desert Classic. Andy Sullivan, Julien Guerrier, Daniel Hillier and Nacho Elvira will also be aiming to build on encouraging starts to the campaign, while local interest will focus on Qatari amateurs Saleh al-Kaabi, Ali al-Shahrani and Daniil Sokolov as they look to make their mark on home soil.

Schaper is hoping to continue a proud record of South African success at the Qatar Masters as he goes in search of a third win of the season at Doha Golf Club. The 24-year-old has been the breakout star of the campaign so far, winning twice and securing a runner-up finish to take the Opening Swing title before achieving a career-best result of fourth at the Dubai Desert Classic.

He arrives at an event where he finished fifth last season and has never missed the cut, looking to follow in the footsteps of compatriots who have dominated the tournament's history. South Africa holds a record six titles from the event's 28 editions, with Branden Grace and Darren Fichardt winning twice, alongside champions Ernie Els, Retief Goosen and Justin Harding.

"If you look at the past, a lot of the South Africans have had quite a bit of success around here," said Schaper. "I personally enjoy it. From tee to green it's one of the



JAYDEN SCHAPER

better courses we play throughout the year. It's quite brutal and quite tough, and the greens are always rolling pure and firm. I'm a golfer who likes to use a lot of the slopes around the greens. It's my fourth week in a row but it's nice to be back out in Qatar. I've got some good memories and nice results around here."

With three events completed and three more to follow after this week, the tournament represents a pivotal stage in the International Swing standings. The winner of the Swing will secure entry into every Phase Two event on the DP World Tour schedule - known as the Back 9 - along with a US\$200,000 bonus and a place at the Scottish Open for the highest-ranked non-exempt player.

This year's tournament marks the 29th consecutive edition of the Qatar Masters since its inception, with eight former champions returning in pursuit of a second Mother of Pearl Trophy. Among

them is 2003 winner Fichardt, whose longevity continues to impress after finishing inside the top 116 on last season's Race to Dubai and enjoying success on the Legends Tour.

Chris Wood, champion in 2013, is on a comeback trail after a recent victory on the MENA Golf Tour, while 2018 winner Eddie Pepperell returns after regaining his playing rights through Qualifying School.

Pepperell hopes fond memories at Doha Golf Club can help revive his form after what he described as an "odd" 12 months. The Englishman has endured a mixed spell that included strong performances, injury setbacks and a dramatic return to the Tour with four consecutive birdies at Qualifying School.

Encouraging early signs in 2026 suggest his game may be trending in the right direction as he seeks to rediscover the consistency that once propelled him into the



The Pro-Am competitions ahead of the 29th Qatar Masters were held at the Doha Golf Club yesterday. Qatar Golf Association's team, comprising Secretary-General Fahad Nasser al-Nuaimi, Mehdi Diouri, Talal Karkouri, and Eugenio Chakarra, emerged victorious with a score of 30 under par. The winners received their awards from Mike Shoueiry, the QGA Technical Director, and Walid Saad, a member of the organising committee. In the morning session, another QGA team, including former Federation President Tami al-Hajri, Paulo Smith, and Victor Pak, triumphed with a score of 34 under par in the first group of the day.

world's top 50. "The last 12 months have just felt very odd. I don't feel like I've played badly and I feel like I've had a number of weeks where I've actually played quite well but my results haven't been that good and I think my standards have just dropped," said Pepperell.

"Over the last few months I've improved my driving and my putting, which is great, but my irons are always the key. If I'm not hitting them well then I'll struggle to do well. I've been searching for a while to try and unlock what I need to do to hit my irons well enough to reach my full potential."

Elsewhere in the field, Justin Harding is chasing a first victory in nearly five years, while Jorge Campillo, Antoine Rozner and Ewen Ferguson are all targeting a fourth DP World Tour title. Defending champion Rikuya Hoshino returns to the venue of his maiden Tour win after a season spent as a dual member on the PGA Tour.

The tournament will also mark a major milestone for Pdraig Har-



PATRICK REED

rington, who becomes the 50th player in DP World Tour history to make 500 appearances.

The three-time Major champion and most successful Irish golfer of all time continues to compete at the highest level, adding another chapter to a career that has spanned more than three decades and 33 countries.

Doha Golf Club, staging the event for the 26th time in its history, will present a refreshed test this

year following upgrades to several tee complexes, including the first, sixth, eighth, 13th and 15th holes. The changes offer greater flexibility in course set-up while enhancing turf quality and strategic challenge. Sustainability remains a central focus at the desert venue, with heat-tolerant grasses, data-driven irrigation systems and ongoing soil health programmes helping to reduce water usage without compromising playing conditions.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Umm Salal shock 9-man Duhail to boost relegation hopes

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Umm Salal stunned nine-man Al Duhail 2-1 at Al Khor Stadium in the Qatar Stars League to revive their hopes of avoiding relegation.

Bottom-placed Umm Salal struck through Antonio Mance (45+4) and Naim Laidouni (72), while Bassam al-Rawi had equalised for Duhail in the 51st minute. The win lifted Umm Salal to 12 points and temporarily moved them off the bottom, while last season's runners-up Duhail remain sixth and could slip further depending on other results this week.

Duhail's troubles began early when Luis Martin was sent off in the sixth minute for a reckless challenge on Ahmed Abdel-Maq-soud. Umm Salal were awarded a penalty in the 26th minute after Salah Zakaria fouled Osama Tannane, but the goalkeeper redeemed himself by saving the spot-kick.

The situation worsened for Duhail when Benjamin Bourigeaud received a red card in the 39th

minute following a tackle on Abdou Diallo, leaving his side with nine men. Umm Salal capitalised just before half-time as Cristo's cross was turned in by Mance.

Duhail briefly fought back after the break when al-Rawi levelled from a direct free-kick, but Umm Salal regained the lead when al-Aidouni headed home from a corner. Despite late pressure, Umm Salal held on for a crucial victory.

Mancini urges focus as Sadd seek revenge against Shahania

Today, reigning champions Al Sadd return to action against Al Shahania at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium, seeking revenge after a 1-0 defeat in the first-leg meeting. Sadd coach Roberto Mancini said his team must remain fully focused. "Every match is a real challenge for us. Al Shahania beat us earlier this season, so we need to give our best," the Italian said, urging his players to keep their focus in the title race.

Shahania assistant coach Pejman Montazeri acknowledged the difficulty of facing a star-studded Sadd side but said his team aims for a positive result to improve their league position. He added

that the team is working to address lapses in morale after conceding early goals following their disappointing result against Al Wakrah.

Meanwhile, leaders Al Gharafa face Al Sailiya at Grand Hamad Stadium. Gharafa will be eager to bounce back from their 3-1 loss to Sadd, while Sailiya aim to continue climbing the table after a goal-less draw with Shamal.

Gharafa coach Pedro Martins backed his players to respond strongly, saying the team will fight to remain in the title race. Sailiya coach Mirghani al-Zein stressed respect for their opponents and confirmed several absences, including Younes Belhanda, but expressed confidence in his squad's ability to execute the game plan.

FIXTURES

Today: Al Sadd vs Al Shahania - Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium (5.45pm); Al Sailiya vs Al Gharafa - Grand Hamad Stadium (5.45pm); Al Arabi vs Al Shamal - Al Thumama Stadium (7.45pm)
Tomorrow: Al Wakrah vs Al Ahli - Saoud Bin Abdulrahman Stadium (5.45pm); Qatar SC vs Al Rayyan - Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium (7.45pm)



Umm Salal and Al Duhail players battle for the ball at Al Khor Stadium in the Qatar Stars League match yesterday.

FOCUS

Spin-heavy Pakistan hit form ahead of WC

AFP
Lahore, Pakistan

Pakistan's spin-heavy squad are in winning form ahead of the T20 World Cup, but a controversial decision to forfeit their marquee clash against India could still trigger another early exit.

Pakistan came close to withdrawing from the tournament in solidarity with Bangladesh, who pulled out after refusing to play in India, citing security concerns. The Pakistan government eventually cleared the team's participation but it barred them from facing India in Colombo in a blockbuster clash on February 15.

With two points for a win, a forfeit of the match will leave Pakistan with no margin for error if they are to progress as one of the top two from a five-team Group A.

It means they must win their opening game against the Netherlands in Colombo on Saturday and beat the United States three days later to stay in contention.

Their final group game will be against Namibia on February 18.

Captain Salman Agha said the move to boycott the India game was out of the team's hands.

"That is not our decision. We have to follow what our government decides," he said.

The Pakistan government has not said what their stance might be if the team were to end up facing India again in the semi-finals or final. Agha was not thinking about that.

"Our job is to win, and we are capable of doing that," he said.

Pakistan will be keen to avoid a repeat of the last T20 World Cup in 2024, where a shock super over defeat to co-hosts the United States led to them failing to get out of the group.

The side has since faced criticism for failing to adapt to the modern demands of T20 cricket, with the batting, particularly Babar Azam's low strike rate, under scrutiny. The criticism



Right arm leg-spinner Shadab Khan.

Right-arm leg-spinner Abrar Ahmed.

Left-arm spinner Mohammad Nawaz.

was fuelled by Pakistan's record last year, where 21 of their 34 T20 international wins came against lower-ranked opponents.

Confidence restored

Against elite teams, the results were sobering: three losses to India in the Asia Cup and a 4-1 series defeat to New Zealand.

However, Agha believes recent performances have restored confidence.

Pakistan beat South Africa 2-1, won a home tri-series, and then completed a 3-0 sweep of an under-strength Australia.

"We've had good preparation by beating Australia. We have the luxury of quality spinning all-rounders like Mohammad Nawaz, Shadab Khan and Saim Ayub.

"We're ticking most boxes and believe we can win the World Cup," Agha said.

The spin department has been strengthened by Abrar Ahmed and Usman Tariq, the latter known for his unusual, slinging action and exaggerated pause at the crease.

The pace attack is led by the experienced Shaheen Shah Afridi and Naseem Shah.

Faheem Ashraf provides seam-bowling all-round support and newcomer Salman Mirza has been impressive.

Batting remains Pakistan's most volatile component.

When openers Saim Ayub and Sahibzada Farhan provide strong starts, the side can post competitive totals, but collapses remain a constant threat.

Head coach Mike Hesson has added another layer of risk by leaving out experienced wicketkeeper Mohammad Rizwan because of poor form, opting instead for makeshift options in Usman Khan, Khawaja Nafay and Farhan.

For Pakistan, the ingredients for a deep run are present, but with points potentially forfeited, there is little room left for error.

SPOTLIGHT

Coach plots first South Africa World Cup win

Conrad says he has brought stability within South Africa ranks

AFP
Johannesburg

Head coach **Shukri Conrad** had a clear plan which culminated in South Africa winning last year's World Test Championship final, but he has shaken things up as he plots a first major white-ball trophy at the T20 World Cup.

"One thing I did from a long way out was to bring some stability to the Test squad," the South African head coach told AFP.

Stability has, of necessity, been lacking from the T20 team's build-up ahead of the World Cup, where South Africa start against Canada in Ahmedabad on Monday.

Thirty-one players have been used in 21 matches since the white-ball team was added to Conrad's responsibilities last May.

Results were paramount in the Test campaign, with points at stake in every match and the win in the final against Australia at Lord's was South Africa's eighth in a row.

In contrast, the T20 side has won only eight matches while losing 13 under Conrad ahead of the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka.

But Conrad is upbeat about their chances of breaking their white-ball duck after they registered their first T20 series win under his tenure against the West Indies on Sunday.

"Yes, we used a lot of players - deliberately so," he said. "We always had to prioritise Test cricket, which meant managing the wellbeing of our players."

Leading fast bowlers Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen played only seven T20 matches in that period.

'We can mix it with anyone'
But a highly competitive SA20



franchise competition enabled players to find form under pressure before the World Cup squad came together.

A significant difference in adapting to the shortest format after a long Test campaign is the type of cricket needed.

Modern Test pitches suit a South African team strong in bowling but short of batting superstars.

"Having such a good bowling attack is always going to keep us in games. We had to find a way of posting competitive totals," said Conrad.

It put a premium on what Conrad calls "character above cover drives" - batsmen willing to grind out scores.

The nature of T20 cricket

means bat dominates ball, although "skilful bowlers remain skilful bowlers", according to Conrad and batsmen need to clear boundaries rather than eke out long innings.

South Africa suffered an agonising defeat in the final of the 2024 T20 World Cup after playing themselves into a winning position against India in Barbados.

Conrad believes the core values and team spirit that clinched the World Test Championship will spill over into a squad which includes eight players who were at the Lord's final.

"There is a belief that we can mix it with anyone," he said.

A batting line-up which includes captain Aiden Markram, a

rejuvenated Quinton de Kock, the exciting Dewald Brevis and the experienced David Miller has the ability to post big totals.

And bowlers such as Rabada, Jansen, Anrich Nortje and Lungi Ngidi are able to take crucial wickets during the powerplay.

South Africa could potentially play five matches at Ahmedabad, the world's biggest cricket stadium, including their first three group matches.

"It is an advantage to get used to certain grounds and it also means less travel," said Conrad.

But he is not looking too far ahead. With tricky group matches against Afghanistan and New Zealand to come, "the first priority is to make sure you get out of the round-robin phase".

Ishan Kishan shines as India hammer South Africa



India's opening batsman Ishan Kishan plays a shot during the 2026 ICC T20 World Cup warm-up match against South Africa in Navi Mumbai yesterday. India won the match by 30 runs after posting an impressive total of 240/5. India's batting charge was headed by Kishan who scored 53 off just 20 deliveries before retiring. South Africa were restricted to 210/7 in 20 overs. Batsman Tristan Stubbs scored 45 not out off 21 deliveries. (AFP)

COMMENT

England coach praises 'tough lad' Brook

Reuters
Colombo

England head coach **Brendon McCullum** is impressed with white-ball captain Harry Brook for his deft handling of a recent controversy and leading the team to a series victory in Sri Lanka ahead of their campaign in the upcoming Twenty20 World Cup.

Brook has been in the eye of a storm since news emerged of his altercation with a nightclub bouncer in New Zealand late last year. The 26-year-old apologised last month for the October 31 incident, which he felt caused embarrassment to him and his team.

Under Brook, England won the one-day international series in Sri Lanka 2-1 and swept the T20 series 3-0, a timely boost as they build toward the global tournament.

"He's had a hard time of late off the field, but he's a tough lad to be able to put that aside and still lead these boys in the manner that he did, and show the tactical nous that he has as a cricketer was outstanding," McCullum said after England's victory in the final T20 match on Tuesday.

"I do sometimes think that people think that Brook's not that clever. I couldn't disagree with that more. He wears his intelligence lightly. He's got a very good tactical cricket brain," McCullum said Brook, who has been fined by the English cricket board for his conduct in New Zealand, needed to



improve his behaviour but stressed the mental-health pressures players face in a relentless schedule.

"He's a work in progress off the field," the coach said. "He's not alone with that and that's our job to help shepherd him through. But on the field, he's certainly excelling at the moment. Cricket is such a unique game because it's 12 months of the year ... It can be challenging mentally for a lot of guys and cricket's got a history of issues in that space. So, our job as leaders and our job at English cricket is to make sure we look after these boys."

England will begin their campaign for a third 20-overs World Cup title with a Group C match against Nepal in Mumbai on Sunday.

Oman all-rounder Nadeem banks on 'smart work' in T20 WC swansong

Bengaluru: Oman's Mohammad Nadeem realises he will have to work smart, and not necessarily hard, to get the best out of his 43-year-old frame in his final Twenty20 World Cup appearance, the all-rounder told Reuters. Nadeem, who made his international debut in 2015, will be the tournament's second-oldest player behind teammate Aamir Kaleem (44) in the 20-team showpiece beginning on February 7.

"The biggest challenge is maintaining performance while protecting your body," Nadeem told Reuters on a video call.

"At this stage, recovery is slow and smart work is actually more important than hard

work. "You know what your body demands, what you can do, what you cannot do. So we have small sessions and we don't go for big ones and save our energy for the matches, so we can have a better result."

His third appearance in the T20 World Cup would be his last but the Pakistan-born player did not rule out continuing in the 50-overs format.

"It all depends on the (Omani) board's call but I believe this will be my last World Cup, and last T20 tournament," Nadeem said.

"If they want to have me for 50-overs, it's their call. But if it's T20, I will say goodbye in

this World Cup." A middle-order batter and a handy seam bowler, Nadeem draws inspiration from former England fast bowler James Anderson, who performed successfully in Test cricket before retiring at the age of 41 in 2024.

"I always say if he could play in Test cricket at this age, then why can't I? Because 90% of our cricket is at the associate level, so why can I not survive at the associate level? Jimmy is my inspiration," he said.

Oman face a daunting task in Group B where they will play former champions Australia and Sri Lanka.

MOTOGP

Mir sets the pace on day two at Sepang

AFP
Sepang, Malaysia

Spaniard Joan Mir set the pace on the second day of MotoGP pre-season testing in contrasting conditions at the Sepang circuit yesterday, as Italian-Japanese factory team Yamaha opted to stay off track.

Mir became the pace setter after the 28-year-old clocked 1 min 56.874 sec on his Honda machine after 11 laps, to become the fastest rider over two days of testing in Malaysia.

Italian Franco Morbidelli came close to matching Mir's timing after he posted 1 min 56.983 sec, while his compatriot Fabio Di Giannantonio was third fastest on the day after registering 1 min 57.049 sec, both on their respective Ducatis.

The morning session witnessed only 17 riders set out for testing, with Yamaha's notable absence as they tried to resolve a technical issue from Tuesday's test.

Their withdrawal compounded Fabio Quartararo's absence from the remaining two days of testing after the Frenchman suffered a finger fracture following his crash on Tuesday.

Sudden downpour

As the skies changed from intense heat to a sudden downpour in the afternoon, only 11 riders emerged to weather the conditions.

Spaniard Alex Marquez, who crashed on the same turn as Quartararo the day before in the morning session, returned to post the fastest lap of the afternoon session as he stamped 1 min 58.094 sec on his Ducati.

"I was quite angry with myself after seeing the damage on the bike," Marquez said.

"I tried different things with the new tyres, the grip of the track is super high so, I had the problem," he added.

"I understood the crash, and we look forward," he added.

Jorge Martin, the 2024 champion who endured a challeng-

ing previous season with injuries, was meanwhile spotted walking around shirtless with his racing gloves on.

The Spaniard appeared in good spirits as he posed for pictures with the medics and race marshals.

Yesterday's pre-season test times at the Sepang Circuit

1. Joan Mir (ESP/Honda) 1 min 56.874 sec
2. Franco Morbidelli (ITA/VR46 Ducati) 1 min 56.983 sec
3. Fabio Di Giannantonio (ITA/VR46 Ducati) 1 min 57.049 sec
4. Pedro Acosta (ESP/Red Bull KTM) 1 min 57.116 sec
5. Maverick Vinales (ESP/Red Bull KTM) 1 min 57.126 sec
6. Marco Bezzecchi (ITA/Aprilia) 1 min 57.141 sec
7. Raul Fernandez (ESP/Aprilia) 1 min 57.274 sec
8. Francesco Bagnaia (ITA/Ducati) 1 min 57.302 sec
9. Ai Ogura (JPN/Aprilia) 1 min 57.376 sec
10. Enea Bastianini (ITA/Redbull KTM) 1 min 57.550 sec



Honda HRC Castrol team's Spanish MotoGP rider Joan Mir takes a corner during the second day of the 2026 MotoGP pre-season test at the Sepang International Circuit in Sepang yesterday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

LIV Golf events 'to receive world ranking points'

'This has been an incredibly complex and challenging process'



Torque GC's Joaquin Niemann, Ripper GC's Cameron Smith and Fireballs GC's Sergio Garcia during round 1 of the first round of LIV Golf series at Riyadh Golf Club in Saudi Arabia yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Los Angeles, United States

Players in LIV Golf tournaments will be eligible to receive world ranking points for the first time from this year, the Official World Golf Ranking (OWGR) announced yesterday.

A statement from OWGR said ranking points would be issued to players who finish in the top 10 of LIV Golf's individual stroke play tournaments from 2026 onwards.

The failure of the Saudi Arabia-financed LIV Golf to secure world ranking points for its events has been a stumbling block since the upstart circuit launched in 2022.

Elite LIV Golf players have seen their world rankings nosedive, complicating their ability to qualify for golf's four major championships, whose fields are largely determined by rankings.

LIV's three-round 54-hole format had also been an issue preventing acceptance by OWGR. LIV has switched to four-round tournaments this season.

OWGR chairman Trevor Immelman said determining a system for awarding ranking points at LIV events had taken several months.

"This has been an incredibly complex and challenging process and one which we have devoted a huge amount of time and energy to resolving in the seven months since LIV Golf submitted their application," Immelman said in a statement.

"We fully recognised the need to rank the top men's players in the world but at the same time had to find a way of doing so that was equitable to the thousands of other players competing on other tours that operate with established meritocratic pathways.

"We believe we have found a solution that



Crushers GC's Bryson DeChambeau holding his driver at Riyadh Golf Club. (Reuters)

achieves these twin aims and enables the best-performing players at LIV Golf events to receive OWGR points."

OWGR said it would continue to evaluate LIV Golf over the next two years.

"As LIV Golf continues to evolve, OWGR will continue to evaluate LIV Golf against OWGR's eligibility standards, which could result in an increase in points, a decrease in points or removal from the system altogether," the OWGR said.

LIV Golf however criticised the OWGR decision, saying it did not go far enough and should be widened to offer points to players finishing outside the top 10.

"Under these rules, a player finishing 11th in a LIV Golf event is treated the same as a player finishing 57th," LIV Golf said in a statement.

"Limiting points to only the top 10 finishers disproportionately harms players who consistently perform at a high level but finish just outside that threshold, as well as emerging talent working to establish themselves on the world stage - precisely the players a fair and meritocratic ranking system is designed to recognise."

Bryson DeChambeau: 'We didn't sign up to play for 72 (holes)'

Bryson DeChambeau is entering the final year of his contract with LIV Golf.

Judging by his latest comments to *Today's Golfer*, it doesn't sound like the two-time US Open champion is too keen on one of the recent changes made by the Saudi-funded tour.

Case in point, the impending shift from a 54- to a 72-hole format.

"It's definitely changed away from what we had initially been told it was going to be," DeChambeau said. "So there is some movement that we've all been, I would say, interested in, and going, 'Why that movement?' Because we were told it was going to be this. So that's definitely made us have some different thoughts about it.

"I've got a contract for this year, and we'll go through it there and see what happens after that. Look, it's 72 holes, it's changed, but we're still excited to play professionally and play for what we're doing and go across the world. I think it's going to be great for our (Crushers GC) team. Is it what we ultimately signed up for? No. So I think we're supposed to be different, so I'm a little indifferent to it right now.

"Hopefully it weighs positively on me over the course of time, but you never know. I'm not sure. We didn't sign up to play for 72."

DeChambeau, 32, joined LIV Golf in 2022 after recording nine wins on the PGA Tour, including the US Open in 2020 and 2024.

FORMULA ONE

Vowles dismisses Williams 2026 title hopes as 'not realistic'

AFP
Grove, United Kingdom

British Formula One team Williams has made progress but "it's not realistic" to target the title in 2026 or 2027, its principal James Vowles told AFP in the build-up to a new season marked by an overhaul of the technical regulations.

The 46-year-old, who took over at Williams after 12 years as a strategy guru with Mercedes, said he was determined that the team should do at least as well as their fifth place in the constructors' standings in 2025, their joint-best finish in 10 years.

"Our expectation is 2025 set the baseline. P5 is where I want us to be at our base, and we nudge forward from there," Vowles told AFP.

"But it's exponentially harder, in my experience, being P4, and exponentially harder being P3, P2, P1.

"And I think with what you can see at the moment, the journey to P2, P1 is simply not on the cards for 2026. We have work to do.

"But do I expect that, as a baseline, we perform at least where we were last year? Yes."

Williams won the last of their nine constructors' titles in 1997 when Jacques Villeneuve also won the drivers' world championship.

For the last 20 years, apart from two seasons when Felipe Massa and Valtteri Bottas lifted them to third, they have struggled to make the top five.

This season they again have Carlos Sainz and Alex Albon at the wheel, with a Mercedes engine powering them, and Vowles is confident that the long-term planning is there to return to the glory days.

"Am I confident we as a business have made a step forward from 2025 to 2026 in the way we're

working? Absolutely," he says. "There's some elements of the car that are really quite impressive. Not all of it, but elements of it.

"Are we at championship level today? No. But I'm confident the way we are going about this will allow us to catch up in the time frame.

"I will always invest in our future. One of the great things about the cost cap is you are constrained.

"You can either think about today, next race, or you can think about a year down the line. It's the same money. You've got to spend it wisely in that regard.

"The decisions that we made in 2025 were the right ones to make sure we forward invest in this team.

"We moved a lot of our team onto this car. But what you don't do is print it early."

With only a month to go before the start of the new season in Australia on March 8, pressure is growing on every team to ensure that their new cars, massively overhauled to meet the new regulations, are in good working order.

Vowles, however, stands by his decision to skip the shakedown in Barcelona in order to tweak their revisions.

"One of the most difficult decisions I've made in my career is not going to Barcelona," he admitted.

"I'm confident it's the right decision though.

"We did VTT (virtual track testing) and other elements with the drivers that have positioned us in a good stead.

"It's not the same as going to Barcelona... But I'm confident that with six days of testing in Bahrain, we'll be absolutely fine coming to Melbourne.

"Ultimately, that's the line in the sand that's important. It's not whether you're at a shakedown test, it's where you perform in Melbourne."

Figure skater trains ahead of Winter Olympic Games 2026



Figure skater Ruiyang Zhang of China during training ahead of the Milano Cortina 2026 Olympics at Milano Ice Skating Arena, Milan, Italy, yesterday. The Winter Olympics begin on Feb 6 and conclude on Feb 22, 2026. (Reuters)

MOTORSPORT

Qatar's al-Attiyah aims for 19th victory in Qatar International Rally

The rally will begin with the new Qualifying Stage from the Lusail Sports Complex today

By Sports Reporter
Lusail

Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah will be bidding for a record-breaking 19th victory from 26 starts when this weekend's Qatar International Rally gets underway from the Lusail Sports Complex today afternoon.

The in-form Qatari began his challenge for an unprecedented 21st FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) title with victory in Oman two weeks ago and has now switched his attention to securing a staggering 93rd career MERC rally win on the three-day event being hosted by the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF).

Al-Attiyah and co-driver Candido Carrera top a 23-car field with strength in depth and will be looking to start their weekend's campaign with a strategic performance on the new Qualifying Stage today. This will determine the starting order for tomorrow's opening special stage.

The outcome of the Qualifying Stage will be the deciding factor to which of the Rally2 crews opens the road, acts as a road sweeper and faces the slight disadvantage of clearing loose sand and gravel off the racing line. In the past, the leader of the championship has opened the road regardless and al-Attiyah may well be able to take advantage of the new addition to the regulations to strengthen his challenge in an Autotek Skoda Fabia RS.

Abdullah al-Rawahi is back from serious injury and pushed al-Attiyah hard in his native Oman last month. Punctures ultimately dropped him to second place and out of victory contention, but the Omani is better prepared for this rally and is hopeful that he has a good set-up on his Skoda Fabia RS to apply the pressure on al-Attiyah from the outset. The



Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (also inset) in action during the Oman Rally last month, is bidding for a record-breaking 19th victory in the Qatar International Rally this weekend.

former regional champion teams up with Jordanian co-driver Ata al-Hmoud.

Local driver Abdulaziz al-Kuwari was not present at the opening round but stayed in match fitness with a strong performance at last weekend's Saudi Baja. He teams up with his brother Nasser in a Skoda Fabia RS and will be striving for the podium on a rally he won in 2012.

This will only be the third special stage rally in Hamza Bakhashab's short career but the Saudi showed in Oman that he has the pace to reach the podium. He admitted at the press conference on Tuesday evening that working efficiently with accurate pace notes had cost him dearly at the opening round when he crashed out of third place, but he and Irish co-driver Lorcan Moore are determined to come back even stronger this weekend in their Jameel Motorsport Toyota GR Yaris Rally2.

Engine issues sidelined Mohammed al-Marri in Oman but the QMMF-backed driver has switched to a Citroën C3 this weekend and will make his debut in the Rally2 class with Frenchman Pierre Delorme reading his pace notes. Veteran Nasser Khalifa al-Atya began his 2026 campaign with a podium finish in Oman, as he tries to retain the FIA Master Driver trophy he won last season. The Qatari again teams up with Lebanese co-driver Ziad Chebab in a Motortune-run Ford Fiesta.

Jweihan aims to extend his FIA MERC2 advantage. Shaker Jweihan was the class of the MERC2 field at round one with his fellow Jordanian co-driver Mustafa Juma and the youngster is determined to maintain the momentum in Qatar. "We have made

a strong start to the season and, yes, the goal is to keep it going and push for another win," said the Mitsubishi driver. His closest rivals in Oman were the Kuwaiti duo of Jassim al-Muqahwi and Sulaiman al-Helal, who finished fifth overall and picked up points for second in MERC2. Jordan's Sami Fleifel was third and he teams up with Yazan Juma to continue his push for MERC2 honours.

A cruel retirement cost Oman's Zakariya al-Aamri (Subaru) valuable points on round one but he will be hoping to be in the mix with navigator Mohammed al-Mazrui on Qatar's abrasive gravel terrain. Further MERC2 competition comes from the Indian duo of Mohamed Mansoor Parol and Lenin Joseph and Lebanon's Charbel Chebly and Carlos Hanna in a pair of Mitsubishi.

Rashid al-Muhannadi and

Gary McElhinney are the defending FIA MERC4 champions, but their title defence ground to a halt with engine issues in Oman. The QMMF-backed Qatari will be looking to bounce back strongly with a category win this weekend, although he faces strong competition from a quartet of Qatari drivers in similar Peugeot 208 Rally4s and the Indian duo of Payyaakkal Panikkaveetil and Musa Sherif in a Ford Fiesta.

The QMMF has offered support to Ahmed al-Kuwari, Nouef al-Sowaidi, Khalifa Saleh al-Attiyah and Ahmad Shaheen al-Muhannadi to boost the flagship two-wheel drive category. They have teamed up with their respective co-drivers, Baptiste Cerrato, Aisvydas Paliukenas, Laos Savvas and Taha al-Zadjali.

The Lebanese pairing of Shadi El Fakih and Joseph Kneid wheel out their Rally5 Renault Clio at the rear of the field behind four SSVs that are also eligible for the regional rally championship. Mohammed al-Atteya and Mirko Carrara drive a pair of Can-Ams and Christiano Gabbarrini and Mario Marotta wheel out two Yamaha YXZ 1000Rs built by Quaddy Racing.

Today's competitive timetable opens with a 75-minute practice session through a new 5.56km special for Rally2 cars at Al Khor from 10.00hrs. This will also act as the new qualifying stage for Rally2 crews, starting at 11.45hrs. The result of that will determine the starting order for leg one. The slowest driver in the qualifying stage will run as the first Rally2 entrant on the road tomorrow. Non-Rally2 machines will be permitted a maximum of two passes apiece during a shakedown on the Al Khor stage from 12.30hrs until 14.15hrs.

The ceremonial start will then take centre stage adjacent to the service park in the grounds of the Lusail Sports Complex.

Timber hopes League Cup can be catalyst for Arsenal success

Arsenal defender Jurrien Timber believes lifting the English League Cup could inspire the Gunners to even more success this season. Mikel Arteta's men are just 90 minutes away from ending their six-year wait for a major trophy after seeing off Chelsea at the Emirates on Tuesday to secure a place in next month's final.

Arsenal are also six points clear at the top of the Premier League and through to the Champions League last 16 following an unblemished league-phase campaign. They also face third-tier Wigan in the fourth round of the FA Cup a week on Sunday. "We don't have anything yet, but we've put ourselves in an amazing position to win," Timber said when asked if winning the League Cup could spur Arsenal on to greater heights. "The Carabao (League) Cup final is coming early, so maybe that could be nice for us as a motivation and a boost towards the other cups as well.

"It's not always possible to play your best. But this team does an amazing job of finding a way to win, no matter what. We have done it away at Chelsea, where it is not easy (to win), and then at home as well. So, it is very deserved. "You could see how relieved everyone was and how happy that we are going to Wembley. And hopefully there are more celebrations to come."

Kai Havertz came off the bench to make sure of Arsenal's place in the final when he scored in stoppage time against former club Chelsea. Havertz spent nearly a year out injured following hamstring and knee operations but has now scored twice in his last three appearances. "Kai's presence within the team makes a big difference, but also on the pitch," said Timber. "Everyone can see his amazing qualities, and how happy we all were for Kai. "He is a fun character. He is not quiet and everyone likes him. "When he's not there, I think everyone notices that, so we're happy he's here with us again. I hope he enjoys this moment, and hopefully there are many more moments like this for him."

HORSE RACING

Injaaz Stud's Mutamarrid claims Ras Rokn Island Cup in style

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Mutamarrid sealed the Ras Rokn Island Cup in style as a competitive nine-race programme unfolded on the dirt at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

The nine-year-old Mutamarrid asserted his class in the feature race for Local Thoroughbred Handicap (45-70) for four-year-olds and above over 2000m, contested by seven runners.

Owned by Injaaz Stud and trained by Jihad El Ahmad, Mutamarrid produced a decisive late surge to score by two and three-quarter lengths under Pierre Charles Boudot. The victory marked the ninth of his career and followed a pair of solid placed efforts in his previous two starts.

Earlier on the card, Tariqu Al Shahania opened proceedings by getting off the mark, while Gasham delivered a breakthrough success in the second race.

Midrass rolled back the years to regain winning form, Habes returned to the winner's enclosure in the fourth, and Necessitate held on gamely after a bold front-running display. Gulf Legend struck back in the staying handicap, Sha'alan edged a closely fought sprint, and Sham Alghania made a winning debut against more experienced rivals to complete a competitive afternoon of racing.

RESULTS
45th Al Rayyan Race Meeting In Al Uqda - Ras Rokn Island Cup WINNERS:
(Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
Ras Rokn Island Cup - Local



Jockey Pierre Charles Boudot guided Mutamarrid to the Ras Rokn Island Cup win at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. **PICTURES:** Juhaïm



Connections of Mutamarrid celebrate after the nine-year-old horse won the Ras Rokn Island Cup.

Thoroughbred Handicap 45-70 (Class 3)
Mutamarrid, Jihad El Ahmad, Pierre Charles Boudot
Purebred Arabian Show Horses And Mares
Sham Alghania, Bader al-Balushi, Youssef Lachhab
Purebred Arabian Handicap 65-85 (Class 4)
Sha'alan, Mohammed Alghazali, Lukas Delozier

Thoroughbred Handicap 65-85 (Class 4)
Gulf Legend, Jassim al-Ghazali, Salman Fahad al-Hajri
Thoroughbred Handicap 55-75 (Class 5)
Necessitate, Rashid al-Jehani, Saleh Salem al-Marri
Local Purebred Arabian Handicap 55-75 (Class 5)
Habes, Hadi al-Ramzani, Marco Casamento

Purebred Arabian Handicap 45-65 (Class 6)
Midrass, Hadi al-Ramzani, Faleh Bughenaim
Local Thoroughbred Premium Maiden Plate (Class 6)
Gasham, Ibrahim Khaled Elahmed, Saleh Salem al-Marri
Local Purebred Arabian Premium Maiden Plate (Class 6)
Tariqu Al Shahania, Rudy Andre Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier

FOOTBALL

Germany rejects calls for World Cup boycott

AFP
Berlin

Germany's government yesterday rejected calls for a boycott of the football World Cup co-hosted by the United States, after President Donald Trump retreated from his threats to seize Greenland.

A boycott of the tournament would not be "the right approach," government spokesman Steffen Meyer told a press conference in Berlin. "Political disputes should be settled at the political level, and sport should be left to be sport."

This year's World Cup is to be held between June 11 and July 19 in the United States, Canada and Mexico. Some German politicians had questioned whether the country should still participate after Trump last month stepped up

his longstanding threats to annex Greenland, an autonomous territory of Nato ally Denmark.

He targeted eight European countries, including Germany, with tariffs for their opposition to his ambitions.

But the US leader later withdrew his tariff threats and vowed not to take the Arctic island by force, after saying he had struck a "framework" deal with Nato chief Mark Rutte to ensure greater American influence.

At the height of the crisis, Berlin had avoided taking a clear stance on a boycott, saying only it was up to the country's football association to decide.

Germany's minister for sports, Christiane Schenderlein, also said yesterday the government had decided that it did not support a boycott.

"Sport must not be exploited like this," she told the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* daily.

Coach Thioune tasked with saving battling Bremen

Daniel Thioune was named Werder Bremen coach yesterday and tasked with saving the struggling Bundesliga side from the drop. Bremen did not disclose the length of Thioune's contract, but German media reported that the coach's future will depend on whether Bremen manage to stay in the top flight. The 51-year-old, who in 2017 became the first German-born Black manager in the country, has no top-flight experience but previously took Bundesliga 2 side Fortuna Duesseldorf to the cusp of promotion. At the end of the 2023-24 season, Duesseldorf lost a two-legged playoff with first division Bochum on penalties. Had they won, they would have replaced Bochum in the Bundesliga. Four-time German champions Bremen sacked previous manager Horst Steffen on Sunday, with the club sitting a point above the relegation placings after a 10-match winless run. Thioune said he "could not correct in three days what hasn't gone optimally in the past three months".