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TENNIS

Alcaraz gets past Khachanov to enter Qatar Open semis

Top seed Spaniard will next face defending champion Rublev of Russia for a spot in the final



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz hits a return against Russia's Karen Khachanov during Qatar Open quarter-final. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil

Agencies
Doha

Carlos Alcaraz came from behind to beat Karen Khachanov 6-7 (3/7), 6-4, 6-3 yesterday and book his spot in the semi-finals of the Qatar Open.

Playing his first tournament since completing his career Grand Slam at the Australian Open earlier in February, Alcaraz will next face defending champion Andrey Rublev for a spot in the final in Doha.

World number two Jannik Sinner completes the last-eight line-up as he taking on sixth seed Jakub Mensik in a late night match. The winner of that match will play

Arthur Fils in the semi-finals, following the Frenchman's straight-sets victory over Jiri Lehecka.

Neither Alcaraz nor Khachanov was able to force a breakthrough on the other's serve at the start of their quarter-final clash as the first set rumbled towards a tie-break. Khachanov then raced into a 6-1 lead in the breaker before finally converting set-point at the third time of asking.

But seven-time Grand Slam winner Alcaraz forced his way back into the tie by breaking Khachanov to 15 in the fifth game of the second frame. Alcaraz repeated the trick by again pouncing on the Russian's serve at 2-2 to get his nose ahead in the third set.

The world number one then broke the

seventh seed in the ninth game to seal his spot in the last four in style. "It was a really close and tight match," said Alcaraz after improving to 6-0 in his head to head record with Khachanov. "In the first set I had a few break points and I couldn't make them. One set point and I couldn't make it, so it was really tough. I think Karen was playing great, but I knew I'd had my chances. I just didn't take them in the first set, so it was the time to keep going and try to keep fighting. Wait for my chances and try to take them in the second set. I'm just really proud about the way that I fought."

In the semis, Alcaraz will meet fifth seed Rublev after the Russian won his quarter-final encounter with former world number three Stefanos Tsitsipas 6-3, 7-6 (7/2).



Russia's Andrey Rublev beat Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas 6-3, 7-6 (7/2) in the quarters.

Rublev, champion in Doha in both 2020 and 2025, saved all five break points he faced against Tsitsipas in their first meeting since the 2022 ATP Finals, advancing in straight sets to stay on course for another title. Tsitsipas trailed early but raised his level in the second set, only to fall short in a tie-break.

The Russian dominated with his forehand, timing his strokes superbly and holding the upper hand in mid-range exchanges as most extended rallies went his way. The fifth seed struck a forehand winner in the third game and capitalised on a Tsitsipas double fault to secure an early break. Rublev consolidated the advantage with a smash winner in the following game before facing his toughest test on serve two games later, saving four break points - three with outright winners - to maintain control.

Tsitsipas held to love in the seventh game and applied pressure again on return,

but Rublev responded strongly, saving another break point with powerful smashes and a forehand winner before firing an ace for a 5-3 lead. Frustration mounted for the Greek after missing multiple chances, and Rublev sealed the set by breaking to love in game nine, finishing with a forehand return winner to take it 6-3 in 42 minutes.

Both players served efficiently in the second set. Tsitsipas held to love in the 10th game to level at 5-5 and later forced a tie-break after holding serve under pressure in the 12th game. Rublev quickly took control of the breaker, claiming two early points on return and moving 3-0 ahead with a volley winner.

A Tsitsipas forehand error handed the Russian another mini-break, and a brilliant return pushed the lead to 4-2. Rublev earned four match points with a service winner at 6-2 and converted the first with a smash winner to book his place in the semi-finals.

SPOTLIGHT

Brash and Tryba claim victories at CHI Al Shaqab

By Sports Reporter
Doha

British rider Scott Brash claimed the CSI5* - Faults & Time - 1.50m event honours as the 13th edition of CHI Al Shaqab swung into action at Al Shaqab on Wednesday evening. The event is the sixth leg of the Doha Equestrian Tour 2026 and boasts of a wide international field.

Brash excelled in the feature event of the opening day of the four-day championship riding his trusted mount Hello Jefferson, clocking the best time of 64.10secs. German Janne Friederike Meyer-Zimmermann on Iron Dames High Level was second (67.19secs). Brazil's Marlon Modolo Zanotelli on Charly Heart and France's Megane Moissonnier on Qoup de Coeur de Muze shared third place with 67.76 seconds.

France's Lara Tryba topped the CSI5* - Two Phases - 1.40m class astride Flash de Talma with flawless best times of 48.80 and 27.94secs. Qatar rider Salman Mohammed al-Emadi finished second riding Wathman Toblerone clocking 51.83 and 28.32secs in the two phases with clear rounds. Turkey's Hasan Senturk on Quinti Von Hof took the third podium spot (50.60 & 28.52secs).

The CSI3* - Two Phases - 1.40m class was claimed by Turkey's Hasan Senturk astride Diams Brimbelles Z clocking 50.28 and 27.37secs. Qatar's Sultan Salem al-Naemi came second on Energika des Neyes with 50.62 and 27.97secs while Austria's Max Kuhner was third riding Eic Up Too



British rider Scott Brash astride Hello Jefferson during the CSI5* - Faults & Time - 1.50m event of CHI Al Shaqab - the sixth leg of Doha Equestrian Tour 2026 - at Al Shaqab.

Jacco Blue (48.04 & 28.16secs).

Jordan's Ibarhim Hami Bishart topped the CSI* - Special Two-Phase - 1.35m event with Corona Irw in 334.89secs and 33.35secs. France's Jean Francois Rondoux on Inter-Larus was second - 37.83 and 35.43secs while Bahrain's Hussain Mohamed Dadalla finished third on Elite with times of 36.78 and 35.63secs.

The CSI1* - Faults & Time - 1.20m event was won by Saudi Arabia's Abdulrahman Almutawaa, who rode Inouie du Nenuphar, clocking the best time of 58.08secs.

His compatriot Abdullah Ibrahim Abdullah was second on F'Un Chassagne in 58.54secs while Egypt's Fatima Mohanad Alkishawi on Quintalou was third (58.96secs).

With a total prize purse exceeding €1.3mn, the championship features 303 riders and 469 horses representing 40 countries, competing in three Olympic disciplines: showjumping, dressage, and para-dressage. Mohammed Jaber al-Khayarin, Deputy Tournament Director, affirmed that the event continues to



France's Lara Tryba rides Flash de Talma on her way to winning the CSI5* 1.40m class.

solidify its position as one of the most prominent international events on the global equestrian calendar. "We are proud to launch a new edition of the Al Shaqab International Championship amidst this large international presence of riders and horses. This reflects the growing confidence in Qatari organization and Al Shaqab's ability to deliver a championship of the highest international standards. This year, we have ensured the highest levels of technical and logistical readiness to guarantee an outstanding competitive experience for all participants," he said.

Today's action will feature CSI5* - Faults & Time - 1.50m, the exciting CSI3* - Jump & Drive - 1.30m class, CSIch-B - 1.10 m - Jump Off - Group VII series qualifier, the CDI1* Intermediate I Freestyle - in dressage and the CDI5* Soundcheck, among more other categories.



Sheikh Talal bin Khalid al-Thani, Assistant Director of Doha Equestrian Tour 2026, honours Qatar rider Salman Mohammed al-Emadi, who finished second in the CSI5* - Two Phases - 1.40m class.

MATCH REPORT

Zimbabwe stun Sri Lanka ahead of Super Eights

'I am pretty excited with how we have gone about our business'

Reuters
Colombo

Zimbabwe fired a warning shot towards the heavyweights who have reached the Twenty20 World Cup Super Eight stage as they beat co-hosts Sri Lanka by six wickets to top Group B on Thursday, chasing down a target of 179 with three balls to spare.

Opener Brian Bennett scored an unbeaten 63 and captain Sikandar Raza made a quick 45 as Zimbabwe, who stunned Australia last week, handed Sri Lanka their first loss in the campaign, with both teams having already qualified for the Super Eights.

"I am pretty excited with how we have gone about our business," player of the match Raza said. "We are unbeaten so far... nice position to be in as a captain but I will try and enjoy at least tonight."

Zimbabwe won three of their four group games while Tuesday's match against Ireland was washed out, which meant Zimbabwe qualified for the Super Eights with Australia eliminated.

Sri Lanka, who ensured their qualification for the Super Eights with Monday's win over Australia, chose to bat first and posted 178-7, as opener Pathum Nissanka led with a knock of 62.

Two-wicket hauls by Blessing Muzarabani, Brad Evans and Graeme Cremer helped contain Sri Lanka to a competitive total in Colombo, before Bennett combined with Tadiwanashe Marumani (34) for a 69-run opening partnership to set the stage for the chase.

Raza hit four sixes and two boundaries to score 45 from 26 balls, leaving Zimbabwe 12 short with 10 balls left. Bennett scored the winning runs with a drive towards mid off, getting his team to 182-4. Zimbabwe, who did not qualify for the 2024 edition, are the only team in this year's Super Eights who reached the T20 World Cup through a continental tournament.

Sri Lanka face England, New Zealand and Pakistan in Group Two of the Super Eights, while Zimbabwe will be in Group One alongside holders India, South Africa and West Indies.

Zimbabwe will play West Indies on Monday, a day after Sri Lanka face England.

BRIEF SCORES: Zimbabwe 182 for 4 (Bennett 63*, Raza 45, Hemantha 2-36) **beat Sri Lanka 178 for 7** (Nissanka 62, Rathnayake 44, Cremer 2-27, Evans 2-35) **by six wickets.**



Zimbabwe's captain Sikandar Raza in action during the T20 World Cup group stage match against Sri Lanka at the R Premadasa Stadium in Colombo yesterday. (AFP)

FOCUS

West Indies ease past Italy to tune up for Super Eights

AFP
Kolkata

The West Indies tuned up for the T20 World Cup Super Eights in perfect fashion yesterday with a comfortable 42-run victory over Italy in their final group match in Kolkata.

After being asked to bat, the West Indies captain Shai Hope scored 75 off 46 balls with four sixes to help his side post 165-6 in the dead rubber Group C clash. They then easily defended the total by bowling out Italy for 123 off 18 overs. "I always try to contribute. Wicket was a good one; felt like I could've given the team more impetus at the death," said Hope, who was named player of the match.

Italy finished with one win in four matches at their debut World Cup, and Hope said it wasn't easy when his side did not know many of the opposition players.

"When you face unfamiliar opposition, you plan but are unsure. You are facing many bowlers for the first time," he said.

"They bowled well in patches, it was tough to score early on. You have to be ruthless early on."

Italy lost regular wickets and were always behind in their chase in the face of tight bowling by the West Indies.

JJ Smuts took 27 balls to score 24 as Italy failed to break the shackles in the middle overs.

Ben Manenti whacked 26 off 21 balls before having his stumps shattered by Gudakesh Motie



West Indies' captain Shai Hope plays a shot during the World Cup group stage match against Italy at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata yesterday. (AFP)

with four overs to go, and from 115-7 the rest folded quickly.

Pace bowler Shamar Joseph took a superb 4-30 backed up ably by fellow seamer Matthew Forde, who had 3-19.

Joseph also had a great day in the field and became the first player to take four wickets and four catches in a T20 international. Left-arm spinner Motie was the pick of the slow bowlers, finishing with 2-24 from his four overs. The West Indies will face Zimbabwe in Mumbai on Monday to kick off their Super Eights campaign, with clashes against South Africa and co-hosts India to follow.

BRIEF SCORES: West Indies 165 for 6 (Hope 75, Kalugamage 2-25, B Manenti 2-37) **beat Italy 123 all out** (B Manenti 26, Joseph 4-30, Forde 3-19, Motie 2-24) **by 42 runs.**

All-rounder Curran brings stuttering England to life at the death

England face co-hosts Sri Lanka in the Super Eights on Sunday, but without Sam Curran, Harry Brook's side may well have been on the plane home. The all-rounder has stood up and proved himself the man for a crisis, delivering match-winning late "death" overs against associate nations Nepal and Italy to stave off embarrassing defeats. Nepal, ranked 16th, were chasing 184 to pull off one of the all-time upsets and needed just 10 off the final over. Left-arm swing bowler Curran kept them to just five under extreme pressure in front of a hostile pro-Nepal crowd at a packed Wankhede stadium in Mumbai. "I said to Brookie: 'I'm backing six yorkers here, and I'll take the hit if I don't execute'," said Curran. "I think you've got to think like that. I've played a lot of T20 cricket. When you win the close ones they're actually the ones that give you a little boost and a bit of a smile on your face."

Captain Brook said the "unbelievable" Curran was his go-to guy at the death and a cool character. "We were both fairly calm out there. He knew exactly what he was going to try and do, and he executed outstandingly," said Brook. England all-rounder Will Jacks said: "Sam's won us that game. It was ebbs and flows the whole way. "I thought it was almost lost with six balls to go."

Then 27th-ranked Italy, in their first World Cup, needed 30 from the last two overs in Kolkata on Monday for a giant-killing that could have left England's World Cup hopes hanging by a thread. Up stepped Curran again, bowling a masterful 19th over to snuff out Italian hopes. He tied down the big-hitting Grant Stewart before removing him crucially for 45 and again conceded only five runs. His heroics made the 24-run victory sound more comfortable than it was. "He's shown for the last two or three years that when the pressure is on, he stands up," said England quick bowler Jamie Overton, whose task in bowling the subsequent 20th over against Italy was made a lot easier by Curran. "And that's the sort of cricketer he is." Curran was in the international wilderness a year ago but forced his way back into the England squad. He has re-established himself as one of coach Brendon McCullum and captain Brook's most trusted players. Curran was in great touch on England's pre-World Cup white ball tour of co-hosts Sri Lanka, where they will play all their Super Eight matches.

SPOTLIGHT

Zadran, Nabi help Afghanistan to consolation win against Canada

AFP
Chennai

Opener Ibrahim Zadran struck an unbeaten 95 to help Afghanistan to a crushing 82-run win over Canada yesterday and cap off an otherwise disappointing T20 World Cup on a high.

Zadran hit seven fours and five sixes in his 56-ball knock to steer Afghanistan to 200-4 after being invited to bat first in Chennai.

Afghanistan bowlers led by veteran spinner Mohammad Nabi, with his T20 best figures of 4-7, kept Canada down to 118-8 for their second win in the 20-team tournament. 2024 semi-finalists Afghanistan failed to reach the Super Eights stage after New Zealand secured the other qualification spot from Group D, which was topped by South Africa.

"We were well prepared for this competition, we were very close," said Afghanistan skipper Rashid Khan. "The game against South



Afghanistan's Ibrahim Zadran watches the ball after playing a shot during the T20 World Cup group stage match against Canada at the MA Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai yesterday. (AFP)

Africa (lost in a double super over) put us on the back foot and that hurt us."

The Afghans put up a dominant show in their last group match with Zadran leading the batting with his half-century and a 95-run third-wicket stand with Sediqullah Atal, who made 44.

It was the last match for former England batter Jonathan Trott as

coach of Afghanistan after he took over the job in July 2022. Canada were never in the chase and ended the tournament without a win in four matches.

BRIEF SCORES: Afghanistan 200 for 4 (Zadran 95*, Atal 44, Jaskaran 3-52) **beat Canada 118 for 8** (Thaker 30, Nabi 4-7) **by 82 runs.**

'DEVASTATED' AUSTRALIA LOOK TO AVOID OMAN UPSET AFTER WORLD CUP EXIT

Australia coach Andrew McDonald said yesterday his players were "devastated" after their T20 World Cup exit, but they would be "zeroed in" on avoiding an embarrassing upset against Oman. Australia failed to make the second phase for only the second time in the event's history after defeats to Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka. "We've got a pretty sort of devastated group, it's fair to say," McDonald told reporters in Kandy ahead of today's final match against Oman, now a dead rubber. "We're usually alive coming to these points in time, but it's not to be. We've put ourselves in this position. So hopefully, Oman, we can prepare and go and do the job there."

Defeat against 20th-ranked Oman would be the biggest embarrassment of all. "There won't be any lack of motivation against Oman," said McDonald. "We've got one more World Cup game and we'll be zeroed in on that." The match will end a chaotic Australian campaign. Australia arrived in Sri Lanka after being drubbed 3-0 in Pakistan and without injured fast

bowlers Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood. They then lost their captain Mitchell Marsh for the first two games after he was hit during practice and suffered testicular bleeding. Australia's acerbic media did not hold back in their criticism, citing selection "stuff-ups". Chief among those is sticking with the woefully out-of-form Cameron Green and promoting Tim David to number four as a "power hitter" when he had not played since December because of a hamstring injury. Glenn Maxwell, so often a match-winner with the bat in the past, is struggling for runs and the Australians dearly missed the experience of Cummins and Hazlewood. Matt Renshaw was Australia's top run scorer in the first two group matches, but he was bewilderingly dropped for the Sri Lanka clash. "I think the debate around selection is always great," said McDonald. "There's always differing opinions from the outside and sometimes the people on the outside don't understand what the moving parts are and the conversations

are on the inside." The selectors had been panned for leaving out all-time great Steve Smith from the original squad, despite his scintillating Big Bash form. Smith was finally flown in and added to the squad last week, only to be ignored for the must-win game against Sri Lanka on Monday. Without Smith and Renshaw, Australia collapsed from 160-4 to 181 all out and lost by eight wickets. "They're entitled to their opinions," McDonald said of the criticism. "Unfortunately, we weren't able to get the performances that we wanted, so those people are entitled to critique that and we're incredibly disappointed with where we're at." The final nail in the coffin came when Zimbabwe's match against Ireland was abandoned the next day, putting the African nation through with Sri Lanka. "The next game is Oman. So we've got to get our heads right around that," said McDonald. "I think the time to start to look back over what happened will be when we exit the shores here."

MOTORSPORT

Wolff accuses engine rivals of ganging up against Mercedes

Reuters
Manama

Mercedes boss Toto Wolff has accused rival Formula One manufacturers of ganging up against his team to put pressure on the governing FIA to change the engine rules, but said it would make no difference.

The Austrian was speaking at pre-season testing in Bahrain on Thursday, a day after the FIA announced an e-vote proposal to close a suspected loophole by proposing a change from August.

Rivals have accused Mercedes, who supply four teams including champions McLaren, of exploit-

ing a grey area to gain performance through compression ratios and thermal expansion of engine components. Wolff told reporters the pre-season favourites would accept the rule change but questioned the way it had been brought about. "Either we stay with the regulations like we are or the e-vote goes ahead on Friday with the proposal that came from the FIA. Both are OK for us," he said.

"We said all along that this looks like a storm in a teacup.

"It doesn't change anything for us, whether we stay like this or whether we change the new regulations. We also want to be good citizens in the sport."

Wolff said he could understand the concern if the performance

numbers being put around were close to the truth.

"If you have four other PUs (power units) that are putting immense pressure on the FIA at a certain stage, what choice do we have than not to play?," he asked.

Ferrari, Audi, Red Bull and Honda are the other power unit providers, with all facing a big challenge this season as Formula One starts a new engine era.

"You've developed a component to the regulations and that's been confirmed and then everybody else gangs up and says it's illegal. The regulators are being put under pressure. Is that how it should go?," said Wolff.

"Philosophically I disagree. But that's what has happened the last

50 years in Formula One and this time we were on the receiving end. I guess the next time maybe we will be ganging up against somebody else because we believe it's not right."

There has been media speculation also that Mercedes have had a problem with certifying their 100% sustainable fuel but Wolff said those reports were wrong.

"This is another of the stories. We were told compression ratio is something that we were illegal (with), which is total bullshit. And now the next story comes up that our fuel is illegal," he said.

"Maybe tomorrow we're inventing something else."

The season starts in Australia on March 8.



Mercedes' driver George Russell drives on the second day of the Formula One pre-season testing at the Bahrain International Circuit in Sakhir. (AFP)

TENNIS

Anisimova ends Andreeva defence in quarter-final

'It made me emotional seeing her like that. I feel we both won today'

AFP
Dubai

Amanda Anisimova ended a tearful Mirra Andreeva's Dubai title defence yesterday with a comeback 2-6, 7-5, 7-6 (7/4) victory in the quarter-finals.

The second-seeded American trailed the fifth seed Russian Andreeva by a set and a break before rallying back to complete a two-hour 38-minute win.

She thereby booked a place in the semi-finals of a WTA 1000 event for the fourth time in her career. "I was almost in tears there at the end," Anisimova said.

"It made me emotional seeing her like that. I feel we both won today," she added.

Anisimova now gets a rematch with fellow American Jessica Pegula.

Two breaks gave Andreeva a one-set lead and the defending champion leapt to a 2-0 advantage in the second set before Anisimova retaliated and clinched the next five games.

Anisimova got broken serving for the second set and it was Andreeva's turn to fight back as she took three games in a row to level for 5-all. She broke again to take the quarter-final clash into a deciding set.

Anisimova served for the match at 5-3 in the decider but Andreeva kept peppering her with slices and lobs to stay alive in the duel and soon drew level.

It was Andreeva's turn to serve for the victory but she couldn't close at 6-5 and the contest fittingly went to a deciding tiebreak.

Anisimova upped her level to take the breaker and hugged a sobbing Andreeva at the net, telling her she was "amazing".



Amanda Anisimova of the U.S. celebrates winning her Dubai Open quarter-final against Russia's Mirra Andreeva yesterday. (Reuters)

Andreeva particularly struggled on her second serve, winning just 37 per cent of her points behind it and double-faulting seven times.

Earlier on centre court, Pegula advanced to a seventh consecutive tour-level semi-final - dating back to the 2025 US Open - with a hard-fought 6-3, 2-6, 6-4 performance against last year's runner-up Clara Tauson.

The 31-year-old American has stepped up her game following sub-par results in Montreal and Cincinnati last summer and has since been a serious threat in the latter stages of every tournament

she has played. "My coaches and I worked on a lot of stuff to get my game back, to emphasise what I do really well, get back to the true roots of my game, just make that even better and more efficient," explained Pegula, who hit 36 winners and just 26 unforced errors against Tauson.

"I think I've been serving a lot better. Physically been feeling good. Moving better again.

"There's a lot of things. But honestly, I've been working on my game a lot. I think I've become a better player over the last six months."

In the first meeting between the pair, Pegula and Tauson split the first two sets and were neck and neck in the decider until the American claimed a crucial break in the seventh game.

Pegula closed out the victory two games later to punch her ticket to the second Dubai semi-final of her career, and first since 2023.

In the night-session quarter-finals, third-seeded Coco Gauff will take on Filipina rising star Alexandra Eala before two-time Dubai champion Elina Svitolina faces Croatian lucky loser Antonia Ruzic.

SPOTLIGHT

Williams 'on the back foot' after missing Barcelona: Albon

AFP
Sakhir, Bahrain

Williams driver Alexander Albon fears missing the Barcelona shakedown last month has left his team clawing to make up lost ground to its main rivals in the build-up on the new Formula One season.

With all teams scrambling to conform to the sweeping overhaul of engine and chassis regulations, Williams were behind the pace and so skipped the shakedown, preferring to do virtual track testing with Albon and his teammate Carlos Sainz.

Williams did take part in last week's testing in Bahrain and are back on track again this week but the Thai-British driver is concerned that they may have lost some serious ground to Mercedes, Red Bull, McLaren and Ferrari.

"Obviously it was frustrating to miss out in Barcelona," Albon, 29, told AFP on Wednesday.

"Clearly we missed an opportunity to learn. We are a little bit on the back foot compared to our rivals up and down the grid.

"And we've realised just there's so much learning to do in these days. Every day has become so valuable. Even just looking at ourselves, how much we've improved from the first day of testing last week to where we are now is huge."

Team principal James Vowles has already said he is determined Williams should do at least as well as their fifth place in the constructors' standings in 2025, their joint-best finish in 10 years.

"I share the same vision as James," said Albon.

"I feel that it would always be nice to be even more, even closer to the top teams and pulling away from the midfield fight.

"Realistically, I think it's going to be a big challenge for us to be able to be there.

"We are as a team very ambitious. Unfortunately we found some bottlenecks and so we are on the back foot.

"We're not where we want to be for now. That's not to say we can't get back to the top five in the constructors and have a



Williams' driver Alex Albon

good season, but we have some catching up to do."

The London-born driver, who announced his engagement to Chinese LPGA golfer Lily He last month, is just the second driver in 75 years of Formula One to race under the Thai flag.

"I feel very much Thai in who I am," Albon said.

"I am Buddhist and I feel very close to Thai people, Thai culture. I resonate much closer to Thailand than I do anywhere else. So it means a lot.

"What meant a lot to me was my first podium in Formula 1 to see the Thai flag behind me. It was very special."

That passion for his mother's country - his father is the British racing driver Nigel Albon - has also stoked a desire to create a Grand Prix in Thailand. "One of my biggest goals is to try to make this happen," he said.

"I think that would be amazing for the country. We're speaking almost every day about how we can make this work. So it's a big goal of mine.

"I think it has the infrastructure and hospitality and the friendliness to have it."

Albon also believes Thailand can position itself as the motorsport capital of the region.

"There is not really the structure apart from Japan in motorsport for Southeast Asia.

"There needs to be one. And I would love it to be Thailand.

"I'd say there needs to be a culture and a structure where we need to make it happen.

"Also it would be amazing for me to be able to say that Thailand is almost the Asian home of motorsport or Formula 1."

GOLF

McIlroy upbeat about his game ahead of Riviera

Reuters
Los Angeles

As a student of the game from an historical standpoint, five-time major champion **Rory McIlroy** has an appreciation for playing in a tournament like this week's Genesis Invitational at Riviera Country Club.

The event returns to its home in Pacific Palisades, California, after a one-year hiatus because of the fires there and the Los Angeles area. McIlroy, ranked No. 2 in the world, was asked at a news conference why Riviera, established 100 years ago, has stood the test of time. "I think the green complexes are a big part of it," McIlroy said.

"Yeah, we haven't been here in a year, obviously, and I just, I don't know why I was surprised but some of the movement and some of how much break you have to play on a lot of the putts out here, it just, I don't know why I didn't

remember but it's like wow, this is - so the greens provide a challenge in themselves.

"Then you get a little bit of wind and it starts to swirl in this valley a bit and it starts to play pretty tricky," he continued.

The native of Northern Ireland knows something about playing in windy conditions. The course conditions could change, McIlroy asserted, if the tournament at the iconic golf club was moved to later in the year, possibly August, as part of widely discussed changes to the PGA Tour's annual schedule.

"This week it doesn't matter if you hit it in the fairway or not," McIlroy said. "It's actually a benefit sometimes if you do hit it in the rough because the ball's not going to come spinning back on you.

"So if you do get it in August where the greens are firm, there's more of a consideration of strategy off the tee especially, and it starts to make the guys think a little bit," he continued.



"It certainly becomes a much more strategic golf course in that way. ... but even if you moved it a little bit later in the year there just to have the opportunity to have better weather and firmer conditions, that would be a good thing."

McIlroy, 36, made his first start of the PGA Tour season last weekend at the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am. He tied for 14th after rounds of 68-67-72-64 for 17-under par. He felt like he shook off a little bit of rust.

"Felt like I learned quite a bit about my game last week, played well for a lot of it," McIlroy said.

"Obviously made some big numbers which kept me from be-

ing right in contention on Sunday, but I feel like there's enough good in there to be encouraged going into this week."

McIlroy has won 29 times on the PGA Tour, most recently the Masters Tournament last April to complete a career Grand Slam and end his 11-year major drought.

He returned to Augusta National Golf Club to do "some filming" for promotional purposes. He has plans next week to play a round with his father, Gerry, and Augusta National chairman Fred Ridley.

"It was cool to get up to the champions locker room and see my nameplate alongside the other two champions that I share a locker with," McIlroy said of his first visit back to Augusta.

"Yeah, it was somewhat nostalgic. I wouldn't say it was emotional but definitely there was nice memories. Yeah, different feels the first time staying on site without having to need a member there. There's a lot of perks you get with being a champion."

MotoGP dumps Phillip Island for Adelaide street circuit

Australia's Phillip Island will host its last MotoGP this year after nearly three decades with organisers yesterday announcing the race will move to a street circuit in Adelaide from 2027.

The event has been held at the picturesque and often windswept waterfront circuit some two hours outside of Melbourne since 1997, but its contract expires this year.

Promotor MotoGP Sports Entertainment - formerly known as Dorna - wanted to broaden its appeal and shift it to Melbourne's Albert Park, which hosts the opening race of the Formula One season in early March. But the Victorian state government was adamant it should remain at "iconic and much loved" Phillip Island, where it is a major boost to the local economy with more than 90,000 fans flocking there last year.

With negotiations breaking down, South Australia stepped in and secured the race for six years from 2027 in Adelaide - the first MotoGP to be held in a city-centre location.

"Bringing MotoGP to Adelaide marks a major milestone in the evolution of our championship," said MotoGP Chief Sporting Officer Carlos Ezpeleta.

"This city has a world-class reputation for hosting major sporting events, and the opportunity to design a purpose-built circuit in the city streets is something truly unique in our sport."

South Australia state Premier Peter Malinauskas called it a "major coup" for Adelaide.

"We back major events that deliver a strong economic return, and MotoGP does exactly that," he said.

"MotoGP is growing globally at record pace - and Adelaide will now be a key part of that growth story."

Adelaide previously hosted the Australian Formula One Grand Prix until it lost to the event to Melbourne in 1995.

HORSE RACING

Return To Senders powers to Al Jumayliyah Cup victory

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Return To Senders returned to winning form in the seventh race on Wednesday night, claiming the Al Jumayliyah Cup over 1700m for 4-year-old and older Thoroughbreds at Al Rayyan Racecourse.

The nine-year-old bay, owned by Al Eida Racing and trained by Jassim al-Ghazali, produced a powerful finish to sweep past his rivals in the final 200m and secure a decisive four-length victory under Marco Casamento, completing a double for the trainer-jockey duo on the card.

Drawn wide in barrier 9, Return To Senders settled just behind the early leaders as Coco Jack set the pace, chased by Mobilise, Assertively, Local Law and Upton Park. The field maintained a steady tempo into the home turn.

In the straight, Upton Park, representing Mohammed Abdulhadi al-Hajri and trained by Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, surged to the front and briefly looked set to win. But Return To Senders responded with a decisive burst of speed, overtaking him inside the final 200m to claim the trophy.

Upton Park held second under Faleh



Jockey Marco Casamento guided Return To Senders to the Al Jumayliyah Cup victory.

Bughenaim, while Smart Contender, ridden by Abdulla Rashid al-Hajri for owner and trainer Nasser Owaida Salem al-Hajri, completed the podium.

Across the seven-race card, highlights included Al Bayyin Grine breaking his maiden in the opener, Ta'hoos Al Shahania powering home from the back, Mystery-ofthesands delivering a devastating turn of foot, Moharb asserting dominance, AJS

Najma front-running impressively, and Sussex showcasing stamina and authority.

RESULTS 52ND AL RAYYAN RACE MEETING - AL JUMAYLIYAH CUP

WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

1 - Al Jumayliyah Cup, 4yo+ Thoroughbreds
Return To Senders, Jassim al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento



Connections of Return To Senders celebrate after the nine-year-old bay won the Al Jumayliyah Cup at the Al Rayyan Racecourse. PICTURES: Juhaim

2 - Purebred Arabian Premium Maiden Plate

Al Bayyin Grine, Hamad al-Jehani, Jefferson Smith

3 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (0-65)

Ta'hoos Al Shahania, Rudy Nerbonne, Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik

4 - Thoroughbred Handicap (0-75)
Mysteryofthesands, Mohammed al-

Ghazali, Salman Fahad al-Hajri

5 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (0-65)
Moharb, Jassim al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento

6 - Local Purebred Arabian Fillies & Mares Handicap (70-90)

AJS Najma, MHK al-Attayah, Szczepan Mazur

7 - Thoroughbred Handicap (70-90), 4yo+
Sussex, MHK al-Attayah, Szczepan Mazur

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arteta tells Arsenal to harness Wolves 'pain' against Spurs

The draw left Arsenal just five points clear of second-placed Manchester City

AFP
London

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta has urged his side to use the "pain" of a shock 2-2 draw with Wolves when they look to revive their Premier League title challenge against arch-rivals Tottenham Hotspur.

The Gunners were on course for a routine win on Wednesday after goals from Bukayo Saka and Piero Hincapie put them 2-0 up at Molineux. But bottom of the table Wolves hit back. Hugo Bueno's superb strike reduced the deficit before teenage debutant Tom Edozie punished a mix-up between Arsenal goalkeeper David Raya and centre-back Gabriel Magalhaes to equalise deep into stoppage-time.

The draw left Arsenal, bidding to end a 22-year-wait to be crowned champions of England again, just five points clear of second-placed Manchester City, who have a game in hand on their rivals, as well as a home game against the Gunners in April. It was the second match in a row where Arsenal had dropped points following a draw with Brentford and meant they have now won just twice in their last seven league games.

Having wasted commanding leads in two previous title fights with City, Arteta's men are in danger of being haunted by the ghost of their past failures. The north Londoners have dropped 11 points in eight league games in 2026.

City twice chased Arsenal down to win the Premier League in both the 2022/23 and 2023/24 seasons and their April clash with the Gunners could prove pivotal to the title race. But Arteta said: "I'm going to be the



Arsenal players react after their draw against Wolverhampton Wanderers. (Reuters)

first one to be close with them (the players) because it has nothing to do with attitude or desire, it is completely the opposite. It's part of football. Where it could've gone wrong today, it went wrong. If you look at the way we conceded the two goals today without conceding any other situations, it is very rare but it happens. And it happened for a reason and we need to react. If you are at the top you have to win and win, that's nothing new."

Arsenal are away to struggling Tottenham in a north London derby on Sunday, with Arteta saying: "We need to go through the pain and go through it looking in the

mirror and understand what the game requires now and the next action is Sunday. We need to keep all that in our tummies to show it on Sunday."

Meanwhile Saka said: "It's pretty flat. We're pretty disappointed with the result, it's the only way to describe it. I think it's a game of two halves. In the first half we started so well but in the second half we dropped the level and got punished for it."

Looking ahead to the derby match, the England international added: "It was already a big game and now it's still a big game...It's still in our control so we just need to focus on that, fix the issues we're

having now and get back to winning ways."

Arsenal looked increasingly nervous as the minutes ticked down against Wolves in a clear sign that the league leaders are feeling the pressure of their bid for a first English title since 2004. Now they must find a way to recover from a significant setback in time for Sunday's north London derby at Tottenham, which is followed by a crucial home game against Chelsea on March 1.

Arsenal's frustration boiled over at the final whistle, with Raya and Gabriel exchanging heated words before Gunners striker Gabriel Jesus shoved Wolves' Yerson Mosquera to the turf.

Real submit evidence to UEFA in Vinicius racism probe

Madrid: Real Madrid said it had provided "all available evidence" to UEFA in support of their Brazilian star Vinicius Junior's complaint of racist abuse during this week's Champions League clash at Benfica.

Tuesday's first leg of the knockout phase play-off tie in Lisbon was stopped for 10 minutes after Vinicius told the referee Benfica's Gianluca Prestianni had called him a "monkey" during a confrontation. The Argentine midfielder, who covered his mouth during the argument after Vinicius had celebrated a goal dancing in front of the home fans, denies the allegation.

UEFA announced on Wednesday it would investigate "allegations of discriminatory behaviour" as a furore broke out, with teammates rushing to back Vinicius, who has repeatedly suffered racist abuse since joining Real in 2018. Benfica issued a statement backing Prestianni and speaking of a "defamation campaign" against him, while manager Jose Mourinho questioned Vinicius's celebration.

SLOT SAYS ISAK IN 'FINAL STAGES OF REHAB'

Liverpool manager Arne Slot said he believes striker Alexander Isak is in the "final stages of rehab" and could return by the end of next month to bolster the Reds' push for Champions League qualification. The British record signing has been sidelined since mid-December when he fractured a bone in his lower leg and needed ankle surgery following a sliding tackle from Tottenham's Micky van de Ven.

His injury came just as 26-year-old Sweden international Isak, who joined Premier League champions Liverpool for £125m from top-flight rivals Newcastle in September, was finding his form at Anfield with two goals in six matches. Isak is one of five Liverpool first-team players currently sidelined, with only Jeremie Frimpong close to a return. Liverpool have had a rare week without a match ahead of Sunday's trip to Nottingham Forest.

POSTCOGLOU ADMITS TAKING FOREST POST A 'BAD DECISION'

Ange Postecoglou has said he has only himself to blame for an extraordinarily brief reign as Nottingham Forest manager, with the Australian accepting he made "a bad decision" taking on the job with the Premier League strugglers. Postecoglou, 60, was appointed as Nuno Espirito Santo's successor in September. But infamously impatient Forest owner Evangelos Marinakis sacked Postecoglou just 39 days later, after the experienced manager lost six of his eight games in charge.

Postecoglou, reflecting on his time at Forest, said an over-eagerness to get back into management after his departure from Tottenham Hotspur three months earlier, had been the root cause of his troubles at the City Ground. "There's no point me blaming it on 'I didn't get time' or anything," said Postecoglou. "I should never have gone in there. That was on me. That was a bad decision by me to go in there."

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Bodo/Glimt stun Inter, Atletico held by Club Brugge

AFP
Paris

Norway's Bodo/Glimt stunned Inter Milan in the Champions League on Wednesday, beating last season's runners-up 3-1 in the first leg of their knockout phase play-off tie after Anthony Gordon scored four as Newcastle United hammered Qarabag 6-1 in Azerbaijan. Elsewhere Atletico Madrid were held by Club Brugge in a thrilling 3-3 draw, while Bayer Leverkusen took a big step towards reaching the last 16 by beating Olympiacos 2-0 away in Greece.

Bodo/Glimt, Norwegian champions in four of the last six years, made it to this stage after some impressive results during the league phase, including wins at home to Manchester City and away to Atletico in their last two games.

The club from north of the Arctic Circle were therefore not afraid of the current Serie A leaders and went in front on 20 minutes through Sondre Brunstad Fet.

Francesco Pio Esposito equalised on the half-hour mark for three-time European champions Inter, the goal standing after a VAR check despite an apparent hand-



Bodo/Glimt's Patrick Berg (centre) and Inter Milan's Pio Esposito vie for the ball during the UEFA Champions League first-leg play-football match in Bodo, Norway. (AFP)

ball in the build-up. However, Bodo/Glimt went back in front just after the hour when Kasper Hogn's brilliant lay-off set up Jens Petter Hauge to score, and Hogn found the net himself three minutes later.

The result leaves Inter, who lost 5-0 to

PSG in last season's Champions League final, facing a big challenge to overturn their two-goal deficit in next Tuesday's return leg at San Siro. The winners of the tie will play either Manchester City or Sporting of Portugal in the last 16 next month.