

To subscribe
GULF TIMES
Newspaper
Please call
444 666 35



CRICKET | Page 2

Suryakumar
admits nerves
but promises
'entertainment'



MOTORSPORT | Page 4

Al-Attiyah, Carrera
in cruise control
after opening leg
of Qatar Rally



Saturday, February 7, 2026
Sha'ban 19, 1447 AH

GULF TIMES

SPORT



TENNIS

Stage set for Qatar
TotalEnergies Open,
draw ceremony held

Page 3

Sheikh Joaan attends IOC president's welcome dinner in Milan



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Olympic Council of Asia and President of the Qatar Olympic Committee, attended the welcome dinner hosted yesterday by Kirsty Coventry, President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), in Milan, on the sidelines of the 145th IOC session. The session was held in the city of Milan and brought together presidents of national Olympic committees, members of IOC, and presidents of international sports federations. The dinner provided an opportunity to exchange views on a number of issues related to Olympic affairs, within the framework of the side meetings accompanying the IOC session, which contribute to strengthening communication and co-ordination among sports leaders at the international level. The dinner was also attended by HE Sheikha Hind bint Hamad al-Thani, Vice-Chairperson of the Board of Trustees of Qatar Foundation and a member of the IOC Education Commission.

QATAR MASTERS

'A little frustrating' - Reed leads at halfway stage

'Towards the end, everything started to feel pretty solid, and I'm really looking forward to the weekend'



USA's Patrick Reed carded a four-under 67 in the second round to emerge as sole leader at the Qatar Masters at Doha Golf Club.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Patrick Reed continued his impressive start to the season by claiming the solo lead at the halfway stage of the Qatar Masters yesterday. At Doha Golf Club, Reed carded a four-under-par 67, finishing his round with a birdie on the par-five 18th to move to 12 under for the tournament.

The American holds a one-shot advantage over Joakim Lagergren after the Swede produced a flawless 66 without dropping a shot.

Reed, who announced on January 28 that he will leave LIV Golf and return to the PGA Tour in 2027, admitted the round was not without its challenges.

"Honestly, today was a little frustrating, especially early," said Reed, whose only bogey came at the 15th hole.

"My ball-striking wasn't quite as sharp as it was yesterday, but I missed in the right spots and that allowed me to still get balls on the greens. Going round this place and feeling like you didn't hit it quite as well as you wanted to, and hit 17 greens is always a positive," the 2018 Masters winner said.

Reed, the winner of the Hero Dubai Desert Classic, said his game began to click late in the



New Zealand's Daniel Hillier tees off yesterday.

round and is confident heading into the weekend. "Towards the end, everything started to feel pretty solid, and I'm really looking forward to the weekend," the 35-year-old Texan said.

The American made just two birdies on the front nine but took advantage of the par-five tenth for the second consecutive day and his gains at the 14th, 16th and 18th more than offset a bogey at the 15th.

Lagergren made four birdies and an eagle at the last to set the pace on 11-under

with a 66 after his powerfully built caddie helped him save par at the second by moving large rocks from around his ball when he found the desert with his drive.

"When I came up to the ball, I was like, 'I can't play this one,' so I had to take it unplayable..."

well, I thought I was going to take it unplayable and drop it in the sand, which was going to be horrendous. So I'm very happy that he managed," Lagergren said.

He finished off in style with a 24-foot putt to pick up two shots at the 18th and spent much of the day at the head of the leaderboard until overhauled late on Reed.

"Yeah, it was very good today, very solid, so I'm happy with the day," the 34-year-old Swedish star said. New Zealand's Daniel Hillier and South Africa's Richard Sterne finished a shot further back on -11, with the former having appeared a threat to claim the lead himself before a bogey-par finish. England's Matt Wallace and Scotland's Ewen Ferguson produced impressive rounds of 66 to move into a share of fifth on nine under alongside Spain's Angel Ayora.

Hillier dropped shots at the third and 12th but on each occasion responded with a trio of birdies - three in succession from the seventh and three in four holes from the 13th. A third bogey, after failing to escape from sand at the 17th, meant he had to settle for three under on the day. Padraig Harrington also made the cut in his 500th DP World Tour start, making up for four birdies with six birdies in a 70 that left him 37th on three-under.



Sweden's Joakim Lagergren is one shot behind the leader after round two.
PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil



T20 WORLD CUP

Fearless talent: 5 young players to watch

The T20 World Cup begins today in India and Sri Lanka, with a chance for fresh faces to shine in the global spotlight. AFP Sport looks at five young players who could make a big impact over the month-long, 20-team tournament.

Cooper Connolly (Australia)
A batting all-rounder who bowls left-arm spin, he made his international debut in 2024. Last year against South Africa Connolly became the youngest Australian, at 22 years and two days, to take an ODI five-wicket haul. Connolly, named Bradman Young Cricketer of the Year last month, could make his T20 World Cup debut in Australia's opening match against Ireland in Colombo next Wednesday.

Jacob Bethell (England)
The left-handed Bethell comes into the T20 World Cup with huge expectations, thanks to his fluent batting, tidy part-time spin bowling and electric fielding.

Born in Barbados, Bethell became England's youngest captain at 21 years and 329 days when he led the T20 team in Ireland, last September.

Bethell, 22, has established himself as an all-format player and struck a coming-of-age Test century against Australia in Sydney last month.

As if to prove his all-round credentials on the eve of the tournament, Bethell took four wickets to spin England to a 3-0 T20 warm-up series triumph over Sri Lanka on Tuesday.



Tilak Varma
Kwena Maphaka (S Africa)
The teenage left-arm quick seems ready to fire at the T20 World Cup, having added muscle to South Africa's battery of pace bowlers alongside Kagiso Rabada, Anrich Nortje and Lungi Ngidi. Maphaka, 19, made his T20 debut against



Cooper Connolly
Africa in 2024 and five months later became the youngest Test debutant for South Africa at 18 years and 270 days. His T20 best of 4-20 last year against Australia in Darwin showcased his skills. Coach Shukri Conrad said Maphaka has the "X-factor" in T20 cricket, citing his age-defying pace and skill.

Tilak Varma (India)
Fearless and fiery, the 23-year-old left-hander has nailed down a spot in a competitive Indian batting line-up after averaging 49.29 in his 40 T20 internationals to date, with two centuries. He missed the recent 4-1 T20 series win over New Zealand with an injury, but played a warm-up this week but should return for India's opening match against the United States today.

Noor Ahmad (Afghanistan)
The 21-year-old, part of a world-class Afghan spin attack led by captain Rashid Khan, has travelled the globe to ply his trade in T20 leagues. The left-arm wrist spinner is set for his third appearance at a cricket World Cup. As a teenager he enjoyed a breakthrough 2023 IPL season with Gujarat Titans where he was paired alongside Rashid. In 2025, five-time IPL winners Chennai Super Kings splashed \$1.19mn on Ahmad, who will be able to draw on his experience of playing in India.

PREVIEW

Surya admits nerves but vows 'entertainment'

India take on the United States in World Cup opener in Mumbai

AFP
Mumbai

India captain Suryakumar Yadav admitted yesterday "there will be nerves" when India open their T20 World Cup campaign in front of more than 30,000 fanatical home supporters in Mumbai, but vowed to give them "entertainment".

The co-hosts start their Group A campaign against the United States at a packed Wankhede stadium tonight.

Suryakumar is only too aware that India, the top-ranked T20 team in the world, are overwhelming favourites to retain their title. But he said his team will try to feed off the positive vibes from a billion-plus home supporters and not be crushed by the huge weight of expectation.

"When you're playing at home there is always an added pressure. I'm not running away from the fact," Suryakumar told reporters ahead of India's final training session yesterday.

"To be honest, there will be nerves, there will be pressure, but if you see the positive side of it, there'll be a lot of cheer around."

"There's so many people coming to watch in the stadiums, I've told my boys the same thing, 30,000-35,000 people coming and so many watching at home."

"Let's give them a good time. Let's give them entertainment."

India know that their opening opponents, the United States, caused the biggest upset of the 2024 tournament when they beat Pakistan in a super over, and



India's captain Suryakumar Yadav interacts with his teammates during a training session on the eve of the 2026 ICC T20 World Cup match against United States, at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai. (AFP)

Suryakumar said no team would be taken lightly.

"I don't see any weak teams in the competition. All 20 teams are very much capable of playing some good cricket," he said.

"In this format, one or two batsmen can make a difference. Or it takes one or two bowlers to have a good 24 balls on any given day."

"So we will have to play the same way as we've been playing against all the teams."

The USA's middle order batsman Sanjay Krishnamurthi said it was an honour to play the open-

ing match against the hosts in Mumbai.

"I think for all Americans, this is a special moment for our country," said the Oregon-born 22-year-old.

"To be able to come here and play cricket in one of the most iconic stadiums against one of the best teams in the world, I think it's going to inspire a future generation of cricketers to rise through the ranks in American cricket."

In a blow to Suryakumar's plans, India fast bowling all-

rounder Harshit Rana was ruled out of the tournament late yesterday after suffering a knee injury in a warm-up match two days before.

Following consultations with a specialist and subsequent scans, the BCCI medical team deemed him unfit to participate in the tournament, India said.

The 24-year-old will be replaced by experienced fast bowler Mohammad Siraj.

A veteran of 45 Tests, the 31-year-old Siraj has not played a T20 international since July 2024.

SPOTLIGHT

Suryavanshi hits 175 as India win U-19 World Cup



Indian players and team officials celebrate winning the ICC U-19 World Cup final against England.

AFP
Harare

Fourteen-year-old prodigy Vaibhav Suryavanshi hammered a stunning 175 from just 80 balls as India thumped England by 100 runs in the Under-19 ODI World Cup final in Harare yesterday.

Suryavanshi, who has already made history by becoming the youngest player to post a century in the Indian Premier League, lashed 15 fours and 15 sixes in his innings which saw him score his last 151 runs from just 56 balls.

The left-handed opener was finally caught

behind by England captain Thomas Rew off Manly Lumsden to leave India on 251-3 in the 26th over. They closed their 50 overs on 411-9.

England launched a spirited attempt at making the runs with opener Ben Dawkins making 66 and middle-order batter Caleb Falconer striking a sublime 115 from 67 balls.

Falconer was last man out, superbly caught by Khilan Patel, with England all out for 311 in 40.2 overs and India winning the title for the sixth time.

"I had faith in my skills that I can contribute in big games and today it happened," said Suryavanshi who was named player of the match and player of the tournament, hav-

ing finished with 439 runs in seven innings at 62.71. Suryavanshi launched himself on to the international scene in 2024 as a 13-year-old with a 58-ball century against Australia in his Under-19 debut.

Picked up by Rajasthan Royals, Suryavanshi then announced himself on the world stage by belting his first ball fearlessly for six on his IPL debut. Nine days later, he clubbed the Gujarat Titans bowlers to all parts as he scored the second fastest hundred in tournament history. The teenager brought up his century off 35 balls with 11 sixes and seven fours to stand behind only West Indies great Chris Gayle, who took 30 balls to make a ton in 2013.

the West Indies in 2024 and five months later became the youngest Test debutant for South Africa at 18 years and 270 days. His T20 best of 4-20 last year against Australia in Darwin showcased his skills. Coach Shukri Conrad said Maphaka has the "X-factor" in T20 cricket, citing his age-defying pace and skill.

Noor Ahmad (Afghanistan)
The 21-year-old, part of a world-class Afghan spin attack led by captain Rashid Khan, has travelled the globe to ply his trade in T20 leagues. The left-arm wrist spinner is set for his third appearance at a cricket World Cup. As a teenager he enjoyed a breakthrough 2023 IPL season with Gujarat Titans where he was paired alongside Rashid. In 2025, five-time IPL winners Chennai Super Kings splashed \$1.19mn on Ahmad, who will be able to draw on his experience of playing in India.

FOCUS

Politics leave Pakistan no room for error at WC



AFP
Colombo

Captain Salman Agha warned yesterday that his Pakistan team must bring their "A-game" to the T20 World Cup to reach the knockout stages after forfeiting their group match against India.

The tournament has been overshadowed by an acrimonious political build-up as Bangladesh were replaced by Scotland and Pakistan refused to face co-hosts India in their Group A fixture.

Pakistan will lose two points for the forfeit and also suffer a significant blow to their net run rate, leaving little margin for error.

Even one abandoned match due to bad weather could complicate their path to the next round.

Pakistan open their campaign today in Sri Lanka against the Netherlands and will also face Na-

mibia and the United States. "We need to be cautious and bring our A-game," Agha told reporters, admitting Pakistan have limited experience of the Netherlands and "don't know many" of their players. "We intend to unleash all our spin options because we feel they are vulnerable against quality spin," he said.

The 2009 champions will lean heavily on their explosive opening pair Fakhar Zaman and Saim Ayub, with Agha slotted for number three.

Former skipper Babar Azam - who has struggled for form - slots in at number four. "Babar has been working overtime on his game. He's a key player in these conditions and can change a match in a few overs. We depend on him heavily," Agha said. Pakistan are on a high after a 3-0 whitewash of Australia at home. The team will seek advice from their government if they reach the knockout phase and meet arch-rivals India.

COMMENT

England's Jacks says players back skipper Brook '100 percent'

AFP
Mumbai

All-rounder Will Jacks said yesterday that under-fire England T20 World Cup captain Harry Brook had "100 percent" support from the players after going through a "tough time".

The 26-year-old Brook, in charge at a global tournament for the first time, has recently been in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons.

He last month had to apologise for being involved in an altercation with a nightclub bouncer during England's white ball tour of New Zealand last year, something that had been a "terrible mistake".

Jacks has been close to Brook since they were room-mates with England Under-19s.

"Obviously, it's been a tough time and that's been well documented in the media," Jacks told reporters ahead of team training in Mumbai on the eve of the tournament.

"I wasn't actually in New Zealand, so I didn't know anything about it."

"He's obviously made the wrong decision, but he's accepted that. He's obviously making amends on the pitch, and we all back him

100 percent," Brook, a richly gifted run-scorer, has an early chance to shift the focus back on to his batting in England's opening match against Nepal in Mumbai tomorrow.

"He wants his cricket to do the talking," said Jacks.

England come into the World Cup in form and heartened by a 3-0 T20 series win in Sri Lanka this week.

In the preceding ODI series against the same opposition, the explosive Brook bludgeoned 136 off just 66 balls.

'Team unity strong'

"It's not so much we are taking momentum from that, but team unity, feeling strong within ourselves," said Jacks. "We have been performing well over the last 12 months, since Harry's become captain, and we're very happy with that. What we did in the last few weeks in Sri Lanka is another stepping stone."

"We come into here full of confidence and belief that we can go a long way in this tournament. "India, on home soil, I think everyone knows who's favourites."

England are expected to make the Super Eight stage from a Group C that also features two-time winners West Indies, debutants Italy and Scotland.

WINTER OLYMPICS OPEN WITH STAR-STUDDED CEREMONY

Milan: US pop diva Mariah Carey helped to get the party started yesterday as the Milano Cortina Winter Olympics staged a unique opening ceremony combining elements from the co-hosts, seeking to reflect both city and mountain life. Carey performed the 1950s Italian song "Nel blu, dipinto di blu" ("In the blue, painted in blue") with its famous "Volare" ("To fly") refrain to cheers in Milan's San Siro stadium. Italian President Sergio Mattarella was introduced to the fans via a recorded video clip in which the 84-year-old was seen travelling through the city on one of Milan's historic trams. The opening stages also included a tribute to the late Italian fashion designer Giorgio Armani, who made Milan his base and died last September. Co-host Cortina d'Ampezzo had its own supporting role in the celebrations from more than 400km (250 miles) away in the mountains, in a spectacle entitled "Armonia" (Harmony) expected to draw a huge global audience on television and online. There was some confusion over access

in Cortina. Loredana Vido, from Padova, owner of a second home in Cortina, was blocked at the start of Corso Italia, the town's main street, and said: "We were not told that everything would be closed off. We were told it was free entry." Athletes were also parading in the mountain venues of Livigno and Predazzo, in a Games spread over 22,000 square kilometres. The ceremony celebrated the diversity of Italian life, from fashionable Milan to the smaller mountain towns in the Alps that host the outdoor events at the Games, which run until February 22. Some in Cortina were pleased to get a slice of the action without having to trek to Milan and back. For the first time, two Olympic cauldrons, one of the symbols of the Games, will be lit simultaneously and burn throughout the Games - one at Milan's Arco della Pace (Peace Arch) and the other in Cortina's Piazza Dibona. Milan enjoyed a sunny afternoon and the mood outside the stadium was festive as crowds built up.



Dancers perform during the opening ceremony of the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at the San Siro stadium in Milan, northern Italy, yesterday. (AFP)

GOLF

Scheffler excited as Koepka makes return from LIV

'I think people want the best people playing together again'

Reuters
Los Angeles, United States

Top-ranked Scottie Scheffler sees the return of LIV Golf players to the PGA Tour as a start to having the world's best talent competing beyond major events.

Scheffler, who won his 20th career PGA Tour title two weeks ago, returns this week to the site of his first victory at the Phoenix Open.

Scheffler won his 2026 season opener at the PGA American Express and seeks another crown at TPC Scottsdale, where he and five-time major winner Brooks Koepka, back from LIV, will compete.

"I think people want the best people playing together again so when it comes to great players like Brooks or Patrick Reed, having those guys competing out here is great for the tour, great for the fans and great for our sponsors," Scheffler said.

"The last few years there has just been a lot of the noise, and so I think getting those guys back is another step towards us just being able to play golf again."

Reed, the 2018 Masters champion, plans a PGA return from LIV next fall.

Scheffler has won four majors since a breakthrough 2022 Phoenix win.

"It doesn't feel all that long ago, but at the same time, it feels like quite a bit of time has passed since then," Scheffler said. "Lots of good memories. It's fun to be able to play in front of this crowd."

Scheffler hurt his hand making a meal last season but is healthy now.



Scottie Scheffler and Chris Gotterup of the United States watch after finishing on hole 18 during the first round of the WM Phoenix Open.

"I got off to a nice start at the American Express," he said. "So it's exciting, but I've always been at my best when I'm trying to stay present and focusing to get a little bit better each day."

"Definitely a lot easier starting off that way instead of missing the

first few tournaments due to hand surgery."

"Did a bit less cooking in the offseason this year. Stuck to plastic silverware instead of metal stuff," he joked.

Koepka, who made his PGA return last week at Torrey Pines,

won his first PGA title at Phoenix in 2015 and won again in 2021.

"Obviously winning it twice helps. Any time you win twice on a golf course, you're going to feel pretty good and pretty comfortable," Koepka said. "Hopefully a good week this week."

"It's just good to be back. Good to see some golf courses I'm familiar with, know where to hit it and have some familiarity with them. I think that's a huge thing."

No hard talks yet

Koepka said he hasn't had hard talks with players unhappy with his return.

"I haven't had any difficult ones. Just happy to see you back, we're glad you back, type things."

"But then again, there's a lot of guys, I mean I'm only nine days into this. There's still a lot of guys I haven't seen."

World number 16 Viktor Hovland, whose most recent PGA triumph came in last March's Valpar Championship, welcomes stronger competition but the Norwegian warns the PGA Tour has issues to consider.

"It does kind of put the tour in a tricky position now," he said. "You've said one thing for a long time and now we're changing things. What precedent are you setting then to the future players now if I can go to a rival tour, get paid, and now seemingly come back again without the biggest consequences?"

"I don't really have an opinion on that. That's something the tour has to figure out. I'm sure there's a lot of people not going to be super happy about that, but I just want to compete against the best players in the world."

FOCUS

Gotterup on top as Scheffler in trouble at WM Phoenix Open

Reuters
Arizona

Chris Gotterup owns a two-stroke lead at the WM Phoenix Open after shooting an 8-under-par 63 in the first round at TPC Scottsdale that was suspended due to darkness Thursday in Arizona.

Nine players, none of them lower than 3 under for their rounds, have one or two holes left to complete on Friday morning before getting on with the second round.

England's Matt Fitzpatrick shot a 7-under 29 on the back nine (his first nine holes of the day) but bogeyed his closing two holes to settle for a 6-under 65.

Tied for third at 5-under 66 are Michael Thorbjornsen, Pierceson Coody, Sam Stevens and Denmark's Nicolai Hojgaard.

Gotterup began his bogey-free round on the back nine and got into red figures with an eagle at the par-5 13th.

He reached the green in two and sank a 27-foot eagle putt to jump-start his round.

"Any time you make an eagle or a nice putt, it definitely helps," Gotterup said.

"I just felt like even if I didn't make that, I felt like I was just trying to do the right stuff..."

"I feel like I just really managed where I needed to be on the golf course well today."

The 26-year-old proceeded to birdie the next three holes, capped by a 7-footer at the famed

par-3 16th, Scottsdale's "Stadium Hole." Gotterup added another birdie at No 18 and two more on the front nine.

"I wouldn't say today I drove it my best or did anything - I putted great today, but I just was in the right spot when I needed to be," Gotterup said.

It has been a dream start to the 2026 season for Gotterup.

He won his third PGA Tour title at the season-opening Sony Open in Hawaii, then tied for 18th at the Farmers Insurance Open last week.

Fitzgerald said of ending poorly after starting hot, "Yeah, it's disappointing. I guess the way you got to look at it is if I started bogey, bogey and you finish 6 under, you come off feeling like the greatest player in the world."

"You got to try and reframe it I guess there."

"If someone would've said, 'Here is 6 under to start the day and I can stay in bed,' I would've snatched your hand off. I'm in a good position to start with and hopefully kick on."

World No 1 Scottie Scheffler is in danger of missing the cut after signing for a 2-over-par 73.

On his back-nine start, he made four birdies but followed three of those immediately with a bogey.

His struggles continued with a three-putt bogey at No 1 and a messy double bogey at No 2.

When Xander Schauffele missed the cut at the Farmers Insurance Open, it left Scheffler as the active leader on tour with 65 consecutive cuts made.



Chris Gotterup of the United States plays his shot from the fifth tee during the first round of the WM Phoenix Open 2026 at TPC Scottsdale in Scottsdale, Arizona. (AFP)

Stage set for Qatar TotalEnergies Open 2026 as draw ceremony held



Players and officials of the WTA and Qatar Tennis Federation at the draw ceremony of the Qatar TotalEnergies Open in Doha yesterday. Seven of the Top 10 players in the WTA Rankings are in Doha this week for the Qatar TotalEnergies Open. The tournament marks the season's first 1000-level event on the WTA Tour. Three-time champion Iga Swiatek is the top seed, followed by Australian Open champion Elena Rybakina, defending champion Amanda Anisimova, Coco Gauff and Mirra Andreeva. Swiatek is the top seed in a section that includes Jasmine Paolini, Linda Noskova and Australian Open doubles champion Elise Mertens. **Right:** Iga Swiatek



MOTORSPORT

Al-Attiyah in cruise control at Qatar International Rally

Jweihan and Khalifa Saleh al-Attiyah take leads in MERC2 and MERC4 respectively after opening leg

By Sports Reporter

Lusail

Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and Candido Carrera were firmly in command of the Qatar International Rally after six special stages to the north of Doha yesterday.

The duo, behind the wheels of Autotek Skoda Fabia RS, won five of the gravel speed tests and headed into the night halt with a comfortable advantage of 92 seconds over Abdulaziz al-Kuwari and his brother Nasser in a Sarrazin Skoda.

Al-Attiyah said: "Today we had some slow punctures and we tried to manage. I think in this kind of race you need to be careful and not have a crazy speed. We did a good job and have a decent lead. This is a good gap but tomorrow we need to be strong. The suspension was much better this afternoon. We stiffened it a bit."

Al-Kuwari added: "Sometimes to be behind Nasser you are like the winner of the rally. It's not bad. I am missing some mileage but I am happy. We didn't push like hell. We will try and improve a little tomorrow."

Mohammed al-Marri belied his lack of Rally2 experience to mix it with his more experienced rivals from the outset. The young Qatari teamed up with Frenchman Pierre Delorme to drive a Citroen C3 for the first time and held a strong third place.

Al-Marri said: "We will try to hold our gap to at least make it a top three on the podium for Qatari guys. I don't have the seat time in the car but I am trying to do my best."

Stopping to change a flat tyre on the opening stage cost Hamza Bakhshab and



Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and Candido Carrera won five of the gravel speed tests and headed into the night halt with a comfortable advantage of 92 seconds.

Lorcan Moore over three minutes in their Jameel Motorsport Toyota GR Yaris Rally2, but the Saudi found a good pace from then on and climbed back to fifth at the mid-day point. He was then able to pass Nasser Khalifa al-Atya and Ziad Chehab over the afternoon's stages and settled into fourth place. Al-Atya continued to lead the FIA Master Driver category in his Ford Fiesta.

Bakhshab said: "The second loop was way better than the first one. It was cleaner and faster. Still a lot of catching up to do after the puncture."

Al-Atya added: "I enjoyed the second loop. I pushed more and improved my times. We need to keep calm like that and finish the rally. We need to be clever tomorrow."

A double puncture on the second stage ruined Abdulla al-Rawahi's challenge for a maiden win in Qatar and the Omani was forced to stop and change one tyre with the loss of over five minutes. He and Jordanian co-driver Ata al-Hmoud persevered with their battle-worn Skoda, only to get another flat tyre on the last stage of the day.



Abdulaziz al-Kuwari and his brother Nasser were in second place in a Sarrazin Skoda.

They slipped back to seventh.

Shaker Jweihan was the class act in the FIA MERC2 category with Mustafa Juma in a Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution X. He won all but one of the stages on his way to sixth overall and an overnight advantage of 2min 24.5sec over 12th-placed Sami Fleifel and Yazan Juma. A handful of seconds separated Rashid al-Muhammadi, Nouef al-Sowaidi and Khalifa Saleh al-Attiyah at the midday regroup in the battle for FIA MERC4 honours. The three Peugeot 208 drivers became embroiled in a gripping contest for supremacy over the afternoon's loop of stages.

Al-Attiyah and Laos Savvas managed to sneak in front of al-Muhammadi and Gary McElhinney on the final stage to hold eighth overall and a 3.2-second lead. Al-Sowaidi and Aisydas Paliukenas were just 2.1 seconds further adrift and Ahmad Shaheen al-Muhammadi and Taha al-Zadali were in touching distance in fourth in MERC4 and 11th overall.

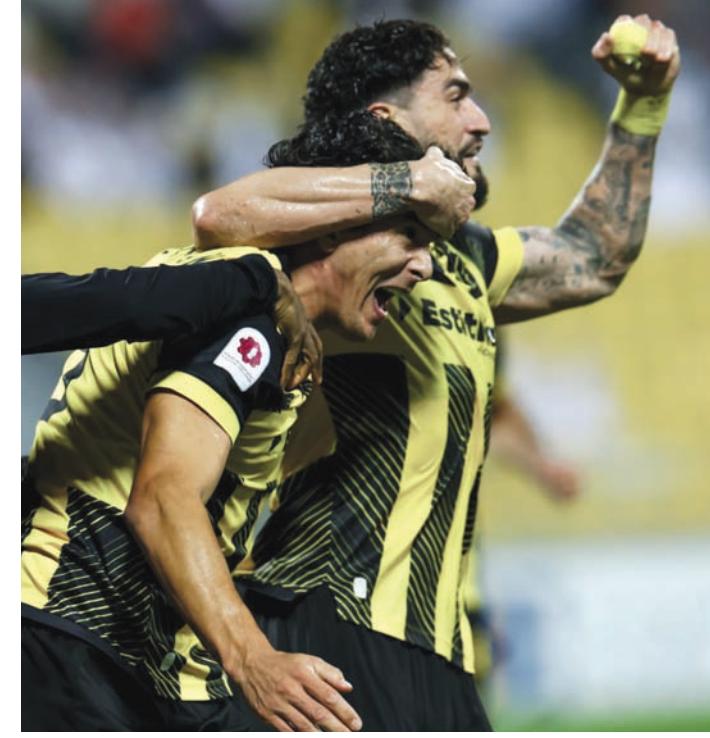
Behind Fleifel, the Lebanese duo of Charbel Chebly and Carlos Hanna were 13th overall and third in MERC2, just five seconds behind the Jordanians, until they suffered electrical issues before the start of stage six and retired. Oman's Zakaria al-Aamri and Mohamed al-Mazrui moved up to third in the class.

Nineteen of the original 23 starters completed the leg. Six further special stages are planned for today before the rally reaches a conclusion with the ceremonial finish at Lusail. An opening run through the slightly modified Umm Birka special (22.98km) gets the day's action underway and is followed by the first passes through Ras Laffan (16.73km) and a revised Al Thakhira (15.28km) speed test.

Another return to the service park in Lusail precedes the repeat runs of the three specials. The second pass through Al Thakhira will also act as the Power Stage, with additional bonus points available for the five fastest drivers.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Rayyan score twice in stoppage time to rescue point against Qatar SC



Qatar SC's Sebastian Soria (left) celebrates with teammate Joao Pedro after scoring against Al Rayyan at Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium.

By Sports Reporter

Doha

Al Rayyan staged a dramatic late comeback from two goals down to secure a thrilling 3-3 draw against Qatar SC in the Qatar Stars League at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.

Qatar SC looked set for victory after taking a 3-1 lead late in the match, but Al Rayyan struck twice in stoppage time to salvage a point.

Serbian striker Aleksandar Mitrovic reduced the deficit with a header in the sixth minute of added time (90+6), before Spanish forward Rodrigo Moreno completed the comeback with an equaliser three minutes later (90+9).

Al Rayyan had earlier taken the lead in the 21st minute when Brazilian striker Roger Guedes scored from a direct free-kick.

Qatar SC responded quickly, with their Tunisian defender levelling in the 24th minute after capitalising on a loose ball from close range.

The visitors then moved ahead in first-half stoppage time (45+3) through Brazilian striker Joao Pedro, who fired home from inside the penalty area, and veteran striker Sebastian Soria added a

third in the 88th minute with a low finish.

The result lifted Al Rayyan to 24 points in fourth place, while Qatar SC moved to 21 points in seventh.

Earlier, Al Wakrah secured a dramatic 3-2 victory over Al Ahli at the Saud bin Abdulrahman Stadium. Ahmed al-Mawla gave Al Ahli the lead after 20 minutes before Ayoub Assal equalised for Al Wakrah just before the break to make it 1-1 at half-time. Lucas Mendes put Al Wakrah ahead midway through the second half, but Omar Sekou restored parity for Al Ahli with a header soon after.

With the match heading towards a draw, Egyptian international Hamdi Fathi scored a stoppage-time header to seal a dramatic win and three valuable points for Al Wakrah. The victory lifted Al Wakrah to 22 points in sixth place, while Al Ahli remained on 15 points in tenth after suffering their third consecutive defeat.

With seven rounds to go in the campaign, defending champions Al Sadd lead the table with 32 points from 15 matches, one ahead of Al Gharafa, while Al Shamal sit third on 28. Al Rayyan and Al Arabi complete the top five. At the bottom, Umm Salal are second from last with 12 points, with Al Shahania rooted to the foot on 11.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arteta upbeat on Arsenal's title push but expects tough Sunderland challenge

Reuters
London

Arsenal have been plotting their Premier League title charge since before pre-season began, manager Mikel Arteta said yesterday as they prepare for a potentially pivotal clash against Sunderland that could extend their lead to nine points.

After three straight runners-up finishes, Arteta said he believed before the season began that Arsenal could end their title drought, with the London side now six points clear of Manchester City. Chasing their first league title since 2003-04, Arteta said the squad had stayed united and blocked out the noise surrounding the pressure of the title race, taking things day by day.

"Before pre-season started, we started to prepare everything with the intention to be where we are and make sure the players are convinced we're going to achieve it," Arteta said. "Then go day by day, that's it... I don't like comparing (to his previous squads). It's an amazing group and they're doing an incredible job so far. We are very excited and privileged to have each other. We are going to enjoy it until the last day of the season."

But first, Arsenal must navigate what Arteta expects to be a stern test against a Sunderland side that sit eighth in the standings after gaining promotion to the top flight last season. Regis Le Bris's Sunderland have held Arsenal, City and champions Liverpool to draws this season while also remaining unbeaten at home in 12 matches.

"We do what we have to do. It's going to be a really tough match. They've been in an incredible run all season. We know the complexity of the match," Arteta said ahead of today's home game. "They are extremely competitive, really well-coached. They have really good individuals and a very clear identity of what they want to do and where they want to take the game,



and they're very good at it. You can see the results they've had against the top sides, so we know what to expect and we need to deliver that tomorrow."

Arteta said Bukayo Saka's hip was in better shape but that he was not yet ready to return. Skipper Martin Odegaard remains sidelined with a niggle while right back Jurrien Timber is ready to play. Arsenal are also without midfielder Mikel Merino - who faces months on

the sidelines after surgery on a foot fracture - a setback Arteta described as "a big blow".

MAN CITY BRACE FOR LIVERPOOL CHALLENGE

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola said mental strength separates elite players from the rest as his team prepares for a Premier League game against Liverpool, in what he described as one of the toughest away fixtures in football.

Ahead of tomorrow's trip to Anfield, City are six points behind title leaders Arsenal after failing to capitalise when the league leaders also dropped points in recent weeks.

City have only one win in their last six league games and Guardiola emphasised that raw talent alone does not cut it at the highest level, especially in the big games.

"I have tried to see how they have played lately. What we have to do, if we have to adjust something. But it is Anfield. The biggest stages and the biggest games always need big personalities," Guardiola said. "I have said many times, it's not about the skills of the players in the top leagues. In the top clubs the skills are there. I never know one player that is not good enough to play in the top clubs, it is how you behave. How you play in the latter stages of the biggest competitions is what defines you as a player. The mind of the players you have defines the big teams."

When asked if Anfield represents the ultimate test for visiting teams, the Spanish coach was unequivocal despite Liverpool's struggles this season. The reigning champions are sixth in the standings, eight points behind City with just one win in their last six games.

Guardiola refused to confirm if Erling Haaland would return to the starting lineup after coming off the bench in Wednesday's League Cup semi-final win over Newcastle United, while Bernardo Silva is also a doubt.

Haaland leads the league with 20 goals but the striker has not found the net in his last three league games.

PSG brace for tough run as 'strange' Marseille come to town

Paris: Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique expects his side to be pushed hard over the closing months of the Ligue 1 season, starting with tomorrow's visit of unpredictable arch-rivals Marseille.

European champions PSG have won their last six league games but face an unexpected title challenge from a dogged Lens, who are just two points back and reached the French Cup quarter-finals in midweek.

"It's a very hard league," said Luis Enrique after last week's 2-1 victory at Strasbourg, where PSG grabbed a late winner after being reduced to 10 men when Achraf Hakimi was sent off. "Lens deserve to be up there with us. It

will be difficult. Marseille and Lyon are improving as well. It's going to be a tough end to the season."

PSG had a rare week between games after their surprise exit in the domestic cup but must navigate a two-legged Champions League play-off with Monaco later in February for a place in the round of 16. Marseille seemed to be heading for the knockouts as well before an improbable turn of events sent them crashing out, provoking a furious reaction from supporters at Tuesday's French Cup tie.

After blowing a two-goal lead in a 2-2 draw at Paris FC last weekend, Marseille dispatched Rennes 3-0 to move on in the cup, but

disgruntled supporters unfurled a series of banners to voice their anger at the club's Champions League debacle.

"The fans are smarter and more knowledgeable than people think. They almost always tell the truth," said De Zerbi, after players and club officials met Monday with fan representatives still smarting from the disastrous 3-0 loss at Club Brugge. "They were disappointed about Brugge, and they're right - it's a match to be ashamed of. We have a team that gives you the impression of being very strong, so it's normal that there are expectations. Sometimes they're met, sometimes not. It's a strange team, hard to figure out."

added De Zerbi. "We're looking for a bit of continuity and consistency."

Marseille beat PSG 1-0 in September and nearly got the better of Luis Enrique's team again in last month's Champions Trophy in Kuwait, losing on penalties after conceding a stoppage-time equaliser in a 2-2 draw. PSG will be without the suspended Hakimi this weekend while winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia is an injury doubt, but Ze Derbi knows Marseille will have to be at their best to win.

"PSG are the strongest team in Europe," said De Zerbi. "I'm not saying that just because they won the last Champions League - I really believe it."