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Farhan hits century as Pakistan reach Super Eights



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Woods won't rule out Masters participation in April

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TENNIS

# Sinner sees off Popyrin to reach Qatar quarter-finals

Tsitsipas crushes Medvedev in straight sets, Lehecka advances



Italy's Jannik Sinner, the second seed, serves against Australia's Alexei Popyrin during their singles match at the Qatar Open in Doha yesterday.

PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil



Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas plays a forehand against Russia's Daniil Medvedev in Doha yesterday. Tsitsipas won 6-3, 6-4.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Jannik Sinner of Italy yesterday produced a commanding show of aggressive tennis as he beat Alexei Popyrin of Australia in straight sets to book his place in the quarter-finals of the Qatar ExxonMobil Open.

In his second appearance since a semi-final run at the Australian Open, the Italian top seed displayed little rust, easing past the Australian 6-3, 7-5.

The victory inches Sinner closer to a highly anticipated potential final showdown against arch-rival and world number one Carlos Alcaraz.

Sinner yesterday was clinical on serve throughout the contest, offering Popyrin - ranked world number 53 - no break-point opportunities.

He set the tone early in the first set, dropping just three points on his own delivery and securing the decisive break in the sixth game.

While Popyrin offered stiffer resistance in the second set, looking to force a tie-break, Sinner's pressure eventually told. The Italian broke at 5-5 before calmly serving out the match to seal the victory.

Sinner is competing in his first tournament since his five-set semi-final defeat to Novak Djokovic at the Australian Open and is targeting a third straight ATP 500 title after lifting trophies in Beijing and Vienna in October.

"I respect every player, but I always try to play my best tennis," Sinner said post-match, addressing his dominance over opponents out-

side the Top 50. "The ranking, at the end of the day, is just a number. Everyone is playing with high quality. Especially when the opponents don't have much to lose, you always have to stay very focused."

Popyrin, who claimed his first tour-level victory since the US Open in August by defeating home wild card Mubarak Shannan Zayid of Qatar in the opening round, showed no signs of a man lacking confidence.

Although he fired 16 total winners and thrilled the crowd in a tightly contested set, Sinner kept his composure to advance on debut in Doha.

"I feel like I started off very well in the first set, not so many problems with my service games," said Sinner, who did not face a break point, according to Infosys ATP Stats.

"But after I struggled a bit. I felt like he raised his level and I lost a bit of rhythm and confidence. I just tried to dig deep... I'm very happy. You have to find different ways to win matches," he added.

Sinner must negotiate a last-eight meeting with sixth seed and 2024 finalist Mensik, who advanced with a 6-3, 6-2 win over Zhang Zhizhen yesterday.

The 20-year-old continues his upward surge after winning the Brisbane title in January, climbing three spots to No. 13 in the PIF ATP Live Rankings - surpassing his previous career high of No. 16.

Elsewhere in Sinner's section of the draw are Jiri Lehecka and Arthur Fils, who both advanced yesterday to set a quarter-final meeting in Doha.

Lehecka, who last year beat Alcaraz en route

## WORLD NUMBER ONE ALCARAZ FIGHTS BACK FOR WIN AGAINST ROYER



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz in action during his round of 16 match against France's Valentin Royer in Doha yesterday.

Carlos Alcaraz roused a big finish to secure progress in straight sets yesterday at the Qatar ExxonMobil Open in Doha.

The No. 1 player in the PIF ATP Rankings overcame Valentin Royer 6-2, 7-5 to seal his quarter-final spot at the hard-court ATP 500.

Alcaraz reeled off five consecutive games from 2-5 in the second set, raising his level in typically classy fashion to round out a 96-minute second-round triumph.

Now on a nine-match winning streak after backing up his Australian Open title run by reaching the quarter-finals in Doha, Alcaraz will today take on Karen Khachanov for a last-four spot in the week-long tournament. The seventh-seeded Khachanov, who downed Marton Fucsovics 6-2, 4-6, 6-4 earlier on Wednesday, was the 2024 champion in the Qatari capital.

Despite defeat, World No. 60 Royer will have plenty of positives to take from his maiden Lexus ATP Head2Head clash with Alcaraz. The 24-year-old Frenchman showed few nerves as he moved within a game of the second set, but he was unable to counter Alcaraz's late charge.

to the semi-finals, eased past Zizou Bergs 6-2, 6-1, while Fils prevailed 6-1, 7-6(7) over countryman Quentin Halys.

Sinner advances to face Jakub Mensik in today's quarter-finals as he continues his bid for the title in Doha.

FOOTBALL

## All World Cup matches sold out: Infantino

AFP  
Washington

All 104 matches of the 2026 World Cup will be "sold out," FIFA president Gianni Infantino said yesterday, even though tickets are still available ahead of the tournament's June 11 kickoff.

"The demand is there. Every match is sold out," Infantino told CNBC.

Infantino, in an interview from President Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida, said that there had been 508mn ticket requests in four weeks for some seven million available tickets.

He said requests during the main sales phase in January came from more than 200 countries. "(We've) never see anything like that - incredible," said Infantino, adding that

football's global governing body has kept "some tickets back" for the last-minute sales phase that will begin in April and run until the end of the World Cup on July 19.

**Infantino estimated that the first 48-team World Cup would bring FIFA some \$11bn or more in revenue, adding that "every dollar" will be reinvested in football in FIFA's 211 member countries**

Infantino addressed the issue of ticket prices, described as "exorbitant" by supporters associations and which have already reached record levels on resale sites.

"I think it is because it's in America, Canada and Mexico," he said. "Everybody wants to be part of something special."

"Ticket prices have been fixed but you have, in the US in particular, something called dynamic prices, meaning the prices

will go up or down. You are able as well to resell your tickets on official platforms, secondary markets, so the prices as well will go up.

"That's part of the market we are in."

Infantino estimated that the first 48-team World Cup would bring FIFA some \$11bn or more in revenue, adding that "every dollar" will be reinvested in football in FIFA's 211 member countries.

He put the World Cup's impact on the US economy at around \$30bn "in terms of tourism, catering, security investments and so on."

Infantino estimated that in addition to seven million spectators, the World Cup would also attract 20 to 30mn tourists and create "185,000 full-time jobs."

"It's a big impact," he said. "I hope this impact will not just be limited to the World Cup but for the future as well."

## AL AHLI BEAT SEPAHAN



Action from Qatar side Al Ahli's AFC Champions League Two match against Iran's Foolad Mobarakeh Sepahan SC at Al Thumama Stadium in Doha yesterday. Al Ahli won 1-0 after a goal by Sekou Yansane.

## MATCH REPORT

# India tune up for Super Eights with hard-fought win

THE DUTCH FIGHT WELL TO LOSE BY SLIM MARGIN OF 17 RUNS

AFP  
Ahmedabad, India

Defending champions India beat a spirited Netherlands team by 17 runs yesterday ahead of their meeting with South Africa in the Super Eights of the T20 World Cup.

India posted 193-6 and then kept the Dutch down to 176-7 with spinner Varun Chakravathy returning figures of 3-14 in Ahmedabad to stay unbeaten in their four matches in Group A.

But a tough test awaits the co-hosts at the same venue on Sunday when they face South Africa, who emerged top of a potentially tricky Group D that had New Zealand and Afghanistan.

India finish top of their group ahead of arch-rivals Pakistan, but need to fix holes in their batting including the form of opener Abhishek Sharma, who fell for his third straight duck in the tournament. Abhishek was bowled on the third ball by off-spinner Aryan Dutt after India elected to bat first at the world's biggest cricket stadium.

India were teetering at 110-4 before Shivam Dube hit a counter-attacking 66 and put on a key stand of 76 with Hardik Pandya (30). Several batters got starts but failed to capitalise as Ishan Kishan fell for 18, Tilak Varma made 31 and skipper Suryakumar Yadav contributed 34.

Dube kept calm and hit a few lusty blows including two sixes and a four off off-spinner Colin Ackermann, reaching his fifty off 25 balls.

He and Pandya ensured India's innings finished strongly although both were dismissed in the final over at the 110,000-capacity stadium, which had a turnout of over 68,000 fans.

Dube, who hit four fours and six sixes in his 31-ball knock, was caught by substitute fielder Tim van der Gugten on the boundary rope, with Pandya picking out a fielder in the deep off the final delivery by Logan van Beek.

Dutt returned impressive figures of 2-19 from his four overs.

In reply, the Dutch openers started cautiously before Max O'Dowd fell bowled for 20 off Chakravathy and Pandya dismissed Michael Levitt, for 24.

Bas de Leede and Ackermann attempted to put the chase back on track in their stand of 43 but Chakravathy broke through



India's Shivam Dube plays a shot during the 2026 ICC T20 World Cup group stage match against Netherlands in Ahmedabad yesterday. (AFP)

with his mystery spin. He sent back Ackermann, for 23, and then bowled Dutt on the next ball, before the hat-trick was avoided by skipper Scott Edwards.

The ever-increasing run rate forced the Dutch to take risks and in the process lose their wickets as

De Leede (33) fell to Dube and Jasprit Bumrah took down Edwards. Zach Lion-Cachet (26) and Noah Croes, who made an unbeaten 25, hit regular boundaries in a desperate attempt to pull off a miracle but India had runs to play with and despite two dropped catches

in the last over won the match.

#### BRIEF SCORES

**India 193 for 6** (Dube 66, Suryakumar 34, van Beek 3-56, Dutt 2-19) **beat Netherlands 176 for 7** (de Leede 33, Varun 3-14, Dube 2-35) **by 17 runs**

## SPOTLIGHT

## Farhan's superb ton fires Pakistan into Super 8 with win over Namibia



Pakistan's Sahibzada Farhan celebrates after scoring a century during the T20 World Cup group stage match against Namibia in Colombo yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters  
Colombo

Pakistan became the final team to qualify for the Super Eight of the Twenty20 World Cup after Sahibzada Farhan's maiden international century powered them to a thumping 102-run victory over Namibia in Colombo yesterday.

Farhan remained unbeaten on exactly 100 off 58 balls, reaching his landmark in the final over as Pakistan posted 199 in their must-win Group A encounter at the Sinhalese Sports Club Ground.

Despite a slow start, the opener's explosive knock featured 11 boundaries and four sixes, with skipper Salman Agha contributing a useful 38 and Shadab Khan adding an unbeaten 36 that included two sixes in the final over of the innings.

"Early on the wicket wasn't that easy to bat on, I told (opener) Saim (Ayub) we'll take some time (to settle in) and I was confident that with time we could set a target," said Farhan, who was named the player of the match.

"The partnership with Shadab was important. The idea was to build a partnership and once the partnership gets going, I would take charge and Shadab can hit as well."

Namibia's chase never gained momentum despite a promising start from opener Louren Steenkamp, who raced to 23 before the African side began losing wickets at regular intervals.

Shadab (3-19) proved instrumental with the ball as well, dis-

missing skipper Gerhard Erasmus before having Alexander Busing-Volschenk stumped for 20 when the middle-order batter charged down the pitch as the required run rate mounted.

Spinner Usman Tariq cleaned up the tail and finished with career-best figures of 4-16 as Namibia were dismissed for 97, ending their World Cup campaign without a win to finish bottom of the group.

Pakistan skipper Salman Agha was beaming when he described the win as a "complete performance".

"We started really well and in the middle, we put partnerships on and then finished well," he said after the match.

"Sahibzada has been outstanding, the way he's been batting for us for the last six months. He scored a hundred today and I'm very happy for him.

"When it comes to bowling, we were lethal and we were ruthless. We bowled in the right areas."

All teams in the Super Eight have also secured automatic qualification for the next edition of the tournament in Australia and New Zealand in 2028.

#### T20 WORLD CUP SUPER EIGHT TEAMS

**Group A:** India, Pakistan  
**Group B:** Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe  
**Group C:** West Indies, England  
**Group D:** South Africa, New Zealand

#### BRIEF SCORES

**Pakistan 199 for 3** (Farhan 100\*, Agha 38, Brassell 2-38) **beat Namibia 97** (Steenkamp 23, Tariq 4-16, Shadab 3-19) **by 102 runs**

## BOTTOMLINE

## South Africa hammer UAE

Reuters  
New Delhi

South Africa made four changes yet scarcely missed a beat as they trounced the United Arab Emirates by six wickets in a Group D dead rubber of the Twenty20 World Cup at the Arun Jaitley Stadium yesterday.

Having already secured their place in the Super Eights with a hat-trick of victories, the 2024 runners-up treated the fixture as a tune-up and rested David Miller, Marco Jansen, Keshav Maharaj and Lungi Ngidi.

Yet, they hardly broke a sweat as they restricted UAE to a below-par 122-6 after electing to field under an overcast sky.

Dewald Brevis (36) and Ryan Rickelton (30) produced breezy cameos as South Africa reached the target in 13.2 overs, wrapping up their blemish-free group campaign with four wins from four.

"It was great to see the boys that came in and that have been working hard for an opportunity to grab that opportunity with both hands," South Africa captain Aiden Markram said. "I thought the bowling unit once again was really good in executing plans on that wicket. It gives confidence to us as a group to know that each guy in the 15 is in a good space."

Earlier, UAE opener Aryansh Sharma was on six when South Africa wicketkeeper Quinton de Kock spilled a skier but the reprieve proved brief. Left-arm spinner George Linde struck in his first over, removing Muhammad Waseem



South Africa's Corbin Bosch delivers a ball during the T20 World Cup group stage match against the United Arab Emirates in New Delhi yesterday. (AFP)

for 22 to open the gate and the powerplay tilted further when Corbin Bosch (3-12) bounced out Aryansh.

The seamer returned to land a major blow - prising out the in-form Sohaib Khan - to leave UAE 66-3 at the halfway mark.

Alishan Sharafu (45) was put through concussion protocols after being hit by a Bosch bouncer, which dislodged the neck protector of his helmet.

The batter gamely soldiered on to top-score

for his team but UAE could never really break the shackles. South Africa lost Markram and de Kock in the powerplay but Rickelton and Brevis scored briskly.

Neither could stay put until the end but South Africa's victory was swift and clinical.

#### BRIEF SCORES

**South Africa 123 for 4** (Brevis 36, Rickelton 30, Arfan 1-16) **beat UAE 122 for 6** (Sharafu 45, Bosch 3-12, Nortje 2-28) **by six wickets.**

### OUR GOAL? WIN WORLD CUP, SAYS SHADAB

**Colombo:** Shadab Khan said Pakistan believed they could go on and win the T20 World Cup after their best performance of the tournament secured the last Super Eights berth yesterday. Pakistan bowled out Namibia for 97 to win by a colossal 102 runs in Colombo and bounce back in style after a defeat to arch-rivals India had left them in danger of elimination. Pakistan rode on an undefeated maiden T20 international century by opener Sahibzada Farhan to post 199-3.

Spinners Usman Tariq and Shadab Khan then shared seven wickets to rout Namibia in 17.3 overs.

"We didn't take this game lightly after so much talk about one match against India," said Shadab, who scored a brisk 22-ball 36 and grabbed 3-19.

"We are on the right track to achieve the goal of winning the World Cup and we are following a process," he added.

Shadab warned that the Super

Eights, which Pakistan will begin with a match against New Zealand in Colombo on Saturday before facing England and co-hosts Sri Lanka next week, will be a step up.

"There are eight good teams so it will be a tough stage and all matches will be high-pressure games," said Shadab. Namibia captain Gerhard Erasmus admitted there were lessons to be learned as they head home after losing all four of their group matches. "I think for us, it's always about nailing those specialist positions," said Erasmus. "It has been a great learning experience and will help us in future."

Erasmus said Namibia were now looking forward to the ODI World Cup next year, which they will co-host with South Africa and Zimbabwe. "There is a lot of cricket around and lots of really exciting things happening in and around cricket in Namibia, which gives the boys a lot of pleasing things to play for."

GOLF

# Woods return timeline uncertain, but won't rule out Masters

AFP  
Los Angeles

**T**iger Woods says he has no timetable for a return to golf, but the 15-time major champion hasn't ruled out the 2026 Masters even as he ponders the over-50s Champions Tour.

Woods, who turned 50 on December 30, underwent disc replacement surgery in October, the latest in a series of operations and injuries that have kept him sidelined since the 2024 British Open.

"It's just one of those things where it's each and every day, I keep trying, I keep progressing," Woods said at The Riviera Country Club, where he hosts this week's PGA Tour Genesis Invitational.

"I keep working on it, trying to get stronger, trying to get more endurance in this body and try-

ing to get it at a level at which I can play at the highest level again," Woods said, adding that he has progressed from chipping and putting practice to hitting full shots.

"I'm able to," he said. "Not well every day, but I can hit them."

Despite the uncertainty, Woods said when asked that the Masters, April 9-12 at Augusta National, was not "off the table."

Woods has won five Masters titles, the most recent an epic 2019 victory that ended his 11-year major championship drought. He suffered severe leg injuries in a 2021 car crash but returned at the 2022 Masters and finished 47th.

The veteran superstar had a back operation in September 2024 and was rehabilitating from that setback when he announced in March of 2025 that he had suffered a ruptured Achilles tendon.

Woods said the Achilles injury



was no longer an issue, but the disc replacement - on top of multiple back surgeries over the years

- was proving challenging to come back from.

"I've had a fused back and now a

disc replacement, so it's challenging," he said. "And now I entered a new decade, so that number is starting to sink in and has us thinking about the opportunity to be able to play in a cart."

"That's something that, as I said, I won't do out here on this (PGA) tour because I don't believe in it. But on the Champions Tour, that's certainly that opportunity."

Even as he strives to ready himself for a return to competition, Woods said he has been devoting a tremendous amount of time as chair of the PGA Tour's Future Competition Committee created to help shape a new-look tour.

"I thought I spent a lot of hours practicing in my prime," Woods said. "It doesn't even compare to what we've done in the boardroom."

Woods said he hopes to see the PGA Tour implement a revamped schedule in 2027, although he ac-

knowledgeed it could take two years to roll out all of the changes.

He envisions a more streamlined schedule, with "more top players playing" - all in a system that still offers opportunities to young talent and keeps sponsors engaged.

The time-consuming work means Woods has yet to make up his mind about whether he'd be willing to captain the 2027 US Ryder Cup team, although he said the PGA of America had been in touch. "They have asked me for my input on it, and I haven't made my decision yet," he said.

"I'm trying to figure out what we're trying to do with our tour. That's been driving me hours upon hours every day and trying to figure out if I can actually do our team, our Team USA and our players and everyone that's going to be involved in the Ryder Cup, if I can do it justice with my time."

TENNIS

# Anisimova and Andreeva set up last eight clash

AUSTRALIAN OPEN CHAMPION AND TOP SEED RYBAKINA RETIRES

AFP  
Dubai

**E**lena Rybakina was the latest player to join the exodus at the Dubai Open yesterday as she retired from her match, while Amanda Anisimova and Mirra Andreeva both won to set up a quarter-final meeting.

Australian Open champion and top seed Rybakina was forced to call it a day in her last-16 match due to gastrointestinal issues at the start of the third set against Croatian lucky loser Antonia Ruzic. The Kazakh joins other high-profile players, including the world's top two Aryna Sabalenka and Iga Swiatek as well as Victoria Mboko and Barbora Krejčíková, in retiring or withdrawing from the WTA 1000 event.

Ruzic, who in the first round eliminated 2021 US Open winner Emma Raducanu, has reached the first WTA 1000 quarter-final of her career. "It was actually a crazy story that I got in as a lucky loser because I lost the first round of qualification," Ruzic said.

"A lot of girls had amazing runs from the lucky losers because you get a second chance so you have nothing to lose anymore. You can just show your best tennis. I'm happy with how I played today."

The 23-year-old world number 67 will face seventh seed Elina Svitolina for a spot in the last four after the Ukrainian beat Belinda Bencic 4-6, 6-1, 6-3.

Anisimova, the second seed, played her first match of the tournament after getting a bye through the first round and a walkover in the second as she beat Janice Tjen in straight sets to book a last eight spot. There she will meet defending champion Andreeva, who defeated Jaqueline Cristian 7-5, 6-3.

It was also the 18-year-old fifth seed's first match of her title defence after similarly receiving a bye and a walkover earlier in the week.



Amanda Anisimova of the US in action during her Dubai Open round of 16 match against Indonesia's Janice Tjen yesterday. (Reuters)

"Honestly, I feel my game was really far from perfect today," Andreeva said. "I was tense, I was nervous, I cared a lot about every single point that I was playing and sometimes I was really scared to miss."

"Tomorrow (Thursday) is probably going to be better, because I'm going to get into the rhythm... I'm looking forward to getting that revenge!"

Andreeva's only previous meeting with Anisimova ended in defeat in the Miami Open third round last year. Third seed Coco Gauff saved three match points as she fought back to win 2-6, 7-6 (11/9), 6-3 against Elise Mertens and will meet either Alexandra Eala or Sorana Cirstea in the next round. American Jessica Pegula eliminated her 18-year-old com-

patriot Iva Jovic 6-4, 6-2 and will next face Clara Tauson following the Dane's victory by the same scoreline against Magda Linette.

Meanwhile Paula Badosa lashed out yesterday at a "disrespectful" comment online and vowed to prolong her injury-hit career after a right thigh issue forced the former world number two to retire from her match at the already depleted tournament.

The Spaniard had worked her way back into the top 10 in the world last year with strong displays after a string of injuries, including a chronic back problem, left her contemplating early retirement in 2024. Badosa went up 4-1 against Elina Svitolina in her second round match in Dubai on Tuesday, but lost the next five

games and dropped the first set, before the 28-year-old called for treatment and then decided to throw in the towel. She later took to social media to hit back at an individual who said she disrespected the game. "You have no idea what it's like to live with a chronic injury and still choose to keep going," Badosa wrote.

"To wake up everyday not knowing how your body will respond, searching for solutions, and fighting for something you love and give everything even when it's so difficult."

Badosa said she faced "endless nightmares" while trying to find lasting solutions, but being able to step onto the tennis court was worth the trouble.

"So I'll keep trying," she said.

FOOTBALL

# Third Al Thumama Ramadan Tournament from tomorrow

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**T**he third edition of the Al Thumama Ramadan Football Tournament kicks off tomorrow evening at Al Furjan Stadium, continuing a community football tradition that has gained momentum over the past two years.

Organised in cooperation with the Qatar Sports for All Federation, the tournament targets young players aged 10 to 14 (born between 2012 and 2016) and has become a key Ramadan platform for nurturing grassroots talent in a competitive yet educational setting.

Chairman of the Organising Committee Hassan al-Ishaq, who also serves as a Municipal Council member, confirmed that all preparations have been finalised to deliver a smooth and successful third edition. He said the tournament continues to build on past achievements, with a focus on encouraging youth participation and promoting sportsmanship, discipline and teamwork.

Opening night will feature three matches starting at 8:00pm. Doha take on Turki Bin Abdullah in the first game, followed by Al Wajba against Al Zaeem. The evening concludes with Al Rayyan facing hosts Al Thumama. Three matches will be played daily throughout the tournament at Al Furjan Stadium.

This year's competition includes 13 teams divided into two groups. Group A features Doha, Turki Bin Abdullah, Al Wajba, Al Zaeem, Al Rayyan and Al Thumama. Group B includes Al Dafna, Al Shaab, Al Waab, Medical Care, Palestine, Abu Nakhla and Al Shahaniya.

Interest was high, with 39 teams applying to participate. After technical review, 26 teams were excluded for not meeting requirements, leaving 13 sides to compete.

Al Ishaq praised the strong community engagement and the federation's support, stressing that the tournament aims to strengthen community sport and make neighbourhood playgrounds safe, attractive spaces for children, in line with the country's broader vision of developing young sporting talent.



## Tiberi takes lead from Evenepoel

Italian Antonio Tiberi took the overall lead of the UAE Tour from Remco Evenepoel after winning the third stage yesterday. Bahrain Victorious rider Tiberi pipped Mexican Isaac del Toro by 15 seconds, with Belgian Lennert Van Eetvelt 29 seconds behind in third place. "This is amazing. It's a dream come true. I've been dreaming of this kind of victory since I turned pro," said the 24-year-old, who finished fifth on the 2024 Giro d'Italia but had never previously won a stage of a World Tour race. "I attacked and I managed to push as hard as possible till the finish. I was hearing that Del Toro was coming back really fast. Tiberi holds a 21-second lead in the general classification over Del Toro, with Colombian Harold Tejada 39 seconds further back in third place overall. Double Olympic champion Evenepoel lost the leader's red jersey after finishing more than two minutes behind Tiberi after a hilly 183km ride from Umm al Quwain to Jebel Mohrah. Today's 182km of racing is a sprint battle starting and finishing in Fujairah. The seventh and final stage takes place on Sunday.

FOCUS

# Qatar ExxonMobil Open 2026: Building on excellence and community

**T**he Qatar ExxonMobil Open 2026 returns to Doha for its second year as an ATP500 event, following its debut season's recognition as the ATP 500 'Tournament of the Year'.

This success reflects the strong partnership between ExxonMobil Qatar and the Qatar Tennis Federation (QTF), a relationship built on a shared vision to excellence and developing local talent.

ExxonMobil Qatar, the tournament's title sponsor, welcomed fans back to its popular stand at the heart of the Public Village. A major attraction each year, the booth offers interactive experiences, from a full-size racing simulator to sur-

prise meet-and-greets with top players making it a must-visit spot for fans of all ages.

These opportunities for autographs, photos, and personal interactions at the booth have created countless memories for attendees.

ExxonMobil Qatar extends the excitement to its own community. Employees enjoy the unique chance to take part in pre-match coin tosses, and young players gain inspiration from professionals during a special kids' clinic hosted by QTF.

"Our goal is to create meaningful connections with the community and celebrate the spirit of our collaboration," said Rashid al-Hajri, Vice President and Public

and Government Affairs Manager at ExxonMobil Qatar.

"These shared experiences are central to our partnership with QTF and the tournament's continued success."

The ExxonMobil booth also includes a dedicated space for Dadu, Qatar's Children's Museum. It is designed to give kids a fun place to learn about mangroves during the tournament, offering hands on activities that bring Dadu's educational experience straight to families attending the event.

As an industry leader in almost every aspect of the energy and petrochemical business, ExxonMobil's focus goes beyond core business operations to positively

impact communities where it operates. The company is dedicated to being a responsible corporate citizen, advancing industry solutions, and delivering energy to enhance livelihoods.

The company plays an active role in community development and education initiatives particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) as a key driver of economic growth and opportunity, aligning its efforts with Qatar National Vision 2030 and the Third National Development Strategy.

This commitment supports the creation of a skilled workforce that propels growth and opportunities for a sustainable future.



## CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# Doue inspires PSG to comeback win in Monaco

'I AM VERY PLEASED FOR HIM BECAUSE HE DESERVED IT'

AFP  
Monaco

Paris Saint-Germain recovered from a shambolic start as Desire Doue inspired a comeback from two goals down to beat Monaco 3-2 in the principality in the first leg of their Champions League knockout phase play-off tie on Tuesday.

United States star Folarin Balogun opened the scoring after just 55 seconds and found the net again on 18 minutes to put Monaco in control against their French Ligue 1 rivals at the Stade Louis II.

Vitinha then missed a chance for the reigning European champions to reduce the deficit when he had a penalty saved and last year's Ballon d'Or winner Ousmane Dembele came off injured before the half-hour mark, but his replacement Doue sparked the comeback.

He scored and then helped set up Achraf Hakimi for the equaliser just before the break, and Monaco then had Aleksandr Golovin sent off right at the start of the second half. Doue then got the winner on 67 minutes.

"He is an incredible player and a different player. I am very pleased for him because he deserved it," PSG coach Luis Enrique told broadcaster Canal Plus.

"There is pressure on us to win and we like that pressure, but there are difficult moments in games that are hard to overcome," he added. The result keeps the tie alive going into the return leg in Paris next Wednesday, but PSG are now strong favourites to seal a place in the last 16. They came into this game having been knocked off top spot in the French league last weekend following a defeat at Rennes, with Lens replacing them at the summit.

However, they are a huge 20



Paris Saint-Germain's Desire Doue (left) celebrates with teammates scoring his team's third goal during the UEFA Champions League knockout round play-off first leg match against Monaco at the Stade Louis II in the Principality of Monaco. (AFP)

points clear of Monaco, who find themselves languishing in eighth due to an inability to put together a consistent run of form.

Nevertheless, Monaco notably held Manchester City, Tottenham Hotspur and Juventus at home during the league phase in Europe and also won 1-0 at home to PSG in Ligue 1 in November.

This time they went in front as Balogun headed in from close range from a Golovin cross for the fastest goal ever conceded in a European tie by PSG.

Monaco were in dreamland as they doubled their advantage when Balogun played a quick one-two with Maghnes Akliouche before running through to finish past goalkeeper Matfei Safonov. A shock result appeared on the cards, with PSG's title seemingly very much on the line, all the more so when Vitinha's penalty was

saved by Philipp Koehn after Khvicha Kvaratskhelia was brought down by Wout Faes.

That was the fourth penalty out of their last five in the Champions League that PSG had failed to convert, and things got worse for them when Dembele - who had been a doubt pre-match and had an injury-hit season - had to come off. Yet his withdrawal really turned out to be a blessing, as Doue entered the fray and had a devastating impact.

The standout performer in PSG's 5-0 demolition of Inter Milan in last season's final had been on the field barely two minutes when he controlled Bradley Barcola's pass in the box before smashing a left-foot shot low into the far corner. The leveller then came four minutes from the interval when a Doue shot was parried by Koehn, with Hakimi controlling the loose

ball before applying the finish. Monaco's grip on the game was really gone within three minutes of the restart as Russian playmaker Golovin saw red following a VAR check for his challenge on Vitinha, granting PSG the extra man. The visitors took advantage as Warren Zaire-Emery laid the ball off for Doue to score his second of the night and make it 3-2 midway through the second half.

"I just did my job. We are pleased because the most important thing in games like these is just to win," Doue told Canal Plus.

PSG will hope to finish off the tie next week, with the winners facing either Barcelona or Chelsea in the next round.

It is a big ask now for Monaco, although they will likely be relieved to be heading to Paris with just a one-goal deficit after playing for so long with 10 men.

## FOCUS

## Gordon scores four as Newcastle hit Qarabag for six

AFP  
Baku

Anthony Gordon starred with a brilliant four-goal haul as Newcastle crushed Qarabag 6-1 in the first leg of their Champions League play-off tie yesterday.

Gordon stole the show by netting four times before half-time at the Tofiq Bahramov Republican Stadium. Malick Thiaw was also on target for Newcastle before the interval and Jacob Murphy netted after the break to complete the demolition.

Elvin Jafarguliyev's second-half reply was little consolation for Azerbaijani underdogs Qarabag, who paid the price for wretched defending in a miserable performance.

England forward Gordon has netted 14 times this season, including 10 in the Champions League, taking him past Alan Shearer as Newcastle's highest scorer in a single campaign in Europe's elite club competition.

Gordon's memorable night on the shores of the Caspian Sea ensured the second leg at St James' Park on February 24 should be a mere formality. Barring a miracle comeback from Qarabag, Eddie Howe's side will face Barcelona or Chelsea in the last 16. Having ended Newcastle's 70-year wait for a major domestic trophy by winning the League Cup last season, Howe set his sights on more history this week, admitting it would "mean everything" to steer them into the Champions League last 16 for the first time.

Howe's cherished target is now within touching distance.

Booted off less than two weeks ago after a defeat against Brentford, Newcastle made the 2,529-mile trip to Baku revitalised by successive away victories against Tottenham in the Premier League and Aston Villa in the FA Cup.

It was the longest journey any English team had ever made for a Champions League knockout game, but there was no sign of fatigue as Newcastle ripped Qarabag to shreds. Gordon started as Newcastle's central striker as Howe again deployed misfiring German forward Nick Woltemade in a deeper role.

Howe's decision to make Gordon the focal point of his attack paid off after just three minutes.

Dan Burn advanced from defence and played a perfect pass towards Gordon, who timed his run to beat the Qarabag offside



Newcastle United's Anthony Gordon celebrates scoring during the Champions League match against Qarabag in Baku yesterday. (AFP)

trap before planting a clinical finish into the far corner from 12 yards. Qarabag beat Benfica, Copenhagen and Eintracht Frankfurt and drew with Chelsea in the group stage.

Yet it was their 6-0 thrashing at Liverpool in the last game of the phase that proved more relevant as Newcastle doubled their advantage in the eighth minute. Kieran Trippier's pin-point cross picked out Thiaw and he guided a composed header past Mateusz Kochalski from close range. Newcastle were carving open the creaky Qarabag defence at will and their barrage brought a third goal in the 32nd minute.

Matheus Silva blocked Harvey Barnes' shot with his arm as he slid along the turf and Gordon stroked in the resulting penalty. Gordon bagged his third goal in predatory style just 60 seconds later, seizing on Kevin Medina's slip and rounding Kochalski to slot into the empty net.

It was Gordon's first professional hat-trick, making him only the third Newcastle player to score a Champions League treble after Shearer and Faustino Asprilla. Gordon's 33-minute haul was also the fastest Champions League hat-trick by an English player. The 24-year-old wasn't finished yet and his break into the area ended with Kochalski fouling him, conceding a penalty that Gordon converted with ease.

Jafarguliyev got one back in the 54th minute with a low drive that was initially disallowed for offside before VAR allowed the goal to stand.

Murphy notched his first goal in the Champions League in the 72nd minute, whipping a deflected strike past Kochalski to put the seal on Newcastle's perfect evening.

## O'Neill taken aback to reach 1,000 games as a manager

Celtic interim boss **Martin O'Neill** said he felt "real surprise" at being told he was going to take charge of his 1,000th game as a manager this week.

The Northern Irishman will reach the landmark when Celtic host Stuttgart in their Europa League play-off first leg today.

O'Neill, 73, is in his second spell as interim coach this season after being in charge of the Glasgow giants from 2000-2005. "It's a real surprise because I'd never counted the games, genuinely never," said O'Neill on Wednesday. "So when the LMA (League Managers Association) told me yesterday about it, it did come as a big surprise to me. It's nice to do, really pleasing but I have to thank Celtic, otherwise it wouldn't have happened."

Celtic are unbeaten since O'Neill took charge again following the sacking of Wilfried Nancy in January. They have since closed to within three points of Scottish Premiership leaders Hearts, with a game in hand, and reached the Europa League knock-out phase.

O'Neill, asked if he might extend his current Celtic stint beyond the end of this season, replied: "That's too far in the future for me, genuinely too far in the future."

Celtic are bidding to win a European knock-out tie for the first time since beating Barcelona in the 2003-04 UEFA Cup fourth round under O'Neill.

"This is a major test for us," said O'Neill of facing Stuttgart, who sit fourth in the Bundesliga. "If you'd been having a conversation with me

after Midtjylland (3-1 loss), you would have got long odds about being here this evening.

"We went to Feyenoord and got a great result (won 3-1) and fought with 10 men for about 60 minutes in the match against Bologna (2-2)."

"I didn't want those games to not count for something."



## BOTTOMLINE

# UEFA to investigate alleged racist abuse of Vinicius

AFP  
Paris

UEFA said yesterday it would "investigate allegations of discriminatory behaviour" after Real Madrid forward Vinicius Junior accused Benfica's Gianluca Prestianni of racially abusing him during a Champions League match in Lisbon.

Tuesday's first leg of the knockout phase play-off tie was stopped for 10 minutes after Vinicius complained to French referee Francois Letexier about the alleged abuse following a confrontation between him and Prestianni. That came just moments after Brazil international Vinicius scored the only goal in a 1-0 win before picking up a yellow card for his dancing celebration in front of the home crowd at the Estadio da Luz.

After arguing with Prestianni, Vinicius ran over to the referee and told him he had been called "mono", the Spanish word for monkey, by the Argentine mid-

fielder. The 20-year-old Prestianni, who covered his mouth with his shirt as he appeared to say something to Vinicius, denies racially abusing the Real Madrid star. Real's England full-back Trent Alexander-Arnold said the incident had left a sour taste in the mouth.

"It's disgusting. What's happened tonight is a disgrace for football. It's ruined the night for the team," he said. Real forward Kylian Mbappe called on Prestianni to be banned. "We cannot accept there's a player playing in Europe's best competition and behaving like this," the France captain told reporters. "This guy doesn't deserve to play in the Champions League again."

Benfica coach Jose Mourinho hit out at Vinicius for inciting Benfica's players and fans with his celebration. "When you score a goal like that, you celebrate in a respectful way," said the Portuguese. British football anti-discrimination body Kick It Out criticised Mourinho's reaction and accused him of "gaslighting".

"When anyone reports discrimination in football, or anywhere, the first priority is that they are listened to and feel supported," it said in a statement.

"Focusing on Vinicius Jr's goal celebration or the history of the club, instead of acknowledging the report, is a form of gaslighting."

"This approach not only harms the individual affected but also sends the wrong message to others around the world who may have experienced similar situations."

Benfica reiterated the club's backing for Prestianni and said it "regrets a smear campaign of which the player has been a victim".

FIFA president Gianni Infantino said he was "shocked and saddened" by the incident and praised the action taken by the referee, who initiated European football's anti-racism protocol.

"There is absolutely no room for racism in our sport and in society," Infantino wrote on Instagram. "We need all the relevant stakeholders to take action and hold those responsible to account."



Benfica's Gianluca Prestianni argues with Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior during the UEFA Champions League knockout round play-off first leg match at Estadio da Luz in Lisbon. (AFP)