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TENNIS

# Gutsy Alcaraz beats Rublev to reach Qatar Open final

The world No.1 will take on France's Arthur Fils in the final today



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz reacts during his semi-final against Russia's Andrey Rublev on day five of the Qatar Open at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex in Doha yesterday. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Top-seeded Carlos Alcaraz of Spain advanced to the final of the Qatar ExxonMobil Open yesterday, defeating defending champion Andrey Rublev in a closely contested semi-final match.

Alcaraz won 7-6 (3), 6-4 after converting his sixth match point, overcoming significant resistance from the Russian fifth seed.

In the final today, Alcaraz will take on France's Arthur Fils who yesterday beat Czech Republic's Jakub Mensik in the day's second semi-final.

Fils won 6-4, 7-6 to reach the final.

Yesterday's hard-fought win by Alcaraz positions the World No. 1 to compete for his first career title at the Doha tournament.

Rublev, who previously won the event in 2020 and 2025, heavily tested the Spaniard's resolve throughout the match. De-

spite the pressure, Alcaraz maintained his composure during the final exchanges to close out the match and seal his passage to the championship round.

"I know what I am able to do every time I step on the court, what I am capable of doing," Alcaraz said when asked if he is ever amazed by himself.

"The way that I am approaching every match, I'm just really proud about it. It's something I am trying to be better at and it's paying off. I'm proud of myself (for) getting better and maturing," he added.

"If you want to find a solution to a problem, you should find it in a calm place," Alcaraz said.

"It's something I am working on. When I am playing and getting mad, seeing I'm not at my best, I just get frustrated.

"That is not the place you will find solutions. In these matches, I have been really calm, thinking clearly and being positive. It's in those places where you can find the solutions to a problem," Alcaraz explained.

The No. 1 player in the ATP Rankings

battled for a gripping victory under the lights in Doha to extend his perfect start to 2026 to 11 matches.

Although he twice failed to serve out the opening set and saw a 3-0 lead in the second quickly erased, Alcaraz remained steady under pressure to advance to the Qatari ATP 500 final for the first time after two hours, two minutes.

Since capturing the Australian Open crown in January to become the youngest man to complete the Career Grand Slam, the 22-year-old Alcaraz has played with assurance, but his path in Doha has required persistence.

After rallying past former champion Karen Khachanov in three sets in the quarter-finals, the top seed faced more challenges against Rublev but still fought his way to an impressive win.

Alcaraz stayed composed through a nervy end and eventually converted his sixth match point to secure victory and advance to his 34th tour-level final.

The World No. 1 is 25-8 in career Tour finals.

## Heliovaara, Patten win doubles title in Doha

DOHA: Harri Heliovaara and Henry Patten beat Julian Cash and Lloyd Glasspool to win the doubles title at the Qatar ExxonMobil Open yesterday.

The third-seeded Heliovaara and Patten completed a spotless run to the ATP 500 title in Doha with a 6-3, 6-3 win over the top-seeded defending champions. Also winners in Adelaide, they became the second team to win multiple titles this season, joining Montpellier and Dallas champions Theo Arribas and Albano Olivetti.

After losing their first four meetings against Cash and Glasspool,

Heliovaara and Patten have now reduced the deficit to 2-4 in their Lexus ATP Head2Head series. They also defeated the top seeds in the ATP Masters 1000 final in Paris in October.

"We finished the end of 2025 really strong and just to keep that form in 2026, it's been a dream six months for us," said Heliovaara, who won his maiden Nitto ATP Finals trophy with Patten in November. "With Henry, it's always lovely to play. I had my family here in Doha this week - my wife and two kids - so it's always special to travel with them."



Harri Heliovaara and Henry Patten celebrate after beating Julian Cash and Lloyd Glasspool in the doubles final at the Qatar Open in Doha yesterday.



France's Arthur Fils hits a return against Czech Republic's Jakub Mensik during their semi-final at the Qatar Open in Doha yesterday. Fils won 6-4, 7-6 to reach the final. (AFP)

## UMM SALAL, QATAR SC POST WINS IN QATAR STARS LEAGUE



Umm Salal's Cristo Gonzalez (centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring a goal against Al Saiiliya during their Round of 16 clash in the Qatar Stars League at Grand Hamad Stadium in Doha yesterday. Umm Salal won 1-0. RIGHT: Players of Al Shahaniya and Qatar SC in action during their QSL match at Al Khor Stadium. Qatar SC rallied for a 4-3 win.



Russia's Andrey Rublev hits a return against Spain's Carlos Alcaraz during their singles semi-final at the Qatar Open in Doha.

## MATCH REPORT

# Australia exit World Cup with consolation win

'Unfortunately we didn't play our best in a couple of games'



Australia's captain Mitchell Marsh (in green) shakes hands with Oman's players at the end of the 2026 ICC T20 World Cup group stage match in Kandy yesterday. Australia won by nine wickets. (AFP)

Reuters  
Kandy

Australia demolished Oman by nine wickets in their final Twenty20 World Cup group match on Friday, delivering a dominant display that ultimately came too late to salvage a disappointing campaign with both sides already eliminated.

Chasing a modest target of 105 in Pallekele, skipper Mitchell Marsh was in no mood to hang around and ruthlessly dispatched Oman's bowlers to all corners of the park, bringing up his 50 off just 26 balls inside the first powerplay.

Oman's Shakeel Ahmed collided with wicketkeeper Vinayak Shukla when he had Travis Head caught and bowled off a top edge for 32, but the 38-year-old spinner was so overjoyed he brought out Cristiano Ronaldo's trademark goal celebration.

Marsh remained unbeaten on 64 with seven

boundaries and four sixes to guide Australia home with 62 balls to spare, equalling the T20 World Cup record for the fastest chase of a total over 100.

Australia finished third in the group with two wins and two defeats, with Marsh describing the 2021 champions' campaign as a "missed opportunity", while winless Oman propped up the table with no points.

"Unfortunately we didn't play our best in a couple of games that we needed to and that's tournament play," Marsh said. "You lose that game to Zimbabwe and you're under pressure and fair play to them, wish them all the best. But we're a very disappointed group."

Australia produced a clinical bowling display to dismiss Oman for 104 after winning the toss and opting to field, with Adam Zampa finishing with figures of 4-21.

Fast bowler Xavier Bartlett set the tone with a wicket off the very first ball, removing Aamir Kaleem before he had skipper Jatinder Singh also bowled.

Oman attempted to rebuild but none of their batters converted their starts while Wasim Ali stood out with a gritty 32, offering the only meaningful resistance.

Zampa claimed his fourth four-wicket haul in T20 World Cups.

"It's been a rough few days, there's a few quiet voices around the team at the moment," he said after picking up the player of the match award.

"We're feeling pretty flat about the World Cup ending so soon for us.

"We feel like we've built something over the last few years," he said.

"We played a specific brand of cricket that we thought was going to work and under pressure it unfortunately didn't for us," Zampa added.

"So yeah, we're disappointed."

#### BRIEF SCORES

**Australia 108 for 1** (Marsh 64\*, Head 32) **beat Oman 104** (Wasim 32, Zampa 4-21, Maxwell 2-13, Bartlett 2-27) **by nine wickets**

## COMMENT

## Bethell insists there's 'fire' in lacklustre England at World Cup



AFP  
Kandy, Sri Lanka

England still have "fire" burning in them ahead of the T20 World Cup Super Eights, Jacob Bethell said yesterday, admitting that Harry Brook's side had been below par during a lacklustre group campaign.

One of the pre-tournament fancies behind hot favourites India, England stumbled through their group matches.

The 2022 champions lost comfortably to the only Test-playing side they faced, the West Indies, and were unconvincing in wins against associate nations Nepal, Scotland and Italy.

"I think there's definitely a little fire in all of us to kind of really go out there and push the players to the top of their performances," Bethell told reporters.

Brook's side have returned to their happy hunting ground in Kandy after playing all their group matches in India, at Mumbai and Kolkata.

Tomorrow England will kick off their Super Eights campaign against co-hosts Sri Lanka at the venue where they swept a T20 series 3-0 this month.

"We're coming back to conditions that were foreign a few weeks ago, we then got to know him over three games here," said the left-handed Bethell, who bats a number three.

"We beat them 3-0, so I think we're definitely coming back to this part of the world with a lot of confidence."

Bethell said he had watched a lot of matches on TV during the tournament and had been impressed by Sri Lanka's Pathum Nissanka.

The opening batsman scored the first century of this T20 World Cup as Sri Lanka beat Australia.

Bethell admitted Nissanka

would be dangerous tomorrow. "I thought Nissanka played unbelievably," said Bethell.

"You know, he actually got off to a few flyers against us. But that really showed what he could do."

The 22-year-old said it was important not to dwell on England's stuttering group stage campaign and move on.

"I think everyone had the same mindset of, all right, the main thing is just to get through to Super Eights," said Bethell.

Effectively a new mini-tournament now begins, with Sri Lanka, Pakistan and New Zealand to face. Only two will progress to the semi-finals.

"So now we're here, then this is where the proper competition starts," said Bethell.

Bethell is England's top run scorer with 143 at an average of 35.75 with one fifty in their four matches to date.

Explosive openers Phil Salt and Jos Buttler have failed to fire so far, as has captain Brook.

Bethell is confident that will change and England's much-vaunted batting line-up will soon be back to their destructive best.

"I think everyone just has that underlying feeling that we're going to turn that corner," he said.

"We're winning games of cricket and we're not firing."

"So imagine when we do?"

Jos Buttler is "frustrated" by his lean run at the T20 World Cup, according to a report in *ESPNcricinfo*.

"I'm a bit frustrated, to be honest," Buttler said on his *For the Love of Cricket* podcast. "I felt like I was playing really well in South Africa, in the SA20, without getting scores. One thing I'd always pride myself on in T20s is, if you get in, to be able to go on and make a good contribution. I found myself getting out in the teens and twenties quite a bit, getting starts and then finding ways to get out."

## PREVIEW

## New Zealand 'must adapt quickly to Sri Lanka wickets'

AFP  
Colombo

New Zealand can adapt quickly to switching to Sri Lankan pitches in the T20 World Cup after playing all their matches so far in India, said batsman Mark Chapman yesterday.

New Zealand open their Super Eight campaign against Pakistan in Colombo today, ahead of matches against Sri Lanka and England at the same venue.

Pace, bounce and spin in Colombo will be markedly different to Chennai and Ahmedabad, where New Zealand played their group matches, but Chapman said the players knew all about the variation in pitch conditions.

"I think guys understand what they need to do on slower wickets after playing in India where pitches were batting friendly," said the middle-order batsman.

"So, we're pretty confident that we'll face up to whatever conditions are in front of us. A lot of the guys have played a lot of cricket here before."

Pakistan have played all their four matches in Sri Lanka and have a potent spin attack.

Chapman was confident New Zealand can handle Pakistan's spinners, including the unorthodox Usman Tariq, who pauses in his delivery stride and bowls with deceptive variation, including side-arm.

"Obviously, Tariq has a pretty unique action with the way that he stops at the crease and that's something to factor in," said Chapman.

"But each of the Pakistan spinners poses their own threat."

Pakistan have beaten New Zealand in five of their seven previous T20 World Cup encounters.

Captain Mitchell Santner is set to return

after missing the game against Canada with a stomach upset. "He's pretty excited to get back to the park," said Chapman. "And, you know, barring any last-minute sickness, I think he'll be there."

Pace bowler Lockie Ferguson will only land back in Sri Lanka after returning home for the birth of his first child.

Ferguson missed the win against Canada on Tuesday and is not certain to play against Pakistan after his long-round trip.

#### South Africa select five uncapped players for T20 tour to New Zealand

South Africa have named a much-changed squad that includes five uncapped players for their five-match Twenty20 tour of New Zealand next month, leaving behind most of the team that have qualified for the Super Eights at the ongoing World Cup in India and Sri Lanka.

Batters Connor Esterhuizen, Dian Forrester and Jordan Hermann, all-rounder Eathan Bosch and teenage seamer Nqobani Mokoena will all hope to make their international debuts on the tour.

Hermann is the younger brother of Ruben, who is also in the squad and has been capped in One Day Internationals and T20 matches for South Africa, while Bosch is the younger sibling of Corbin, who has impressed at the World Cup.

The side will be captained by spinner Keshav Maharaj, with a return for seamers Gerald Coetzee, Lutho Sipamla and Ottneil Baartman. The five-match series will be played between March 15-25.

#### SOUTH AFRICA SQUAD

Keshav Maharaj (captain), Ottneil Baartman, Eathan Bosch, Gerald Coetzee, Tony de Zorzi, Connor Esterhuizen, Dian Forrester, Jordan Hermann, Ruben Hermann, George Linde, Nqobani Mokoena, Andile Simelane, Lutho Sipamla, Prenelan Subrayen, and Jason Smith

## Vaughan calls for probe into reports Pakistan stars sidelined from Hundred

Michael Vaughan has urged the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) to "act fast" on reports that Pakistani players will be overlooked by Indian-owned teams in the domestic Hundred competition. Longstanding political tensions between India and Pakistan have led to the border rivals only playing each other in international cricket events, although their recent Colombo showdown at the ongoing T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka only went ahead after Pakistan called off a threatened boycott.

It has been claimed that politics has also led to an effective ban on Pakistani players participating in the Indian Premier League, world cricket's most lucrative T20 franchise competition. And with several IPL owners now owning teams in several different countries, opportunities for Pakistani cricketers to participate in various leagues are in danger of being reduced further.

The BBC has now reported that the issue could be a factor during next month's player auction for English cricket's Hundred, a 100 balls-per-side competition featuring eight franchises rather than the traditional 18 first-class counties.

Players will go under the hammer in London on March 11-12, with the BBC reporting that the four Indian-affiliated Hundred teams - Manchester Super Giants, MI London, Southern Brave and Sunrisers Leeds will deliberately avoid selecting players from Pakistan. More than 50 Pakistani cricketers have registered their availability, with four other teams involved in the bidding.

The ECB have been unable to substantiate the BBC allegations, but former England captain Vaughan



**The ECB need to act fast on this... they own the league and this should not be allowed to happen... the most inclusive sport in the country is not one that allows this to happen**

has called for the governing body to investigate the issue thoroughly. Vaughan, referencing the ECB's stated aim of cricket becoming the most inclusive sport in the country, posted yesterday on X: "The ECB need to act fast on this... they own the league and this should not be allowed to happen... the most inclusive sport in the country is not one that allows this to happen." An ECB spokesman said: "The Hundred welcomes men's and

women's players from all over the world and we would expect the eight teams to reflect that.

"Almost 1,000 cricketers from 18 nations have registered for The Hundred auction, with representation on the longlist of over 50 players respectively from Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Pakistan and West Indies."

Only two Pakistan internationals - Mohammad Amir and Imad Wasim - appeared in last year's Hundred, the final edition before new investors became involved.

James Thomas, Birmingham Phoenix's performance director, told *ESPNcricinfo* that the franchise will be "really open" to signing overseas players regardless of nationality. "Birmingham is a hugely diverse city," Thomas said. "You've got to pick players for what they can bring in terms of performance but when you look at the bigger picture... We want our teams to be representative of the city and the region as well. If we align, and we get players who speak to the different demographics of the city, that's brilliant."

The auctions - which will be live-streamed, though not broadcast live - will both start with a marquee set of 'hero' players based on nominations submitted by the eight franchises, *ESPNcricinfo* reported.

Each team has already made up to four pre-auction signings, with new investment in the Hundred prompting a "reset" among the squads. Salary caps in the Hundred have risen sharply for 2026 to £2.05m (men's) and £880,000 (women's). Each team will also be permitted to field four overseas players per match, an increase from three in previous seasons.

WINTER OLYMPICS

# It's all in the family as China's Wang wins aeri-als gold

WANG FOLLOWS HIS WIFE XU IN WINNING OLYMPIC TITLE AS CHINA CONTINUE TO DOMINATE

Reuters  
Livigno, Italy

**W**ang Xindi won the freestyle skiing men's aeri-als at the Winter Olympics yesterday, strengthening China's dominance in the discipline and bringing another gold medal into the family.

The victory came two days after Wang's wife Xu Mengtao retained her Olympic title in women's aeri-als, and the couple could be set for more glory in today's mixed team final.

"We celebrated her gold, but I was also quick to refocus on to my own event", he said. "We've battled together for years, but we're also professionals."

He said Xu, a five-times Olympian with a record number of World Cup victories, sometimes shares "pointers" with him, "but also doesn't want to say so much. But in my heart, I also understand what she wants to say."

The couple's Milano Cortina double-act adds to China's Beijing 2022 tally of two gold medals in men's and women's aeri-als and silver in mixed teams.

Yesterday, world champion Noe Roth of Switzerland won silver, while another Chinese freeskier, Olympic first-timer Li Tianma, got bronze.

"We knew we (Chinese) had an advantage because of the quality of our squad. We were pretty confident of winning a gold today, it's just down to who performs on the day," Li said.

All four Chinese competitors made it to the final, from an initial pack of 24, including defending champion and five-times Olympian Qi Guangpu, who came sixth. Qi, who is 35, said it was the end



Gold medallist Xindi Wang of China (centre) celebrates on the podium with silver medallist Noe Roth of Switzerland and bronze medallist Tianma Li of China after the freestyle skiing competition in the men's aeri-als in Livigno, Italy, yesterday. (Reuters)

of his Olympic career, even if Wang urged him not to retire and hailed him as a role model. The new Olympic champion took top spot with a remarkable score of 132.60, out of a maximum of 150. Roth was close behind on 131.58, while Li got 123.93. The field was whittled down over four rounds held in snowy, overcast conditions in the Alpine resort of Livigno, leaving six competitors, four from China and two Swiss - with Roth joined by compatriot Pirmin Werner - to contest the final run.

"I want to thank myself for not giving up," Wang said. "For my dedication. When things were hard, when I was down ... I'd like to give myself a big hug." American Quinn Dehlinger had to pull out

before the start, due to a knee injury suffered during training.

Aeri-als is a gravity-defying discipline that has been part of the Winter Games since 1994.

Athletes jump off a near vertical ramp, launching themselves in the air and performing complex aerobatics, reaching speeds of up to more than 65 km per hour. They are judged on height, distance, style, degree of difficulty and landing.

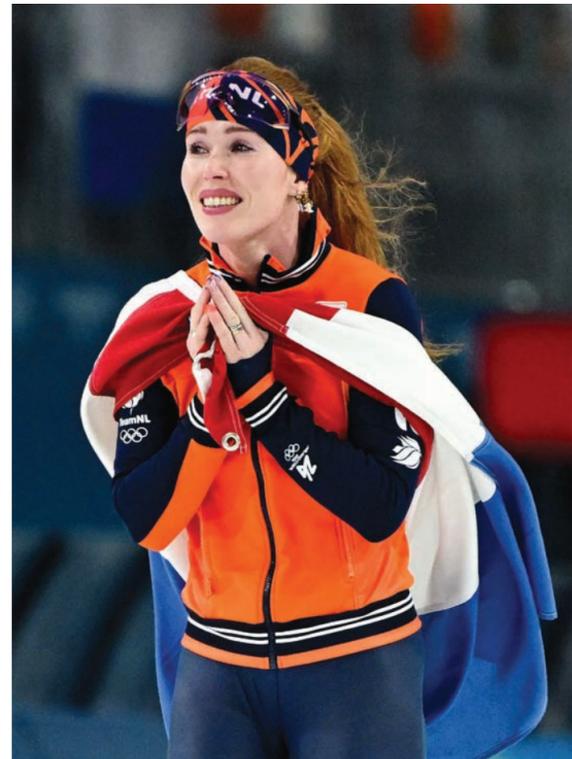
**Netherlands' Rijpma-de Jong grabs 1,500m gold**

Dutchwoman Antoinette Rijpma-de Jong won the women's 1,500 metres at the Milano Cortina Games yesterday, securing the first Olympic gold of her career and her

nation's third speed skating title of these Games. Norway's Ragne Wiklund took silver, while Canada's Valerie Maltais claimed bronze to round out the podium.

Rijpma-de Jong - who finished behind now-retired Dutch great Ireen Wust and Japan's Miho Takagi to take bronze in this distance at Beijing 2022 - stopped the clock at one minute 54.09 seconds, earning her second medal of these Games after winning silver in the team pursuit. She finished 0.06 seconds ahead of Wiklund.

Competing at her fourth Olympic Games, the 30-year-old Rijpma-de Jong joins Jutta Leerdam and Femke Kok as Dutch speed skating champions at Milano Cortina.



Netherlands' Antoinette Rijpma-de Jong celebrates after winning gold in the women's 1500m speed skating during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at Milano Speed Skating Stadium in Milan. (AFP)

Considered one of the favourites in the distance after finishing second behind Takagi in the 2025-26 ISU Speed Skating World Cup standings, Rijpma-de Jong was drawn in the penultimate pairing. She skated in the outer lane, with American Brittany Bowe along-

side her in the inner lane. Once she crossed the line, all eyes turned to Takagi, who set off in the 15th and final pair with the Czech Republic's Nikola Zdrhalova, but the 31-year-old Japanese great could only manage the sixth-fastest time.

GOLF

# McIlroy shares the lead at Riviera as Rai charges

AFP  
Los Angeles, United States

**R**ory McIlroy weathered drenching rain and gusting winds to fire a five-under par 66 and seize a share of the clubhouse lead at the Genesis Invitational, where Aaron Rai was six-under through 16 holes when darkness halted play.

Northern Ireland star McIlroy, who completed his career Grand Slam with a Masters triumph last year, had six birdies and a bogey and was joined in the clubhouse on five-under by American Jacob Bridgeman.

Both came back strong from a rain delay of almost three hours, the soaking showers giving way to gusting winds in the afternoon. World number one Scottie Scheffler was among the late starters who struggled. He was unable to find a birdie to balance a double-bogey and three bogeys that left him five-over through 10 holes and sharing last place when darkness fell.

Meanwhile England's Rai was rolling. Three-under through 12 holes, he birdied 13, 15 and 16 to surge to the top of the leaderboard, where he'll hope to stay when the round resumes. While Scheffler's tee time was delayed, McIlroy started on time and was two-under through three holes.

He came back from the delay to roll in a 30-foot birdie putt at the fourth, then added a 19-foot birdie at the eighth and a birdie at the par-five 11th.

A bogey at 16 briefly dropped him out of the lead, but McIlroy responded with a birdie at the par-five 17th.

"I've definitely got more comfortable playing in conditions like this over the past few years as I've gotten more comfortable in controlling my ball flight," McIlroy said. "I've started to just really enjoy this style of golf."

"Honestly, I haven't always had the skill set to excel in (the conditions)," he said. "To start to enjoy them and have the shots to suc-



Rory McIlroy lines up his putt on the 18th green during the first round of the The Genesis Invitational at Riviera Country Club at Pacific Palisades, California, USA. (Reuters)

ceed on days like this, that's a really satisfying thing to be able to be, you know, nearly 20 years into a career and still feel like you're getting better at some aspects of the game."

McIlroy said playing in the rain posed little problem. Play was halted as water pooled on the already soaked Riviera Country Club course - the classic layout in Pacific Palisades where he has come up empty in eight prior starts.

Instead, he said, it was the afternoon winds that made it "pretty tricky."

Bridgeman, a 26-year-old American chasing his first PGA Tour title, said the same, but he revelled in the challenge.

"It was great," he said. "The rain was tough. The wind might have been a little bit harder than the rain, but it was cool."

He got off to a jerky start, with an eagle at the first followed by a double bogey at the fourth.

But he picked up steam after

the delay with five birdies, his four-footer at the par-five 17th putting him atop the leaderboard.

"I think one of my strengths is kind of flighting shots down, hitting shots where people don't really know how far it's playing, what the number actually is and just kind of feeling it out ... I think today especially in the wind it played into my favor," Bridgeman said.

**Somi Lee (61) has career-low round, takes lead in Thailand**

South Korean Somi Lee carded a 61 - her career-low round - to move to 17-under par and take a three-stroke lead after 36 holes at the Honda LPGA Thailand yesterday.

Trailing her is World No. 1 Jeeno Thitikul, who, with her home-country crowd on her side, fired a 63 at the Siam Country Club Old Course in Pattaya, Thailand.

The players found the course extremely friendly yesterday, with scores in the 60s the norm.

Lee and Thitikul took full advantage. Neither player recorded a bogey. Lee had nine birdies and an eagle to help her reach 14-under.

Thitikul had her big day on her 23rd birthday, with the crowd singing "Happy Birthday" to her on her birdie holes. She said she will remember the day for both the celebration and her round.

"For the past two days, I have been in a good position where I just want my ball to be," she said. "So if we can put the ball where it's kind of safe, not too risky, should be not a big problem with this golf course."

Lee, obviously, also was pleased by her round.

"My shots went well overall, but even the shots that didn't go well I was able to save with my putter, so I think that's what overall went well today," she said.

Lee is looking for her second career LPGA title.

TENNIS

# Pegula fights back to beat Anisimova, sets up final with Svitolina

Reuters  
Dubai

**J**essica Pegula shook off a first-set stumble to beat fellow American Amanda Anisimova 1-6 6-4 6-3 in the semi-finals of the Dubai Tennis Championships yesterday, reaching the eighth WTA 1000 final of her career.

World number six Anisimova took less than half an hour to win the first before building a 3-1 lead in the second set.

But Pegula held her nerve and broke Anisimova three times in a row to win the second set, before securing victory in the decider.

In the final today, Pegula will take on Ukraine's Elina Svitolina who beat world number four Coco Gauff in the second semi-final.

Svitolina won 6-4, 6-7, 6-4 in the three gruelling sets.

"It's not like we have really easy matches ... we had a lot of cat and mouse points and they mostly went my way so that was good," world number five Pegula said after her fifth straight win over Anisimova.

Anisimova, who reached the finals of Wimbledon and the US Open last year, yesterday frustrated Pegula with aces throughout the match.

But Pegula, who won only six of her 16 service points in the first set, drew her opponent into longer rallies as she plotted her comeback.

Pegula made Anisimova run back and forth with short slices and won the second set with a powerful backhand, as Anisimova's hasty return went long.

An exhausted Anisimova found the net while attempting a drop shot, setting up Pegula's break point to take a decisive 3-1 lead in the third set.



Jessica Pegula of the US celebrates winning her semi-final match against Amanda Anisimova at the Dubai Championships. (Reuters)

## CHI AL SHAQAB

## Brash and Hello Jefferson continue golden run

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Britain's Scott Brash and his evergreen partner Hello Jefferson extended their flawless run on the second day of the 13th edition of CHI Al Shaqab, producing another commanding performance to win the CSI5\* 1.55m jump-off class at Al Shaqab's Longines Arena on Thursday.

Fresh from victory in Wednesday's 1.50m CSI5\* competition, the celebrated duo once again proved unbeatable, underlining their remarkable consistency as one of the sport's most successful partnerships. Following a competitive first round that featured 37 combinations, eleven riders progressed to the jump-off over Italian course designer Uliano Vezzani's demanding track, with ten returning for the decisive round.

Brash guided the 17-year-old Belgian Warmblood gelding to a brilliant fault-free round in 39.93 seconds, finishing just under a second clear of Germany's Hans-Dieter Dreher aboard Vestmalle des Cotis, who stopped the clock in 40.82 seconds. Brazil's Santiago Lambre secured third place with Zeusz after another double-clear effort in 40.86 seconds.

"Jefferson was incredible yet again," Brash said after sealing his second consecutive victory of the week. "He has such an amazing career now. He is 17 years old and probably in the form of his life. The whole team behind him keeps him in top shape."

Saudi Arabia's Abdulrahman Alrajhi finished fourth riding Lorenzo ES, narrowly ahead of Portugal's Duarte Seabra on Dourados 2, while Belgium's Niels Bruynseels also impressed by qualifying for the jump-off and eventually placing 10th with



Britain's Scott Brash onboard Hello Jefferson clears a rail during the CHI Al Shaqab.

Oakly Flandria.

Italy's Emanuele Gaudiano emerged as another standout performer, securing victories in both CSI5\* and CSI3\* competition. In the CSI5\* 145cm Table C (LR-D) class, speed proved decisive as Gaudiano piloted Julius.D to victory in 59.76 seconds. Britain's Millie Allen followed in second with Quick Diamant HR (60.80s), while American rider Kristen Vanderveen placed third aboard Bull Run's Amen (62.33s).

Gaudiano later returned to the arena to win the CSI3\* 140cm Faults and Time class with Diarouge Blue PS, narrowly edging Egypt's Ismail Osama El Borai and Gin Lady Tivoli Z by just 0.12 seconds. Qatar's Ghanim Nasser al-Qadi completed the podium riding Isis, drawing strong home support.

Saudi Arabia's Khalid Al Hadi claimed top honours in the CSI3\* 130cm Faults and Time competition with a fluent clear round aboard Capoen in 59.42 seconds. Egypt dominated the remaining podium places through Abdallah Haitham on Consagros and Seif Eldin Essam Abbas riding Heathcliff Blue.

In the CSI2\* 110cm Special Two-Phase event, Abdullah Ibrahim Abdullah of Saudi Arabia delivered the fastest double-clear performance with Erosa (25.36s). Qatar's Abdullah bin Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani secured second with Cassandra 352, while Egypt's Fatima Mohamad Alkishawi finished third riding Ippocampo de Maor.

Young Qatar riders featured strongly in the CSICh-B 105cm class, where Abdullah bin Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani guided



Italy's Emanuele Gaudiano emerged as another standout performer on Thursday at CHI Al Shaqab, securing victories in both CSI5\* and CSI3\* competitions.

Let It Be des Hurlevents to victory ahead of compatriot Abdulla Ahmed al-Khulaifi on Quenta van de Corsendonksehoeve. Sheikh Nasser Hamad al-Thani completed an all-Qatari podium aboard Equinoxe de l'Aulne.

The para dressage programme showcased high technical standards across all CPEDI3\* Grand Prix A grades. Brazil's Luiz Felipe Queiroz Menin topped Grade I aboard Ocaso Do Luar, while USA rider Fiona Howard produced the leading performance in Grade II with Ferguston (73.506). Italy's Francesca Salvade won Grade III with Escari, and the Netherlands' Sandra Jeuken secured Grade IV honours riding Nespresso. Sweden's Lena Malmström claimed victory in Grade V aboard Fabulous Fidelie.

Qatar celebrated further success in the CDI1\* Prix St-Georges, where Jassim al-Kuwari and Jack Sparrow delivered a winning score of 69.608 ahead of compatriot Wejdan Majed al-Malki and Maryam Ahmad al-Boinin.



In the CSICh-B 105cm class, Qatar's Abdullah bin Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani guided Let It Be des Hurlevents to victory.

## PREMIER LEAGUE

## Guardiola 'couldn't care less' about Arsenal stumble

City are now just five points behind Arsenal with a game in hand

AFP  
London

Pep Guardiola insists he "couldn't care less" about Arsenal's stumble letting Manchester City back into the Premier League title race. Guardiola's side were in danger of being blown away by Arsenal after their inconsistent form left the Gunners in pole position.

But second-placed City have been handed a lifeline by Arsenal's damaging draws against Wolves and Brentford. They are now just five points behind Arsenal with a game in hand and a home match against Mikel Arteta's men to come in April. If City win their remaining 12 matches they will be crowned champions for the fifth time in the last six seasons.

But Guardiola is not getting carried away by the opportunity. Instead, he remains focused on today's visit from Newcastle, when a win would close the gap on Arsenal to two points before the Gunners face Tottenham in the north London derby tomorrow. "I didn't talk about the table, or our position or something like that. I could not care less," Guardiola said. "I didn't talk about that for one second. Just Newcastle, Newcastle, Newcastle. If you ask me this question with two or three games left, I will have your answer. It's 12 games left, it's an eternity."

Having won six titles during 10 years at City, Guardiola knows the final weeks of the season will bring more twists and turns.

He also has experience of watching Arsenal let substantial leads slip away in the 2023 and 2024 title races, allowing City to snatch the trophy from their grasp.

"Many things are going to happen until the end of the season. For now it is Newcastle, a rest and after it Leeds. It has always been like that," he said. "Seventy per cent of the players are new, so they don't have the experience to live these kinds of situations. An experience is to win tomorrow. It is only one. Arsenal were nine points (ahead) when we had a game in hand, so whenever everybody is on the same games played then after that we will see the difference. I understand you want to anticipate



what is going to happen. That doesn't count. It is Newcastle, that is all."

## ARTETA URGES ARSENAL TO 'WRITE OWN DESTINY' AFTER TITLE WOBBLE

Meanwhile, Mikel Arteta challenged spluttering Arsenal to start writing their "own destiny" in north London derby at Tottenham after losing control of the Premier League title race.

The Gunners have finished as runners-up for the last three seasons and their latest untimely stumble has raised pointed questions about their ability to cope with the pressure of the title race. But Arteta is adamant his players can handle the tension, as long as they embrace the opportunity to make history.

"What I have seen is a tremendous reaction again. When you lose points with the last kick of the game, in an unpredictable manner, nobody can really understand that. But this is football," he said. "Life moves on, there's nothing we can do. It is about what happens

next. That was a chapter. In chapter 27, we draw against Wolves. In the next one it is about how we write our own destiny going forward."

Arsenal have squandered the lead in their last two matches, drawing 1-1 with Brentford and 2-2 at bottom-of-the-table Wolves.

Failing to beat Wolves after establishing a two-goal lead was especially painful, with a mix-up between keeper David Raya and defender Gabriel Magalhaes sparking Tom Edozie's stoppage-time equaliser.

"The immediate reaction is tough. It was a shock to the system. We wanted to win and we couldn't and we have to move on," Arteta said.

"But we have clear instructions. We have to live in the present. The present is beautiful, we are exactly where we want to be in every competition."

Arsenal have won just two of their last seven league games, but troubled Tottenham are in even worse form, with no wins in their previous eight top-flight matches.

## HORSE RACING

## Kendah Al Shahania claims Loyalty Cup

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

HE Sheikha Iman bint Mohammed bin Khalifa al-Thani's Kendah Al Shahania won the Loyalty Cup in style at the Al Rayyan Racecourse turf on late Thursday evening.

The bay filly, trained by Rudy Nerbonne and ridden by Marco Casamento, built on her runner-up debut to open her account in decisive fashion, settling towards the rear before unleashing a sharp burst in the straight to seize control and score 1¼ lengths win in the 1600m feature race, Graduation Plate for four-year-old Local Purebred Arabians, Class 4, contested by 10 runners. In the process, the filly, also provided her trainer a double on the card.

Early pace was set by the front-running group while Kendah Al Shahania was content to bide her time in behind, travelling comfortably as the field began to string out approaching the home turn. Turning in, Qiltan had already moved into a prominent position and struck the front, but once the eventual winner was angled into the clear she quickened decisively, reeling him in with authority and drawing away inside the final stages.

Qiltan, representing Wathan Racing and trained by Alban de Mieulle, stayed on under Soufiane Saadi to secure second, finishing a full seven lengths clear of Asfaan

Al Shahania, who ran on late under Lukas Delozier for HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Khalifa al-Thani and trainer Nerbonne.

The sizeable margin between the pair underlined how the winner and runner-up had pulled well clear of the remainder in the straight, effectively settling the race between themselves before the line.

Tabahi returned to winning form by winning the The Late Rabiah Saad Al Kaabi Cup, the 1400m race for Thoroughbred Handicap for Fillies & Mares. The five-year-old chestnut mare, in the silks of Sheih Faisal bin Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani, recorded a third win from five starts this campaign, tracking the long-time leader throughout before finding extra passing the 300m mark to strike the front and score by a length. Trained by Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, the mare was ridden by Arnaud De Lepine.

Torvar broke through in Division 2 of the 1100m Thoroughbred Handicap for Mohammed Nawaf Al-Rayes by winning The Late Rashid Mubarak Al-Shafi Cup.

Drawn wide, the five-year-old chestnut gelding was rewarded for three consecutive placed efforts, producing a display of grit and speed in the home straight as he charged from the rear to overhaul the leaders in the concluding stages and prevail by a ¼ length.

Trained by Mohammed al-Ghazali, he was ridden by Soufiane Saadi, the pair completing a treble on the day.



Marco Casamento rides Kendah Al Shahania to Loyalty Cup win at the Al Rayyan Racecourse. PICTURE: Juhaim

## IOC chief Coventry says unaware of Infantino's presence at Board of Peace meeting, will look into matter

Mian: International Olympic Committee President Kirsty Coventry said she was unaware of world football body (FIFA) chief Gianni Infantino's presence at the first meeting of The Board of Peace along with US President Donald Trump, and said she would look into the matter.

Infantino, who is also an IOC member, took part in the meeting of The Board of Peace, established under Trump with a focus on Gaza's reconstruction fund, and aimed at rebuilding the territory once

Hamas disarms.

The FIFA chief appeared on stage with several politicians, sported a red hat with 'USA' on the front and the numbers 45-47, for the two non-consecutive presidencies of Trump. Infantino also displayed the FIFA collaboration agreement with The Board of Peace, which includes building 50 mini-pitches near schools and residential areas in Gaza, five full-size pitches across multiple districts, a state-of-the-art FIFA academy and a new 20,000-seat national stadium.

"I wasn't aware of that, that we had an IOC member front and centre," Coventry told a press conference during the Milano Cortina Olympics. "Now that you guys (journalists) made us aware of it we will go back and have a look at it," she said. "The IOC Charter is very clear what it expects of its members. We will go and research into the alleged signing of documents."

The Olympic Charter states that members must always act independently of commercial and political interests. They

also cannot accept "from governments, organisations, or other parties, any mandate or instructions liable to interfere with the freedom of their action and vote," the Charter says.

"I think from the IOC's point of view we will continue to be politically neutral," Coventry said. "That's the only way for us as an organisation to ensure that we allow for there to be fairness on the field of play. That's what we will continue to do as we walk into the future."

Trump has met Infantino several times, with the United States co-hosting this summer's soccer World Cup along with Mexico and Canada.

The US President was also awarded FIFA's inaugural peace prize in December for his efforts to promote dialogue and de-escalation in some of the world's biggest hotspots, the soccer body said at the time.

Coventry, elected in 2025, has not yet met Trump, with the 2028 Summer Olympics to be held in Los Angeles.