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TENNIS

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HH THE AMIR SWORD FESTIVAL

Dubawi Spectre digs deep to retain Sand Championship

Trainer al-Ghazali and jockey Casamento dominate card with treble and double on the second day

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Dubawi Spectre successfully defended the Thoroughbred Sand Championship Cup on the second day of the HH The Amir Sword Festival at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.

Just as he did last year, Mansoor bin Ebrahim al-Mahmoud-owned six-year-old bay gelding showed trademark determination in the concluding stages, digging deep to secure victory by ¾ of a length in the 1700m feature race of the day under the guidance of Marco Casamento, which gave trainer Jassim al-Ghazali, a treble on the card. The victory also gave Casamento a quick-fire double.

Phoebus set the pace for much of the contest, with Upton Park tracking closely in second throughout the early and middle stages. Nuvolari travelled in midfield before improving approaching the home turn to move into third, positioning himself to challenge as the tempo lifted.

Straightening for home, Nuvolari struck the front and engaged in a sustained duel with Dubawi Spectre, who responded gamely when asked for his effort. The pair drew clear of the remainder and battled stride for stride until inside the final 50m, where Dubawi Spectre dug deep to edge ahead and secure victory with authority.

Nuvolari, owned by Nibras Racing Syndicate and trained by Abdulla al-Mulla, raced midfield before pressing forward approaching the home turn, taking the lead on entering the straight and battling the winner all the way to the final 50m under Marco Ghiani to take second, finishing seven lengths ahead of Upton Park.

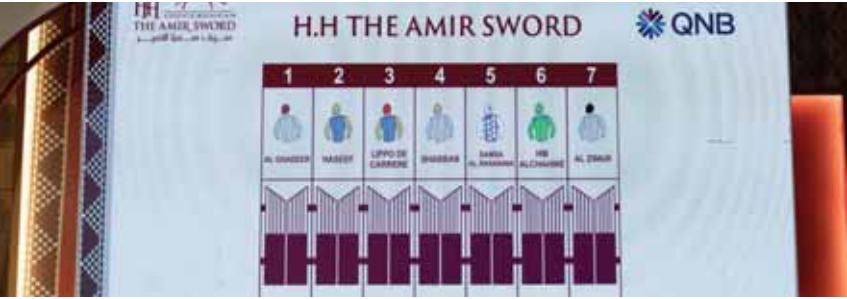
The latter, representing Mohammed Abdulhadi al-Hajri and prepared by Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, raced prominently in second throughout behind the long-time leader before finishing best of the rest under Tomas Lukasek, though well adrift of the first two. Ahmed Amanalla al-Sheebani, QREC Deputy CEO, awarded the winners.

In the penultimate race of the day, Mared Al Jasra timed his challenge to perfection to win the Purebred Arabian Sand Championship Cup for four-year-olds and upwards over 1700m, Class 2, contested by seven runners. The six-year-old grey, racing for Al Ghazali Stud and trained by al-Ghazali, tracked the pace throughout before wearing down the long-time leader in the closing strides to prevail by 1¼ lengths under Casamento.

Kamun Du Nil was quickly in stride and set the pace from the outset, maintain-



Connections of Dubawi Spectre celebrate after the six-year-old bay gelding's victory in the Thoroughbred Sand Championship Cup.



Draw for the HH The Amir Sword race is shown on the screen.

ing control through the early and middle stages with Mared Al Jasra shadowing him in second, always within striking distance. Burkan settled in fourth and travelled comfortably as the field remained compact approaching the home turn. Turning into the straight, Kamun Du Nil attempted to kick clear, but Mared Al Jasra began to close relentlessly. Inside the final strides he edged past the leader and asserted close home to secure a determined victory. Kamun Du Nil, owned by Mubarak Ali al-Nuaimi and trained by Hamad al-Jehani, led for much of the contest before being reeled in late, staying on under Pierre-Charles Boudot to take second, finishing half a length ahead of Burkan. The latter, representing Al Rabban Racing and prepared by Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, raced in fourth throughout before pressing hard in the home straight under Lukasek to secure third.

Earlier in the day, Mohammed Abdulhadi al-Hajri-owned and Hamad al-Jehani-trained Maysara defied the widest draw in stall 13 with emphatic authority in the 1200m contest for the Local Thoroughbred Sand Championship Cup. The striking six-year-old chestnut mare recorded her second straight win and a fourth success of the season. Making up ground with every stride in the home straight, she swept past the leaders before surging right away in dominant fashion to put the race beyond doubt by 5¾ lengths under jockey Pierre Charles Boudot.

Hay'er Al Shahania, in the colours of Mansoor Mesfer al-Shahwani, returned to winning ways in the Local Purebred Arabian Sand Championship Cup, the open 1200m contest. Building on his recent runner-up effort, the four-year-old grey colt ridden by Szczepan Mazur recorded a



Marco Casamento rides Dubawi Spectre to Thoroughbred Sand Championship Cup win on the second day of the HH The Amir Sword Festival at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaïm



Mared Al Jasra timed his challenge to perfection to win the Purebred Arabian Sand Championship Cup under jockey Marco Casamento.

third victory of the season. Always travelling strongly on the pace, he produced a mighty late effort, quickening decisively inside the final 300m and drawing clear with authority to score by 4½ lengths.

- RESULTS 49TH HH THE AMIR SWORD FESTIVAL - DAY 2**
- WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)**
- 1 - Thoroughbred Sand Championship Cup**
Dubawi Spectre, Jassim al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento
 - 2 - Purebred Arabian Sand Championship Cup**
Mared Al Jasra, Jassim al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento
 - 3 - Local Thoroughbred Sand Championship Cup**
Maysara, Hamad al-Jehani, Pierre

- Charles Boudot
- 4 - Local Purebred Arabian Sand Championship Cup**
Hay'er Al Shahania, Abdulla Mesfer al-Shahwani, Szczepan Mazur
- 5 - Thoroughbred Sand Championship Cup**
Calafiori, Mohammed al-Ghazali, Lukas Delozier
- 6 - Middle Distance Cup, Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (85-105)**
Za'er Al Shahania, Eng. Osama Omer al-Dafea, Maxime Guyon
- 7 - Sand Sprint Cup, Thoroughbred Handicap (85-105)**
Townsend Manor, Jassim al-Ghazali, Maxime Guyon
- 8 - Purebred Arabian Handicap Cup (70-90)**
Sha'alan, Mohammed al-Ghazali, Soufiane Saadi

FOOTBALL

Duhail and Wakrah ease into Amir Cup quarter-finals



Al Wakrah's Omar Salah (second left) celebrates with teammates after scoring the team's first goal against Al Saliya.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Duhail reached the Amir Cup quarter-finals with a 2-0 victory over Al Waab in their round of 16 clash at Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday. Al Wakrah also advanced after beating Al Saliya by the same scoreline.

Adel Boulbina put Al Duhail ahead from the penalty spot in the 28th minute, while Krzysztof Piatek sealed the win with a late strike in the 87th. Al Waab threatened early, with Ousseynou Gueye breaking into the area and forcing a save from goalkeeper Salah Zakaria in the seventh minute. The breakthrough came when Abdoulaye Bakayoko fouled inside the box, allowing Boulbina to convert from the spot and give Al Duhail a 1-0 lead at the break.

Al Waab came close to leveling after halftime, but Bahaa Faisal's powerful effort rattled the crossbar in the 52nd minute, as Al Duhail held firm before Piatek wrapped up the result late on.

"We went into the match determined to win and reach the quarter-finals, given the importance of this tournament," said Boulbina after



Al Duhail's Adel Boulbina (centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Al Waab yesterday.

the match. "In these games, the key is getting the result, and we did that. The season is still long, and our focus remains on the Amir Cup and the AFC Champions League."

Al Duhail will face the winners of the Al Arabi vs Al Shahania clash, scheduled for today at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium, in the quarter-finals. Al Shamal will take on Qatar SC at Grand Hamad Stadium in the other match today.

Meanwhile, second-half strikes from Omar Salah and Redouane Berkane secured Al Wakrah's 2-0 win against Al Saliya later in the evening. Salah capitalised on a defensive error to break the deadlock in the 58th minute, while Berkane sealed the victory five minutes before time.

Al Wakrah will now meet either Al Rayyan or Al Khor, who will face each other at Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium tomorrow.

- ROUND OF 16 FIXTURES**
- Today:** Al Shamal vs Qatar SC at Grand Hamad Stadium (4:30pm); Al Shahania vs Al Arabi at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium (7:15pm)
- Tomorrow:** Al Gharafa vs Al Kharaitiyat at Hamad Bin Khalifa Stadium (4:30pm); Al Rayyan vs Al Khor at Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium (7:15pm); Al Sadd vs Al Markhiya at Grand Hamad Stadium (7:15pm)
- On Sunday:** Al Ahli vs Umm Salal at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium (7:15pm)

MATCH REPORT

Hosts India thump Namibia ahead of Pakistan clash

‘Every game is important, we started a bit scratchy but we are on the road’

AFP
New Delhi

India tuned up for their blockbuster showdown with Pakistan at the T20 World Cup by hammering Namibia by 93 runs at New Delhi's Arun Jaitley Stadium yesterday.

With the high-octane game against their arch-rivals looming in Colombo on Sunday, Ishan Kishan got in the mood with 61 off just 24 balls in India's 209-9.

Namibia, who won the toss and chose to field, were bowled out for 116 as India matched Pakistan in making it two wins out of two in Group A.

“The Pakistan clash will be a special one for everyone,” Kishan told reporters. “Once we get there, we'll look at the wicket, have an idea of what will be a good total and we will play accordingly.”

Opening batsman Kishan was out for 20 just as he was getting going in India's first match against the USA, so was pleased to kick on this time. “Getting runs is always a good thing for batters. We have been doing well from the previous series as well, so all these matches that we played, there has been a lot of learning and confidence which we gained.”

Varun Chakravarthy put the squeeze on Namibia who started brightly to reach 67-1.

The spinner took 3-7 from his two overs as defending champions India made it 10 wins in a row in T20 World Cups. Chakravarthy struck with his first ball to remove Louren Steenkamp for 29 in the eighth over and took two more wickets in his second over as Namibia tumbled to 86-4.

Fellow spinner Axar Patel took two wickets with his left-arm spin, including Malan Kruger, for five, when Jasprit Bumrah took a high, diving catch at short fine-leg. Hardik Pandya grabbed two wickets in two balls near the end with his seam bowling, but the hat-trick was averted before the innings folded in 18.2 overs.

The Pakistan government late Tuesday reversed its order for the cricket team to boycott Sunday's match as a protest at Bangladesh being kicked out of the tournament.

India top the group from Pakistan on net run rate, and the winner of Sunday's clash will be assured of advancing to the Super Eight stage as one of the top two



India's Jasprit Bumrah (right) celebrates with teammate Hardik Pandya after taking the wicket of Namibia's Ruben Trumpelmann during the T20 Cricket World Cup group stage match in New Delhi yesterday. (AFP)

in the five-team group. For India, Sanju Samson struck 22 in eight balls and Kishan smacked left-arm pace bowler JJ Smit for four sixes and a four to raise his fifty off 20 balls.

India had raced to 100 in the seventh over when captain Gerhard Erasmus dismissed Kishan with the first ball of his spell before finishing with 4-20 from his four overs.

India had a mini-collapse from 104-1 to 124-4 before Pandya,

who hit 52, and Shivam Dube, who made 23, rebuilt the innings with a stand of 81 for the fifth wicket.

“Every game is important, we started a bit scratchy but we are on the road,” said India captain Suryakumar Yadav after a more convincing display than the opening 26-run victory over the United States.

All-rounder Pandya, who was named player of the match for his 52 runs off 28 balls and 2-21 from four overs, fell to off-spinner Er-

asmus just with substitute fielder Dylan Leicher taking a stunning grab in the deep.

He caught the ball on the run but flipped the ball up inside the playing area as he stepped over the ropes, before crossing back to complete the catch.

BRIEF SCORES: India 209 for 9 (Kishan 61, Hardik 52, Erasmus 4-20) **beat Namibia 116** (Steenkamp 29, Varun 3-7, Axar 2-20, Hardik 2-21) **by 93 runs.**

FOCUS

Mosca brothers shine as Italy crush Nepal for first World Cup win

AFP
Mumbai

Spinners Crishan Kalugamage and Ben Manenti helped debutants Italy to a historic first win at the cricket T20 World Cup with a 10-wicket hammering of Nepal yesterday.

Kalugamage (3-18) and Manenti (2-9) combined to bowl out Nepal for 123, a total Italy's openers overhauled with 44 balls to spare in their second match at Mumbai's Wankhede Stadium.

Brothers Justin Mosca, who made 60, and Anthony Mosca, who hit 62, tore into the opposition attack with fours and sixes to fire their team to a win.

A nation better known for its football, Italy are cricket minnows and the lowest-ranked side in the 20-team tournament.

They lost their opener to Scotland in Group C but bounced back. Nepal were a far cry from the team that ran England close on Sunday at the same venue as they collapsed from 93-3 to be bundled out in 19.3 overs.

“It's pretty extraordinary really. It's something a lot of people in Italy, a lot of people in this group, have dreamed of,” Italy's stand-in skipper Harry Manenti said.

“We didn't quite nail it the other day but we backed up to-

day and showed the world what we've got.”

Italy were without skipper Wayne Madsen, who dislocated his shoulder in the first loss, but came out roaring after they won the toss and elected to field first.

Leg-spinner Kalugamage sent back skipper Rohit Paudel for 23 and Manenti, who opened the bowling attack, took down Aasif Sheikh, for 20, with his off-spin.

“I always wanted to help the team to win a match and do my best for my nation, Italy -- I'm happy,” player of the match Kalugamage said. “These are my brothers. I'm really happy.”

Aarif Sheikh attempted to rebuild in 27 but Italy bowlers were unrelenting in their pursuit of wickets and the Nepal batting came crashing down.

“We need to be more consistent and today was the day to prove that, but not taking away the credit from Italy,” said Paudel. “They played really well today and credit must go to them.”

The Mosca brothers then struck eight fours and nine sixes between them to leave the Nepal bowlers in agony.

The win made Italy jump to third and England slip to fourth in the group led by the West Indies.

BRIEF SCORES: Italy 124 for 0 (A Mosca 62*, J Mosca 60*) **beat Nepal 123** (Kalugamage 3-18) **by 10 wickets.**



Italy's Anthony Mosca celebrates after winning the World Cup group stage match against Nepal at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Shanaka fireworks as Sri Lanka thrash Oman

AFP
Kandy

Dasun Shanaka hammered the fastest half-century by a Sri Lankan in T20Is as the co-hosts thrashed Oman by 105 runs at the World Cup yesterday in Pallekele for their second win in Group B.

The 2014 champions piled up 225-5, the highest total of the tournament, before restricting an outclassed Oman to 120-9.

The 43-year-old Mohammad Nadeem waged a lone battle for Oman, compiling an unbeaten 53 to become the oldest player to score a fifty in T20 World Cups.

Having promoted himself up the order and under pressure to deliver, Sri Lanka skipper Shanaka smashed a 19-ball half-century. It has been a bruising few months for the out-of-form Shanaka since reclaiming the captaincy late last year. But on a batting-friendly pitch he smacked the Oman bowlers to all corners of the park, peppering the stands with five sixes and two fours. Before that, Pavan Rathnayake and Kusal Mendis laid the foundation as the pair each posted fluent half-centuries, stitching together a 94-run stand for the third wicket.

“After the last game, the man-

ner in which I was dismissed, it was disappointing,” Rathnayake said.

“I wanted to make it count today, and glad I was able to score a half-century. Pallekele is always good for batting and I enjoyed the outing. More importantly, the team is one more step closer to the second round.”

Once the platform was set, Kamindu Mendis applied the finishing touches.

Fresh from his match-turning cameo in the win over Ireland, the left-hander scored an unbeaten 19 off just seven deliveries, striking one four and two sixes.

Oman were never really in the game as they fell to a second defeat at the tournament. Sri Lanka spinner Maheesh Theekshana shared the new ball with Dushmantha Chameera and they accounted for two wickets apiece.

“We are a better side than what we showed today,” said Nadeem.

“On this pitch we should have kept them for 180, but 225 was too much. We have had two bad games now and it feels disappointing.”

BRIEF SCORES: Sri Lanka 225 for 5 (Mendis 61, Rathnayake 60, Shanaka 50, Ramanandi 2-41) **beat Oman 120 for 9** (Mohammad Nadeem 53*, Theekshana 2-11, Chameera 2-19) **by 105 runs.**



Sri Lanka's captain Dasun Shanaka plays a shot during the World Cup group stage match against Oman at the Pallekele International Cricket Stadium in Kandy yesterday. (AFP)

Age just a number for record-breaking Oman veteran Kaleem

Oman's Aamir Kaleem has become the oldest player ever to play in a Twenty20 World Cup, but the 44-year-old veteran insists he's far from finished and is determined to keep pushing for his country's success. Kaleem achieved the milestone at 44 years and 81 days during Oman's eight-wicket loss to Zimbabwe on Monday in Sri Lanka, eclipsing former Hong Kong captain Ryan Campbell's record (44 years and 34 days) from the 2016 edition.

“Age is just a number because I can still compete at this level. I'm working very hard and the credit goes to my national team trainer and physio,” Kaleem told Reuters on a video call.

The all-rounder, who made his international debut in 2015, got a late entry to the World Cup squad, replacing injured fast bowler Hassnain Shah. After spending two to three years mainly on the sidelines, consistent domestic performances earned him his World Cup spot.

“I am still hungry (to play)... I'm a strong believer in keeping myself fit at this age and doing my process,” he said. While Oman boast experience with Mohammad Nadeem (43) as the tournament's second-oldest player, Kaleem believes associate nations need more exposure against the full-member nations.

Last year, Oman played only two T20 games against the test-playing teams India and Pakistan out of 15 matches.

“We are lacking the experience of playing at the highest levels. All the associate teams have very good talent, but the only thing we are not getting are the regular opportunities to play against the test nations or in such tournaments,” Kaleem said.

“In this World Cup, we saw England v Nepal and the Netherlands v Pakistan and it was exciting to see how the associate teams were giving a tough time to the test teams. I think ICC has to look forward to giving more opportunities in the future.”

Despite being winless in a challenging group with full-member nations, including former champions Australia and Sri Lanka, Kaleem remains confident that his side will grow in the coming matches.

“We're playing too many rash shots, which are not needed in a power play... but in the coming matches, we'll definitely apply ourselves to spend more time (on the pitch) and take the team longer. Next game, you will see a different Oman team,” he said. Oman suffered a 105-run loss to Sri Lanka yesterday and are set to play Ireland tomorrow.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Tuchel extends England contract until Euro 2028

HEAD COACH’S DEAL WAS DUE TO FINISH AFTER WORLD CUP

AFP
London

England manager **Thomas Tuchel** signed a new contract on Thursday that will see him remain head coach of the team till the end of Euro 2028.

The German was confirmed as the successor to Gareth Southgate in October 2024 and has overseen an unbeaten qualification run to this year’s World Cup in North America, with England winning all eight group games.

“I am very happy and proud to extend my time with England,” said the 52-year-old former Chelsea manager in an FA statement.

“It is no secret to anyone that I have loved every minute so far of working with my players and coaches, and I cannot wait to lead them to the World Cup.

“It is an incredible opportunity and we are going to do our very best to make the country proud,” added Tuchel, whose previous England deal ran only until the end of this year’s global showpiece.

The FA said that the new agreement with Tuchel would provide “clarity and full focus” amid speculation about his future after the World Cup.

However, FA chief executive Mark Bullingham explained there are “performance conditions” in the deal. “We tend to want to know where we are, to remove that uncertainty when you’re going into a tournament,” added Bullingham. “It gives everyone - the support team and the players - that certainty.”

Tuchel had been touted as a candidate to be the next perma-



nent Manchester United manager. But in signing a new England contract, Tuchel appears to have ruled himself out of a post-World Cup move to Old Trafford.

The FA added that Tuchel’s senior backroom team had all also agreed contract extensions through to the end of Euro 2028.

“I have had so much support from Mark, all my colleagues at the FA and from fans wherever I go that I did not hesitate when asked to continue in this dream job,” added Tuchel. Extending his contract ahead of this year’s World Cup is a clear sign of the FA’s confidence in Tuchel, who is aiming to guide the England men’s team to their first major trophy in six

decades. “He was the right person for the job when he joined us for the World Cup campaign, and has only strengthened his reputation across the qualifiers...There is simply no better candidate available in world football,” said Bullingham.

Tuchel, due to attend the Nations League draw in Brussels on Thursday, said in his first interview after succeeding Southgate that he wanted to add a “second star” to the England shirt by winning the 2026 World Cup.

The only major international tournament won by the England men’s team was when they triumphed on home soil at the 1966 World Cup, defeating the then

West Germany in a Wembley final.

But they twice came close to ending that barren run under Southgate, losing in both the Euro 2020 and 2024 finals.

Tuchel’s England team eased through qualification, winning all eight matches in a group which also featured Albania, Serbia, Latvia and Andorra. They will face Croatia, Ghana and Panama in their World Cup group.

But tougher tests could await in the knockout stages with co-hosts Mexico in line to face England on home ground in the last 16 should Tuchel’s men top their group, with a possible quarter-final against five-time world champions Brazil to follow.

FOCUS

Dyche sacked by Forest after dismal Wolves draw

AFP
London

Nottingham Forest sacked manager **Sean Dyche** after a dismal home draw with Wolves left them hovering three points above the Premier League relegation zone.

Forest are now looking for a fourth manager this season following Dyche’s dismissal after less than four months in charge.

“Nottingham Forest Football Club can confirm that Sean Dyche has been relieved of his duties as head coach,” the club said in a statement on X.

“We would like to thank Sean and his staff for their efforts during their time at the club and we wish them the best of luck for the future.”

Forest’s 0-0 draw with bottom club Wolves left them in severe relegation danger and Dyche’s team were booed off at the final whistle at the City Ground.

Speaking after Wednesday’s stalemate, a gloomy Dyche acknowledged his job was in peril, and that volatile owner Evangelos Marinakis could well decide to swing the axe. Marinakis has already sacked Nuno Espirito Santo and Ange Postecoglou this season, and his patience once again wore thin after Forest drew

a blank despite having 35 shots.

The 54-year-old Dyche, who was previously in charge at Everton and Burnley, said he was a “realist” about his precarious situation and spoke like a manager resigned to his fate.

“The owner has been fair to me, without a shadow of a doubt,” he said. “If anyone chooses to change in football now, that’s their decision. We’ve all seen it,” he added, hours after Tottenham sacked Thomas Frank as their manager.

“If the owner wants to make a change, then that’s up to him, and that’s the way football is now, that’s just the reality of it.

“He’s been absolutely fair with me from the beginning to the end, and I’ve been fair with him and told him the truth every step of the way.”

Forest thrived under Nuno last season, securing a place in the Europa League, but the Portuguese coach was dismissed after falling out with Marinakis over transfers. Postecoglou’s reign was short-lived, gone after just 39 days. Dyche hardly fared much better, lasting just 114 days. Marinakis has time to choose yet another manager.

Forest travel to Turkey to play Fenerbahce in the Europa League on February 19, before facing Liverpool at home three days later.



SPOTLIGHT

England, Spain drawn together in UEFA Nations League

AFP
Brussels

Spain and England will face each other in the next edition of the UEFA Nations League following yesterday’s draw, which also threw up a clash between France and Italy while Germany and the Netherlands will renew their rivalry. Spain, who beat England in the final of Euro 2024, won the Nations League in 2023 and lost last year’s final, on penalties, to Portugal.

They will come up against Thomas Tuchel’s England side in Group A3, with the Czech Republic and beaten 2023 finalists Croatia completing the section. The Nations League will be the focus for European international football for the year after the 2026 World Cup, before attention switches to Euro 2028 qualifying. Group matches, with everyone playing each other home and away, will take place between September and November this year.

The top two in each of the four groups in League A will advance to the quarter-finals in March 2027, the winners of which will progress to the four-team finals in June that year - likely to be hosted by one of the participating teams. Reigning Nations League champions Portugal, who also won the inaugural edition in 2019, are in Group A4 with Denmark, Norway and Wales. France, winners in 2021 and

semi-finalists last year, will take on Italy, Belgium and Turkey in Group A1. Germany, the Netherlands, Serbia and Greece make up Group A2.

DRAW
Group A 1: France, Italy, Belgium, Turkey
Group A 2: Germany, Netherlands, Serbia, Greece
Group A 3: Spain, Croatia, England, Czech Republic
Group A 4: Portugal, Denmark, Norway, Wales
Group B 1: Scotland, Switzerland, Slovenia, North Macedonia
Group B 2: Hungary, Ukraine, Georgia, Northern Ireland
Group B 3: Israel, Austria, Republic of Ireland, Kosovo
Group B 4: Poland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, Sweden
Group C 1: Albania, Finland, Belarus, San Marino
Group C 2: Montenegro, Armenia, Cyprus, Latvia/Gibraltar
Group C 3: Kazakhstan, Slovakia, Faroe Islands, Moldova
Group C 4: Iceland, Bulgaria, Estonia, Luxembourg/Malta
Group D 1: Gibraltar/Latvia, Malta/Luxembourg, Andorra
Group D 2: Lithuania, Azerbaijan, Liechtenstein - Latvia v Gibraltar and Luxembourg v Malta meet in two-legged play-off ties in March 2026 to decide their leagues.

BOTTOMLINE

Guardiola eyes rest for ‘exhausted’ Man City stars

AFP
Manchester

Pep Guardiola is hoping two rare free midweeks will refresh his “exhausted” Manchester City squad for the Premier League title run-in after beating Fulham 3-0 on Wednesday.

City cut the gap on leaders Arsenal to three points ahead of the Gunners’ trip to Brentford.

Antoine Semenyo, Nico O’Reilly and Erling Haaland struck in 15 first-half minutes as City built on the momentum gained from a dramatic late fightback to win at Liverpool on Sunday.

“One of the best (performances)

of the season, especially after Anfield for our experience there, in an important, emotional game,” said Guardiola.

“The next one is always tricky. We were lucky we were home.”

Guardiola substituted Haaland at half-time and replaced Bernardo Silva and Rodri early in the second half.

City and are still involved in four competitions. But after the visit of League Two Salford in the FA Cup on Saturday, they have two free midweeks to prepare for Premier League games against Newcastle and Leeds before the end of the month.

“Bernardo was exhausted, Rodri was exhausted. He (Rodri) didn’t lose one ball and then in the sec-

ond half he lost 10 balls,” added Guardiola. “Now we have Salford then we need to not see each other and rest. We have an incredibly tough schedule, like Arsenal, and we will have a midweek off. It’s been so tough and with a lot of injuries. Salford and then we need two, three, four or five days off.”

Milner equals Premier League appearance record

Brighton midfielder James Milner equalled a Premier League record when he made his 653rd appearance in Wednesday’s 1-0 defeat against Aston Villa.

Milner’s milestone moment came when he was introduced as a substitute for Carlos Baleba in the first half at Villa Park.

The 40-year-old has drawn level with former Villa and Manchester City midfielder Gareth Barry for the most games played in the Premier League. Saluting Milner’s achievement, Brighton boss Fabian Hürzeler said: “It is a special night for James. It’s no coincidence that he’s still proving he can play in the Premier League.

“It’s a pleasure to work with him and have him in our squad as a player and role model.”

Milner’s landmark feat couldn’t stop spluttering Brighton suffering another defeat as Jack Hinshelwood’s 86th-minute own goal gifted the points to Villa. Of Milner’s 653 appearances, 435 have been starts and 218 from the bench.



Fulham’s Samuel Chukwueze (left) held off by Manchester City’s Bernardo Silva during the Premier League match at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Charles tops CSI5* class at Amir Sword Showjumping

Riding Casquo Blue, Charles produced a flawless double-clear round

By Sports Reporter

Doha

Britain's Harry Charles stole the spotlight with a razor-thin victory in the CSI5* 155cm Prix Hermes Sellier, the feature event on the second day of the HH The Amir's Sword Showjumping Championship at Al Shaqab after prevailing in a high-quality jump-off.

Riding Casquo Blue, Charles produced a flawless double-clear round in 37.74 seconds to edge Italy's Emanuele Gaudiano and Es-teban de Hus, who also jumped clear but finished just hundredths of a second slower in 37.77 seconds.

Belgium's Pieter Devos secured third place with Primo DV - recording the fastest jump-off time but incurring four faults after knocking a pole. Edwina Tops-Alexander finished fourth on Fellow Castelfield, while Khaled Almoby completed the top five aboard Qaparezzo-A.

Earlier in the CSI5* 1.45m Faults and Time class, France's Lara Tryba guided Flash de Talma to victory with a clear round in 62.41 seconds. Austria's Max Kuhner followed closely in second place on Eic Cornets Lady in 62.54 seconds, while Brazil's Marlon Modolo Zanotelli and Merciminka secured third in 63.56 seconds. Megane Moissonnier finished fourth on Kandoo Z and Kamal Abdullah Bahamdan rounded out the top five with Cascadello Boy RM. Belgium's Niels Bruynseels delivered the best national performance just outside the top five, finishing sixth with Chacco's Lando OL.

In the CSI3*-W 1.35m Special Two-Phase class, Kristen Vanderveen of the United States topped the podium with Bull Run's Mary in 31.06 seconds, ahead of Qatar's Ibrahim Yusuf al-Mahmoud on Perle Van Dorperheide and Saeed Hamad Juma with Wathnan Diesel in third.

Italy's Gaudiano returned to winning form in the CSI3*-W 1.45m Faults and Time class, partnering Diarouge Blue PS to a clear round in 62.02 seconds. Qatar's Faleh Suwead al-Ajami finished second aboard Wathnan Qapella, while Turkey's Hasan Senturk claimed third with Quinti Von Hof.

Egyptian riders dominated the CSI3*-W



Britain's Harry Charles in action with Casquo Blue on the second day of the HH The Amir's Sword Showjumping Championship at Al Shaqab



Harry Charles celebrates with the trophy after winning the CSI5* 155cm Prix Hermes Sellier class, ahead of Italy's Emanuele Gaudiano and Belgium's Pieter Devos.

1.30m class, with Ismail Osama El Borai winning on Incredible Z ahead of compatriot Abdallah Haitham on Consagros, while Saudi Arabia's Bader Alfard placed third with Kimberly. Saudi Arabia's Salem Balharith topped the CSI1* 1.20m class riding Lovina, narrowly ahead of Sheikh Fahad Jassim al-Thani on C-ara LU, with Khalid al-Hadi finishing third aboard Capoen. In the CSI1* 1.10m Special Two-Phase, Abdulaziz bin Jassim al-Thani claimed victory with Gabbana M ahead of Abdulla Ahmed al-Khulaifi and Quenta van de Corsendonksehoeve.

In the National Competition 80cm Optimum Time class, Meshael Mohammed al-Thani won with Malaga, followed by Jassim Saoud al-Darwish on Janne and Bahrain's Sultan Abdulaziz Mayoof al-Romaihi with Olissimo Van 'T Merelsnest.

The CDI1* Prix St-Georges dressage

competition saw Qatar's Jassim al-Kuwari take top honours with Jack Sparrow on a score of 71.275, ahead of Wejdan Majed al-Malki riding Faisao in second and Maryam Ahmad al-Boinin with Blue Hors Touch Of Olympic L in third.

Competition continues today with 10 rounds on the programme, including the feature CSI5* Grand Prix at 160cm with a jump-off for the prestigious Amir Sword. The €1.5mn Grand Prix stands as the championship's showpiece event and ranks among the most prestigious classes in global showjumping, attracting top-ranked riders from around the world and delivering elite-level competition. Today competitions will also be held for three CSI3*-W classes counting as World Cup qualifiers, two rounds for Junior and Youth riders, a national 80cm class, an international CDI dressage class.

Sheikh Joaan meets FEI President



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Olympic Council of Asia and President of the Qatar Olympic Committee, met with Ingmar De Vos, President of the Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI), who is currently visiting Doha. During the meeting, both sides reviewed areas of mutual cooperation and discussed ways to further develop equestrian sport, particularly with regard to organising international championships and exchanging expertise in technical and organisational aspects. The two sides also exchanged views on supporting the presence of equestrian sport at the continental and international levels, with a focus on enhancing the standard of competitions and expanding their participation within the global sporting calendar.

MOTORSPORT

Qatar's al-attiyah tops prologue at Jordan Baja

By Sports Reporter

Aqaba, Jordan

A flying Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah topped the time on the 12.78km Aseza Prologue stage that kicked started the weekend's off-road action at the Jordan Baja. The short desert stage was held near the village of Rahmeh to the north of Aqaba and determined the starting order for the first of the stages through Wadi Rum today.

Al-Attiyah had initially entered the event with Fabian Lurquin but Max Delfino returned as his navigator for a second time in an MD Optimus Buggy. The Qatari stormed to the quickest time in the car category by 36 seconds.

Toyota Gazoo Racing's Saoud Variawa is competing in Jordan for the first time with French navigator Francois Cazalet. The South African was second quickest.

Defending regional Baja champion Dania Akeel was the first into the stage in her Toyota Hilux and carded the target time of 9min 57.1sec. That put the Saudi down in seventh position.

Fellow Saudi Arabian driver Yassir Seaidan was the man to beat in the Challenger category. The Taurus Evo Max driver was fourth quickest overall and 9.6 seconds ahead of World Baja Cup runner Abdulaziz al-Kuwari. Omani veteran Hamed al-Wahaibi began his weekend's challenge strongly with third in Challenger but Abdullah al-Fahad stopped in the stage.

Al-Kuwari added: "It was complicated and very difficult to drive. The navigation was tough. From the start we saw many cars had lost the way and came back. We didn't lose the road but we started behind



the T2 cars and, many parts, we were driving in the dust. We took the full points in Challenger in the World Cup. That was good for us."

Qatar's Abdullah Al-Rabban (Nissan) got the better of his four rivals in the Stock category for series-production cross-country vehicles and was quickest from Abdullah al-Shegawi (Toyota) and Nissan rivals Al Mashna al-Sham-meri, Majed al-Thunayyan and Ahmad al-Muhannadi.

FIM Bajas World Cup leader Alex McInnes was the quickest rider on the Prologue with a time of 11min 19.7sec but several of his rivals played the tactical game. While Marcin Talaga was his closest challenger in the stage, MX Ride Dubai's defending champion Mohammed al-Balooshi was down in ninth position and Rafic Eid was fifth. Today, competitors head into the depths of Wadi Rum for a special stage of 225.71km that starts and finishes in Humaymeh, an ancient trading post in southern Jordan that was founded by the Nabataean king Aretas III in the first century BC.

TENNIS

Swiatek, Rybakina dumped out by Sakkari, Mboko at Qatar Open

AFP

Doha

World number two Iga Swiatek and Australian Open champion Elena Rybakina both crashed out of the Qatar Open on Thursday losing their quarter-finals to Maria Sakkari and Victoria Mboko respectively.

Top seed Swiatek fell short against a revitalised Sakkari who rolled back the years as she clawed her way to a nervy 2-6, 6-4, 7-5 victory while 10th seed Mboko out-muscled Rybakina 7-5, 4-6, 6-4.

"It's been a while since I had a big win like today," said Sakkari, who reached No. 3 in the rankings in 2022 but has slipped to 52nd. "When you drop in the rankings and you're not playing good tennis you start doubting yourself and you think you are never going to beat those players again. So it's a huge process you have to go through in your head that you can do it."

The 30-year-old Greek won her first three career meetings with the young Swiatek but the last of those victories came in 2021. The Pole had won their last four matches, the most recent in straight sets in Qatar last year. "Last year in the second round here against her, I was not confident, I was not believing in myself and this year it's different. I feel a lot better," said Sakkari who will now face either 14th seeded Czech Karolina Muchova or



Tenth seed Victoria Mboko outmuscled Australian Open champion Elena Rybakina 7-5, 4-6, 6-4 at the Qatar Open. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil

unseeded Russian Anna Kalinskaya. "I've missed that feeling of going deep into tournaments."

Swiatek, who won the Qatar tournament, a WTA 1000 event, in 2022, 2023 and 2024, started as if she would repeat last year's rout when she broke twice in the first set. Sakkari began to fight back in the last game, but Swiatek saved a break point to seal the set.

Sakkari continued her upswing by breaking in the second game of the sec-

ond set. Yet every time she gained an edge, Swiatek responded. The Pole broke in the seventh game, but Sakkari steadied and broke in the tenth game to take the set.

It was the first time in their seven meetings that a match between the pair had gone to a third set. In a see-saw deciding set, Swiatek saved a match point on her serve before Sakkari held to love, the Greek going on to win in the next game, on her third match point.

The match lasted one minute under



Maria Sakkari clawed her way to a nervy 2-6, 6-4, 7-5 victory over Iga Swiatek.

two-and-a-half hours and was followed by an equally gripping contest as Mboko underlined her growing reputation in a contest that was just six minutes shorter. Mboko, who had already defeated Rybakina in last year's Montreal semifinals, managed to break the Kazakh's serve three times in the opening set alone.

On the flip side she lost her own twice but that was still enough for her to take the first set 7-5. She dropped her serve twice

again in the second set, which Rybakina won 6-4. But the 19-year-old Canadian had the last word in the final set, winning it 6-4.

Mboko, who was swept aside by world No. 1 Aryna Sabalenka in the round of 16 in Melbourne, will face last year's runner-up, Jelena Ostapenko in the Doha semifinals. The Latvian, who won the French Open in 2017, advanced by beating the Italian Elisabetta Cocciaretto 7-5, 6-4.