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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

# Sadd aim to tighten grip on title as Duhail seek revival

Defending champions Sadd are top of the table, while last season's runners-up Duhail sit eighth

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

League leaders Al Sadd will look to take another decisive step towards retaining the Qatar Stars League title when they face fierce rivals Al Duhail SC in today's exciting clash at Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium.

The encounter adds another chapter to one of Qatar football's defining modern rivalries, with both sides dominating domestic honours over the past decade and regularly battling for silverware. Sadd arrive in commanding form, sitting top of the standings with four point lead and riding an eight-match winning streak that has strengthened their push for a third successive league crown.

Wolves' coach Roberto Mancini stressed the importance of maintaining focus in what he described as one of the season's toughest fixtures, noting that victories against direct rivals remain crucial in the title race. "The next match will be very important, like all matches," Mancini said. "If we want to win the league, we must beat teams such as Al Duhail and Al Arabi. We know it will be a difficult game."

He added that clashes between the two sides consistently deliver high intensity and quality, with Sadd determined to continue their winning run and move closer to the title. Captain Hassan al-Haydos echoed his coach's sentiments, expecting a demanding contest as the league enters its decisive phase.

"We expect a strong and difficult match," Al-Haydos said. "We are in the final stretch of the league and are targeting three points in every game. We were not at our best against Al Wakrah, especially



Al Sadd coach Roberto Mancini and his Al Duhail counterpart Djamel Belmadi (right) speak to the media on the eve of their Qatar Stars League match.

in the first half, and we must improve. The support of our fans will be very important during this period."

For Duhail, the match represents an opportunity to revive a challenging league campaign. Last season's runners-up currently sit eighth with 21 points following inconsistent results. Coach Djamel Belmadi expects another closely fought encounter, highlighting the long-standing competitiveness between the two clubs despite their contrasting league positions this season. "Matches between Al Sadd and Al Duhail are always tight," Belmadi

said. "The rivalry reflects the competitiveness between the two teams, and it is difficult to predict how this match will unfold."

Al Duhail enter the fixture without a win in their last three matches, most recently drawing 1-1 with Al Arabi, and will be under pressure to deliver a strong response against the leaders.

Meanwhile, third-placed Al Gharafa face Al Rayyan at Thani bin Jassim Stadium in another marquee clash. Al Gharafa are aiming to halt a three-match losing streak that has damaged their title hopes, while fourth-placed Al Rayyan, boosted by a 2-1



win over Al Ahli, will rely on attacking duo Roger Guedes and Aleksandar Mitrovi as they target a move into the top three.

Elsewhere, Umm Salal host Al Wakrah at Al Khor Stadium, with both sides seeking valuable points. Umm Salal have revived their survival hopes with consecutive wins, while Al Wakrah aim to bounce back after defeat to Al Sadd.

Struggling Al Ahli meet bottom side Al Shahania at Al Thumama Stadium in a crucial relegation battle, while high-flying Al Shamal take on Qatar seeking a third straight victory, although they will be without suspended striker Baghdad

Boundedjah. Round 17 concludes with Al Arabi facing Al Saliya, with both teams eager to recover dropped points.

**QATAR STARS LEAGUE FIXTURES**  
(All matches kick-off at 9:30pm)

**Today:** Al Gharafa vs Al Rayyan at Thani bin Jassim Stadium; Al Duhail vs Al Sadd at Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium

**Tomorrow:** Umm Salal vs Al Wakrah at Al Khor Stadium; Al Ahli vs Al Shahania at Al Thumama Stadium

**Saturday:** Al Shamal vs Qatar SC at Al Shamal Stadium; Al Arabi vs Al Saliya at Al Thumama Stadium

SPOTLIGHT

## Mbappe season on ice ahead of silverware sprint, World Cup

AFP  
Madrid

French superstar **Kylian Mbappe** may have to put his season on hold because of a knee problem, with his main goals fast coming into view - a first major trophy with Real Madrid, and a second World Cup triumph.

Little more than 100 days from the start of the 2026 World Cup, the France captain seems to be paying the price for efforts he has made to carry his team this season. According to several sources, Mbappe, hampered by damage to the outer ligament of his left knee since late 2025, had to withdraw from Madrid's squad to face Benfica in the Champions League play-off round last night because he felt "pain that was too persistent" in training.

Mbappe is expected to rest for at least 10 days so he can recover from the issue which has troubled him over the past couple of months. His absence for one of the most important matches of the season, confirmed by Madrid, is a concern for Los Blancos, who lost at Osasuna in La Liga on Saturday to allow Barcelona back in front in the title race.

Beyond a personal quest for glory, having finished his first season at Madrid without a major trophy, the intense pressure and demand for results at the Santiago Bernabeu have contributed to Mbappe playing through the pain in recent weeks. "It's important to highlight the immense effort Kylian is making and the fact that he's trying to help us out on the pitch," said Madrid coach Alvaro Arbeloa on Tuesday.

Mbappe flew to Saudi Arabia in January to appear in the Spanish Super Cup final against Barcelona as a substitute, having missed the semi-final because of knee pain, but his team fell to defeat.

It is hard to imagine where the Spanish giants would be without their No 10's supreme finishing ability, as Mbappe has netted 38 goals in 33 matches this season across all competitions. At least winger Vinicius Junior has finally hit top form after a slow start to the season and could pick up some of the slack, along with promising young striker Gonzalo Garcia, who Madrid fans are keen to see more of.

Mbappe is top scorer in both La Liga and the



Champions League, even in a dysfunctional Madrid side that sacked coach Xabi Alonso in January. If they are knocked out by Jose Mourinho's Benfica on Wednesday, a result that would trigger a fresh crisis, Madrid might be tempted to push their striker to play to salvage their season.

Should they progress then Mbappe will be eyeing the round of 16 clash against Manchester City or Sporting Lisbon, with the first leg set for March 10 or 11. The next international break (March 23-30), when France face Brazil and Colombia in the United States, would come at the perfect time to give him another breather - but could trigger a new club-versus-country conflict.

France are counting on their captain, a source close to the national team said, adding that Mbappe is in "regular contact" with coach Didier Deschamps.

Deschamps is due to announce his squad list for the USA trip on March 19, with the tour including promotional events with American sportswear company Nike, who outfit both the French national team and Mbappe.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

## Last-gasp penalty sends Atalanta past Dortmund and into last 16

AFP  
Bergamo, Italy

A stoppage-time **Lazar Samardzic** penalty took Atalanta to a 4-1 victory over Borussia Dortmund, sending the Italian side to the last 16 of the Champions League 4-3 on aggregate.

Dortmund led 2-0 from the first leg but were on the back foot from the opening whistle, with Atalanta neutralising the visitors' advantage by half-time thanks to goals from Gianluca Scamacca and Davide Zappacosta. Mario Pasalic gave the hosts the lead in the tie but Karim Adeyemi's solo effort dragged Dortmund level.

With the match set for extra time, a late VAR review showed that Ramy Bensebaini had caught Nikola Krstovic with his boot in the box. The referee duly pointed to the spot and Samardzic blasted home in the 98th minute to send through the Serie A side with virtually the last kick of the match. Atalanta will meet either Premier League leaders Arsenal or German champions Bayern Munich in the last 16.

The victory and qualification continues Atalanta's resurgence under Raffaele Palladino, who took over from the struggling Ivan Juric in November. Under Palladino, Atalanta have improved and are unbeaten domestically in 10 matches in 2026. The victory also helped save the blushes of Italy's Champions League sides in this season's competition.

Inter Milan's surprise elimination to Bodo/Glimt on Tuesday left



Atalanta's Lazar Samardzic scores a penalty during the UEFA Champions League second leg play off match against Borussia Dortmund. (Reuters)

Atalanta and Juventus, who host Galatasaray later on Wednesday but are trailing 5-2 from the first leg, as the only remaining Serie A sides. Regardless of the evolving formats over the years, not since 1987-88 had a Serie A club failed to make it to the last 16 of the European Cup.

Despite their first-leg advantage, Dortmund coach Niko Kovac said Monday his side's chances of reaching the last 16 were "50-50" and promised not to sit back and defend the first-leg lead. Visiting goalkeeper Gregor Kobel saved a Nicola Zalewski effort with four minutes gone but Atalanta broke through a minute later when Scamacca tucked home with ease from close range after Bensebaini's failed clearance.

With the help of Kobel's frequent clean-up efforts, Dortmund found their feet but were stung be-

fore half-time when Zappacosta's speculative attempt took a heavy deflection off Bensebaini and went in just before the break. With Dortmund's first-leg lead eroded, Atalanta continued to turn the screw. Pasalic headed in a Marten de Roon cross early in the second half to grab an overall lead and full control of the tie.

Subbed on with 20 minutes remaining, Adeyemi gave the visitors hope when he curled in a superb effort from the edge of the box to level up the tie with 15 minutes left. The sides looked set for extra time but Bensebaini's poor night continued when he connected with Krstovic's head late in stoppage time.

Despite touching the ball first, VAR found the contact to be dangerous and the referee handed Bensebaini a second yellow before pointing to the spot.

## PREVIEW

## India eye team changes for Zimbabwe tie



India captain Suryakumar Yadav during a net session in Mumbai on Wednesday. (@BCCI)

Reuters  
Kolkata

India wicketkeeper-batter Sanju Samson will be under consideration for today's Twenty20 World Cup game against Zimbabwe as the team look to reshuffle their side, batting coach Sitanshu Kotak said ahead of the must-win match.

Kotak admitted India had played their "worst game in two years" in the 76-run loss to South Africa on Sunday but stressed the need to focus on combinations who could yield the best results rather than

dwelling on pressure. "There can be changes, yes. And obviously, it goes without saying that we discussed, because there are two lefty openers, number three is left-handed and opposition's bowling off-spin," Kotak told reporters yesterday.

"Because in the three games, we lost a wicket in the first over, obviously any team would think. So we are thinking and we will see how it goes because we never decide the team too early.

"Definitely there will be thought about playing him (Samson), there is no doubt. But nets don't give any indication."

Despite the setback, Kotak said India, who need to win their remaining two matches in the Super Eight to stay in the hunt for a semi-final place, would stick to their aggressive approach.

"We have to be very positive and play the same brand of cricket which has given us the success and clearly that is the way we will play, there will not be any difference," he said.

Samson could provide a spark to India's opening partnership, with Abhishek Sharma struggling for form after recording three ducks from four appearances.

However, Kotak backed the

under-fire opener, attributing his poor run to health issues.

"His health was a bit bad. And then after that, he didn't have that much momentum. But last game, he looked good," Kotak said. "So our job is to keep him in a good frame of mind and once he starts hitting the ball again, you will see the same Abhishek again, there is no doubt." India will be boosted by the return of finisher Rinku Singh, who flew home due to a family emergency. "Rinku, his father wasn't well so he went back and I think he is coming back today evening. So, hopefully he will be back today evening," Kotak said.

## MATCH REPORT

## New Zealand fight back to eliminate edgy Sri Lanka

Santner's 47 off 26 balls leads New Zealand's recovery as Sri Lanka's top-order collapses in run chase



New Zealand's captain Mitchell Santner plays a shot during the T20 World Cup Super Eights match against Sri Lanka in Colombo yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters  
Colombo

New Zealand recovered from a poor start to crush Sri Lanka by 61 runs in the Twenty20 World Cup Super Eights and eliminate the co-hosts from the tournament yesterday.

Mitchell Santner led New Zealand's recovery with a captain's knock of 47 off 26 balls after coming in with his side in huge trouble at 84-5 to power them to a competitive 168-7 at the R Premadasa Stadium.

Sri Lanka managed 107-8 in reply, never recovering from a top-order collapse to succumb to their second defeat in the Super Eight stage of the 20-team tournament.

Rachin Ravindra (4-27) and Matt Henry (2-3) impressed with the ball for New Zealand.

"It's embarrassing to disappoint the home crowd, they've been very supportive," Sri Lanka captain Dasun Shanaka said. "We wanted to restrict them to 130 but, to be honest, they played really well so we must give them credit."

Having lost to England in their

first Super Eight match, it was a do-or-die game for Sri Lanka and they initially showed a sense of urgency with the ball after electing to field.

## NEW ZEALAND START WELL

New Zealand got off to a strong start before losing openers Finn Allen and Tim Seifert in successive overs.

They were 75-2 in the 10th over before the Sri Lankan spinners wreaked havoc to reduce them to 84-6.

Maheesh Theekshana (3-30) removed the well-set Ravindra (32) and Mark Chapman in the same over to turn the screw.

Santner joined Cole McConchie, who made 31 not out, in a rapid 47-ball stand of 84 that proved decisive.

Santner smacked four sixes as New Zealand plundered 70 runs from the last four overs to ensure their bowlers had a decent total to defend.

Henry bowled Pathum Nissanka for a duck with the first ball of the Sri Lankan innings and deceived Charith Asalanka with a slower delivery in his next over.

Player of the match Ravin-

dra then whittled out Sri Lanka's middle order to derail the chase. The left-arm spinner sent down a two-wicket over in which Kusal Mendis and Pavan Rathnayake were stumped to reduce Sri Lanka to 29-4 in the ninth over.

Ravindra also dismissed Shanaka for three to effectively seal their victory. Kamindu Mendis (31) and Dunith Wellalage (29) offered brief resistance but Sri Lanka were never in the chase.

"It's one of those wickets where, if you can get in and give yourself a bit of time, you can cash in," Santner said.

"It was pretty tough to start out there, so to hit 160 was nice."

Group Two leaders England have qualified for the semi-finals with four points from two matches.

New Zealand, who came into the match with one point from their washed-out match against Pakistan, have three points.

## BRIEF SCORES

**New Zealand 168 for 7** (Santner 47, Ravindra 32, Theekshana 3-30, Chameera 3-38) **beat Sri Lanka 107 for 8** (Kamindu 31, Wellalage 29, Ravindra 4-27, Henry 2-3) **by 61 runs**

## COMMENT

## No Ahmedabad advantage for Proteas against West Indies: Maharaj

AFP  
Ahmedabad, India

South Africa spinner **Keshav Maharaj** denied yesterday that his side will have an advantage in their T20 World Cup showdown against the West Indies in Ahmedabad after playing four of their five matches there.

Both sides come into today's crucial Super Eights clash off the back of five straight wins in the tournament and the winners will put themselves in pole position for a semi-final berth.

South Africa have played all but one match in Ahmedabad, including a thumping 76-run win over India in their first Super Eights match that silenced an 80,000-strong crowd.

The West Indies have been playing exclusively in Mumbai and Kolkata, where conditions are very different to the cavernous Narendra Modi stadium.

"It's nice to not travel," said left-arm spinner Maharaj, who took 3-24 as co-hosts India were routed for 111 on Sunday.

"But from a pitch point of view, I think every game has been very different.

"The four matches that we've played here, conditions have played very differently throughout the game.

"So I don't see it too much of an advantage.

"It's just making sure that we adapt quicker rather than later compared to the opposition."

West Indies batting coach Floyd Reifer said if his players stuck to their game plan they could negate any edge South Africa might hold.

"They have an advantage of playing most of their games at the



same venue," Reifer told reporters. "But like I said, once we plan properly and execute our plans, then we will play a good game of cricket.

"So for us, we're not worried too much about the venues and who played there, who didn't play there.

"For us, no, it's just coming now and understanding what's needed to be done and execute."

## FLAWLESS RECORD

Unbeaten West Indies are being underestimated despite their flawless record so far in the Twenty20 World Cup, batting coach Reifer said.

"There's no point to prove for us and we came here like any other team to win the competition," Reifer told reporters on Wednesday.

"A lot of people have us flying under the radar but we plan every game to go in there with a positive mentality to win cricket games."

West Indies are chasing World Cup glory for the first time in a decade, having last triumphed in 2016, and Reifer credits their success to squad depth rather than

star power. "We have quality batters and we're not like the other teams - depending on one or two batters.

"Everybody has stepped up every game and put in performances and we've been consistent in doing that," he said.

South African spinner Maharaj believes his side, finalists in the last edition, have finally developed the character to overcome the shortcomings that have historically derailed their World Cup campaigns.

"In previous World Cups, we never crossed over those small moments... If the character is strong in winning those small moments, it propels us to go further on in this tournament," Maharaj said.

"Despite the energy buzzing through the camp after Sunday's 76-run victory over India, Maharaj warned against complacency against a West Indies side fresh off a mammoth 107-run win over Zimbabwe.

"We're not getting carried away at that. We still know that there's a lot of cricket to be played in this tournament," the 36-year-old said.

South Africa will be playing their fifth match of the tournament in Ahmedabad but Maharaj said that would not give them any advantage and stressed the need for clear execution and adaptation.

"West Indies have a way of turning up in these events and we know the danger they possess from an explosive point of view," he told reporters.

Regardless of today's outcome, the group featuring defending champions India, West Indies, Zimbabwe and South Africa will remain wide open, with all four teams having an equal chance of reaching the semi-finals.

## SPOTLIGHT

## England's Brook gains redemption after 'hardest winter of my life'

AFP  
Mumbai, India

Richly talented but much maligned, England captain **Harry Brook** finally achieved redemption at Pallekele stadium in Kandy after a torrid few months - and came of age as a leader.

His match-winning century against Pakistan on Tuesday will go down as the finest innings of the 27-year-old's white-ball career because it single-handedly took his side into a fifth successive T20 World Cup semi-final.

Facing a tricky chase of 165 against Pakistan at the Pallekele stadium in Kandy, England could have been in dire straits when they lost Phil Salt first ball of the innings.

But Brooks, who normally bats at number five, strode to the wicket first drop in a massive statement of intent that said



"leave it to me, lads". Before the tournament there had been calls for Brook's resignation after he had to apologise for a Halloween incident on the white-ball tour of New Zealand, where he was punished by a nightclub bouncer - in his own words "a terrible mistake".

On the eve of the T20 World Cup Brook admitted lying about being on his own that night to protect his teammates at the

time. All this had emerged after an Ashes debacle where Brook failed to score a century and was castigated in the English press - and mocked in Australia - for throwing his wicket away with reckless shots time and again.

"It's probably been the hardest winter of my life to be honest," Brook told reporters after the match.

"There's been a lot of stuff behind the scenes. It's just nice to see some rewards from my hard work away from the ground."

Brook was more modest, saying his one-day international century against Sri Lanka last month had been better.

"I actually think I preferred the Sri Lanka ODI to be honest," said Brook.

But that was in a bilateral series; this one was in a World Cup match.

"It's certainly up there in the context of the game and the situation that we found ourselves."

## Darwin to host Test series against Bangladesh

**Sydney:** International Test cricket will return to the Australian city of Darwin for the first time in over two decades in August, organisers said yesterday as they unveiled the schedule for an upcoming series against Bangladesh.

Cricket Australia said the first of two Tests against Bangladesh would kick off on August 13 in the Northern Territory capital, the first such match there since July 2004 when they hosted Sri Lanka.

The second Test from August 22-26 will be played in Mackay

in the eastern state of Queensland.

## 'Delighted to bring Test cricket to northern Australia'

"We're delighted to bring Test cricket to northern Australia and look forward to a fantastic series against Bangladesh," Cricket Australia CEO Todd Greenberg said.

"It is no secret the international calendar is now crowded and we're fortunate to have world class facilities available in August ensuring we have another window for Test cricket outside

summer," he told reporters yesterday.

The Tests will be the Australian men's first since thrashing England 4-1 in an Ashes series that wrapped up in January. Touted as a close contest, the Ashes was all over inside three Tests with Australia superior in all departments despite missing some key players.

After the Bangladesh series, Australia will head to South Africa in October for three Test matches against the hosts in Durban, Gqeberha and Cape Town.

MOTOGP

# Marquez targets eighth title as season opens in Thailand

AFP  
Buriram

Defending champion **Marc Marquez** launches his bid for a record-equalling eighth MotoGP world title as the season opens this week in Thailand. The Spaniard capped a remarkable comeback from injury last year, winning his first championship since 2019 after a gruelling struggle that almost forced him to hang up his helmet.

The 33-year-old Ducati rider was in imperious form all season, winning 25 races including sprints and clinching the title with five events to spare. Marquez missed the last four races of the season after injuring his collarbone at the Indonesia grand prix with the title already in the bag. Now he is ready to go again, with his sights firmly set on equalling Italian legend Giacomo Agostini's record eight premier class world titles. "We must fight for the title one more time," Marquez told reporters in pre-season testing in Malaysia.

"We have the pressure. I mean, if you're in the Ducati Lenovo team then you must fight for the championship, and that is what we will try to do."

Marquez spent the winter rehabbing from his latest injury and he admitted that he was not quite back to full fitness in Malaysia.

He still put in an impressive performance, although it was his brother Alex Marquez who clocked the fastest times in Sepang. Alex Marquez finished last season as runner-up and he could well challenge his brother for the title again in a field packed with talent. No fewer than five current or former world champions will line up on the grid. As well as Marc Marquez, the list includes Jorge Martin, Francesco Bagnaia, Fabio Quartararo and Joan Mir.

Martin won the title in 2024 but his campaign last year was wrecked by injuries, which have continued to trouble him into the new year. Bagnaia had a season to forget, finishing fifth overall.

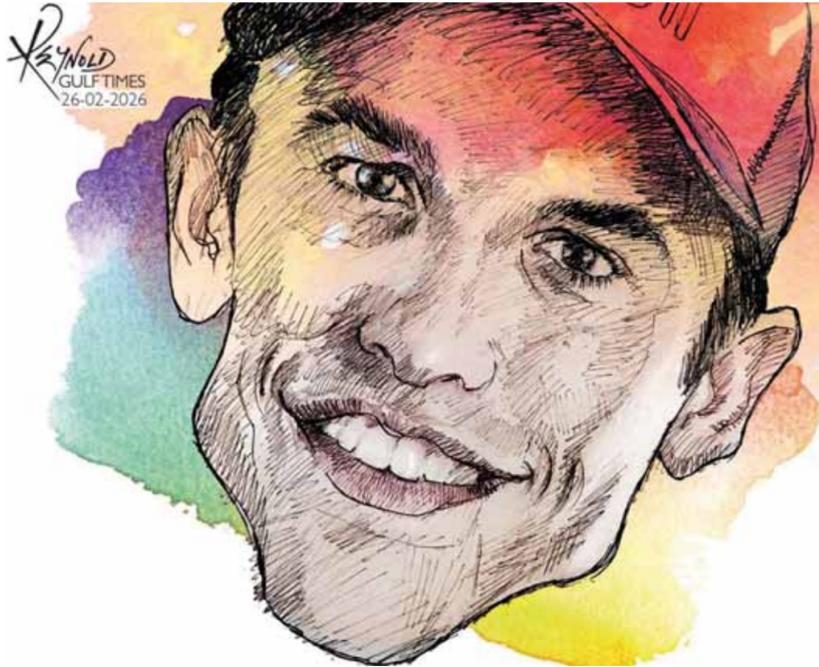
The Italian will be desperate to rediscover the form that led him to the world title in 2022 and 2023, and he said in Malaysia that he was feeling good on his bike. "Being able to ride in the way I want and the way I prefer is much better, also for the technicians who need to understand more our feelings," said Bagnaia, Marquez's Ducati team-mate.

"So with this kind of feeling, we

can work more, we can understand the items."

Aprilia's Marco Bezzecchi impressed last season, winning three grands prix overall including the final two of the campaign. The Italian has made a strong start to 2026 and was fastest at the second pre-season test in Thailand last week, setting a new lap record in Buriram. Pedro Acosta of KTM also did well last year and he will be confident of turning his youthful promise into a first grand prix win this season.

The grid welcomes a new face in Toprak Razgatlioglu, a three-time Superbike world champion who is set to become the first rider from Turkey to compete in MotoGP. Known for his gravity-defying "stoppie" celebration, where he rides balancing only on his bike's front wheel, the flamboyant 29-year-old brings spectacular skill to the competition. Brazil's Diogo Moreira, last season's Moto2 world champion, is another new addition after joining Pro Honda LCR. Moreira will get the chance to race in his home country as MotoGP returns to Brazil for the first time since 1992. This year's competition will be the last before radical new bike regulations are introduced for the 2027 season.



TENNIS

# Auger-Aliassime, Medvedev march on at Dubai Open

MEDVEDEV TOO STRONG FOR 40-YEAR-OLD WAWRINKA

AFP  
Dubai

Felix Auger-Aliassime stamped his ticket to the quarter-finals of the Dubai Open yesterday with a 6-4, 6-4 win over Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard, while Daniil Medvedev put an end to Stanislas Wawrinka's tournament.

Canadian top seed Auger-Aliassime overcame the big-serving Frenchman thanks to an impressive break-point conversion rate as he managed to make the most of three of the five break-points he forced on Mpetshi Perricard's serve. Consecutive breaks in the seventh and ninth games of the opening set allowed the world number eight to seize the initiative.

Auger-Aliassime pounced again early in the second set to get his nose in front and then managed to serve out to book a meeting with Jiri Lehecka in the last eight.

The Czech eliminated Spain's Pablo Carreno Busta 7-6 (8/6), 6-4 to progress through the round of 16.

"It definitely didn't start the way I wanted," said the World No 8 Auger-Aliassime, who lost to Stefanos Tsitsipas in last year's final.

"Obviously, there's a bit of shade on the court, different feelings, different sensations during the day, but once I got settled in, I felt like I was returning well. I just thought to myself, 'I'll get my chances' and I did - I took them and came back brilliantly."

On dealing with Mpetshi Perricard's powerful serve, Auger-Aliassime said he was actively trying to drag his opponent around the court. "Obviously, I had a few double faults to start the match, but after I cleaned that up, I was way more efficient from 3-0 down," he said.

"Also just maybe moving him a little bit more; not playing in one



Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime in action during his Dubai Open match against France's Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard yesterday. (Reuters)

spot, because he's so powerful when he's not moving. It's different if he starts moving, so you have got to be smart and adjust tactically to try to find a way to win."

Auger-Aliassime, who has now reached at least the quarterfinals three times already this year after winning in Montpellier and getting to the final in Rotterdam, will meet Jiri Lehecka next.

The Czech, seeded eighth this week, saw off Spanish qualifier Pablo Carreno Busta 7-6 (6), 6-4 to reach his second successive

quarterfinal following a straight-sets defeat to Arthur Fils in Doha last week.

In a battle of former Grand Slam winners, Russia's Medvedev beat Wawrinka 6-2, 6-3.

The 40-year-old Swiss will retire at the end of the season and was honoured on-court after his defeat.

"It's my last time here, but I always had amazing support from you guys," 2016 champion Wawrinka told the crowd.

"It's always special. The reason

why I kept playing for so long is because of those emotions that I receive on court, but I think at 40 it's time to play for one last year. I'm enjoying it a lot."

"Dubai has always been special," said Wawrinka, who won the 2014 Australian Open, 2015 French Open, and 2016 US Open.

"Since I first arrived on tour, Dubai was always a tournament you look for: So many great players, so many amazing champions play here. One of the biggest on the ATP Tour. I had the opportunity to win it in '16, so for me it was amazing to receive a wildcard this year and have the chance to play here this week. It was not the best finish, but Daniil is a tough and great player. I tried, but he was better than me."

Third seed Medvedev will face Jenson Brooksby in the next round, after the American defeated seventh-seeded Russian Karen Khachanov in straight sets.

"It's amazing to play against him for what might be one last time," said Medvedev.

"But it's also special because usually you sit and wait for your opponent to make a speech only in the final, so it was cool to see the tournament make this gesture to Stan. It's not his last tournament here, but it's his last tournament here, so it's cool to see a legend like Stan being appreciated."

"It's amazing to play against him for what might be one last time," said Medvedev.

"But it's also special because usually you sit and wait for your opponent to make a speech only in the final, so it was cool to see the tournament make this gesture to Stan. It's not his last tournament here, so it's cool to see a legend like Stan being appreciated."

Andrey Rublev also continued a fine Middle East swing by battling through 6-4, 6-7 (5-7), 6-3 against France's Ugo Humbert.

AL THUMAMA RAMADAN TOURNAMENT

# Al Zaeem, Al Wajba register victories

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Al Zaeem stormed to a resounding 5-0 victory over Al Doha as the third edition of the Al Thumama Ramadan Tournament continued at Al Furjan Stadium in the Al Thumama area.

Al Zaeem delivered a dominant display, with Youssef Bassem Hassan named Man of the Match after a standout performance.

In the second fixture, Abdullah Bin Turki edged Al Thumama 1-0 in a closely contested encounter, while Tamim Mohammed al-Qudah claimed the Man of the Match award.

Al Wajba secured a 2-1 win over Al Rayyan in the third match of the day, with Mahfouz Nour El Din earning Man of the Match honours.

The third edition held in cooperation with the Qatar Sports for All Federation features 13 teams divided into two groups.

Hassan al-Ishaq, Head of the Tournament's Organising Committee and member of the Municipal Council, said the competition continues to grow in stature.

"We are delighted with the large turnout for the tournament this year, which reflects the great confidence in the tournament and its social and sporting objectives," al-Ishaq said.

"We are always keen to provide a safe and competitive environment for our children aged 10 to 14, contributing to honing their talents and strengthening the values of sportsmanship among them."

He added: "The intensity of the matches makes it difficult to predict the winner, and this is what makes the tournament so enjoyable."



## Van der Poel to make season bow at Omloop Het Nieuwsblad

Former road race world champion Mathieu van der Poel will start his season at Omloop Het Nieuwsblad in Belgium this weekend, his Alpecin-Premier Tech team announced yesterday.

One-day classics specialist Van der Poel ended his winter cyclo-cross campaign unbeaten earlier this month after winning a record eighth world title before taking some time off to go skiing. After a winter training camp in Spain, he is now turning his focus to the road, starting on Saturday with the maiden cobbled classic of the campaign.

After Omloop Het Nieuwsblad, the 31-year-old will also ride the Tirreno-Adriatico week-long stage race and then embark on his usual one-day classics campaign: Milano-San Remo, E3 Saxo Classic, In Flanders Fields (previously known as Gent-Wevelgem), Tour of Flanders and Paris-Roubaix.

"After a few focused weeks of preparation, he now feels race-ready and confident to line up at Omloop Het Nieuwsblad, the opening race in Belgium," Alpecin-Premier Tech said.

"His programme for the remainder of the spring mirrors last season's successful structure," they added.

Van der Poel, the 2023 world road race champion, has won eight Monuments in his career including the Tour of Flanders a joint-record three times, Paris-Roubaix three times and Milan-San Remo twice. Also a two-time winner of E3, Van der Poel has claimed success in other one-day classics such as Strade Bianche, Amstel Gold and Dwars door Vlaanderen but has never won Omloop.

Van der Poel, a Tour de France and Giro d'Italia stage winner, is among the leading contenders for Omloop, alongside his long-time Belgian rival Wout van Aert.

## Taylor to hang up gloves after Dublin farewell fight this year

Ireland's undisputed super-lightweight champion Katie Taylor has said she will retire after one final fight in Dublin this year, with the iconic Croke Park stadium topping her wish list for the career-ending bout.

The 39-year-old boxer, who has not fought since defeating Amanda Serrano in their trilogy clash in New York in July, confirmed her retirement plans but no opponent or exact date as been decided.

"We're still trying to figure the details out but I do plan on having one more fight this year. It's kind of like my retirement fight. It has been an amazing journey, the whole lot of it," Taylor told RTE Sport.

Taylor, who has enjoyed a decorated career

spanning two decades and holds a remarkable 25-1 professional record, said ending her boxing journey on home soil had always been part of her plan.

"Over these last 20 years I've had the highs and the lows. It's just been an incredible, remarkable career and I've always wanted to end my career here in Ireland," she said.

"That's what we're hoping and preparing for, to have one last fight. It is going to be an amazing celebration."

Taylor expressed her strong desire to stage the farewell fight at Croke Park, though the 2012 Olympic gold medalist acknowledged other Dublin venues remained options.

"I just want to fight in Dublin to end my career.

Obviously we're still hoping for Croke Park, we're hanging on to a bit of hope that it can happen," Taylor said.

"If it doesn't happen there are plenty of options there. I have obviously fought in the 3Arena a couple of times, the Aviva Stadium is also there. "But Croke Park would be top of the list. Fighting my last fight in our most iconic arena, how special would that be?"

Taylor, who was designated 'Champion in Recess' as she stepped away from boxing last year, said her farewell bout could take place in July or August.

"Either way I'm in the gym for whenever and whoever it will be. I'm staying sharp and ready," she added.

## FOOTBALL

# Bodo/Glimt topple Champions League giants in 'fairytale'

Scandinavians edge Italian powerhouse Inter Milan to reach last 16



Bodo/Glimt's players celebrate after their win over Inter Milan in the UEFA Champions League second leg play off match at San Siro stadium. (AFP)

AFP  
Oslo

In the space of just over a month, three massive football names, Manchester City, Atletico Madrid, and now Inter Milan, have fallen to Bodo/Glimt – a small Norwegian club based inside the Arctic Circle.

Having already beaten Inter at home 3-1, the Scandinavians edged the Italians 2-1 at the iconic San Siro on Tuesday to reach the last 16 of the Champions League. The victory over the three-time Champions League winners, who are sitting pretty atop Serie A, continued Bodo's surprise tour de force in the competition. "This is the greatest club achievement ever by a Norwegian team," Norway coach Stale Solbakken said. While their league season has been over since November, Bodo/Glimt have won all their European matches since the start of the year.

Before twice overturning leads by Inter, they beat Manchester City, led by compatriot Erling Braut Haaland, 3-1 in Norway, and also toppled Atletico 2-1 in Madrid. It's a feat few would have seen coming. Bodo is a small coastal city north of the Arctic circle, which many would struggle to find on a map, with only 50,000 inhabitants. Far from almost everything and battered by

icy sea winds Bodo/Glimt ("glimt" meaning "glimmer" in Norwegian) keep the flame alive in a city plunged into darkness during winter months. Their cramped and outdated Aspmyra Stadium – built in 1966 – can hold just over 8,200 spectators and the team came close to bankruptcy in 2016.

It is made up almost entirely of Norwegians and they have been working wonders since a return to the Eliteserien, Norway's first division, in 2018. Since then, they have been crowned national champions in four of the last six campaigns. Last season they become the first Norwegian team to play in the semi-finals of a major European competition with their run in the Europa League.

"It's so important for football that Glimt are doing this, that in 2026 it's still possible for a small club to build itself up from almost nothing," Mads Skauge, vice-president of the club's supporters' group J-Feltet, said. "At a time when there is so much money in football, it's truly unique. I can't find any other example in modern history of a run as close to a fairytale as the one Glimt have had," Skauge added.

Today, Bodo/Glimt's fan base extends far beyond the town, and even outside Norway. The club's shirts are sold in Asia, and media from around the world are coming to report on the

phenomenon. The recipe for success is a team with no egos, where everyone knows their role.

"It's a team in the truest sense of the word. There are no big stars, no freeloaders," Skauge said. "Everyone clearly knows their role and if they don't fulfil it, they're out," Skauge added.

They have also adopted a style of play focused on attack, no matter the opponent. "With so much repetition (in training), they play so fast that even the best teams struggle to keep up," Skauge said.

To this they have now added a solid backbone. Bodo/Glimt finished last season in second place with by far the best attack and the best defence of the Norwegian league.

"We've dared to follow our own path, to be bold, to find our own way of doing things and, each time, we assess and move forward, maybe even a bit more than we would have dreamed," coach Kjetil Knutsen said. Now confidence is sky-high – to the point where the players are daring to shed their traditional Nordic humility. "We are incredibly strong. What we're achieving is simply huge, we can beat anyone," forward Jens Petter Hauge, who scored the first goal against Inter said.

Their next opponents – who will either be Manchester City once again or Sporting Lisbon – have been warned.

## SPOTLIGHT

## FIFA boss 'very reassured' about World Cup in Mexico despite violence

AFP  
Barranquilla, Colombia

FIFA boss Gianni Infantino said on Tuesday he was "very reassured" about Mexico's hosting of games in the football World Cup, in his first comments on the violence triggered by the killing of a drug cartel leader.

"Very reassured, everything's good. It's going to be spectacular," Infantino said in the Colombian city of Barranquilla, two days after cartel members went on a rampage – including in host city Guadalajara – over the army's killing of their leader Nemesio "El Mencho" Oseguera.

Mexico is one of the three host countries for the June 11-July 19 World Cup, along with the United States and Canada.

The country as a whole, but particularly Guadalajara, was shaken by the violence that followed the killing of the leader of the powerful Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG).

At least 74 people were killed during the operation to capture him at a ranch near Guadalajara and subsequent clashes between the security forces and suspected cartel members. Only one was a civilian, according to the government, but residents and tourists alike were left scurrying for cover as cartel gunmen blocked roads in 20 of Mexico's 32 states and torched vehicles and businesses.

"It feels like we're in a war zone," Javier Perez, a 41-year-old engineer, said in the parking lot of a grocery store replete with burnt-out cars in the Jalisco tourist resort of Puerto Vallarta. The images of anarchy and violence were beamed around the world less than four months before the start of the World Cup, while FIFA on Monday refused to comment.

Infantino spoke at a Colombian Football Federation event. However, Infantino's optimism was not reflected by the Portuguese Football Federation, who cast doubt on whether their team would play a friendly on March 29 in Mexico City. The federation said it was "closely monitoring the delicate situation currently unfolding in Mexico."

It added that the safety of players, coaches and supporters was a top priority and security considerations would be the deciding factor. Mexico national team coach Javier Aguirre was more upbeat, declaring: "All is

going ahead as planned." Earlier, Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum assured that there was "no risk" to World Cup fans and said the situation was "gradually returning to normal." Guadalajara, the capital of Jalisco state, will host four group-stage matches.

Mexico City and the north-eastern city of Monterrey will also host games. Both cities were spared by the recent unrest. In addition to the four matches, including one of the most anticipated of the first round between Uruguay and Spain, Guadalajara will co-host with Monterrey the playoff tournament that will determine the last two teams to qualify for the World Cup at the end of March.

Jalisco Governor Pablo Lemus ruled out the prospect of Guadalajara being dropped from the tournament over security concerns, saying there was "absolutely no risk" of a change in the line-up. All eyes will be on the central state of Queretaro, where Mexico were playing Iceland for a friendly. A first-division game was suspended on Sunday in Queretaro over the violence.

Oseguera was one of the most-wanted men in the United States and Mexico. He had a \$15mn US bounty on his head. Oseguera was a founding member of CJNG, which was formed in 2009 and grew into one of the biggest, most violent drug cartels in Mexico, overtaking the Sinaloa cartel of jailed kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman.

Mexico confirmed that he was captured with the help of "complementary information" from US authorities, but insists no US forces took part in the raid. As the fallout from the violence continued to reverberate nationwide, Japanese car manufacturer Honda announced that it had suspended activities at its assembly plant in Guadalajara.

"As a precautionary measure, our operations in our installations in Guadalajara were temporarily suspended on Monday, February 23," Daniela Sanchez, a spokesperson for the car factory, told AFP, explaining that the automotive giant was currently "assessing the (security) situation."

Mexico is a major automotive hub with several major manufacturers, including Ford, General Motors, BMW, and Audi, assembling vehicles in the country for the North American and European markets.

## Carrick hails 'ruthless' Man United match-winner Sesko

**Liverpool:** Manchester United boss Michael Carrick praised the impact of super-sub Benjamin Sesko after the Slovenian's cool finish earned a 1-0 win at Everton on Monday night.

Sesko is yet to start in Carrick's six matches in charge but has come off the bench to net in three of his last four appearances with vital goals. The 22-year-old also scored a late winner against Fulham and rescued a point against West Ham deep into stoppage time in United's previous outing.

Sesko started the move that led to the winning goal as all of United's £200mn trio of attacking signings last summer combined to great effect. Matheus Cunha picked out the run of Bryan Mbeumo, who squared for Sesko to

slot home his sixth goal in seven appearances since Ruben Amorim was sacked in January.

Victory lifted United into the Premier League's top four, three points clear of Liverpool and Chelsea in the battle for a place in next season's Champions League. "It was a ruthless finish, I like the way he put it away with real confidence," said Carrick, who has five wins and one draw since taking charge at Old Trafford. "Great play from Matheus and Bryan to set it up. Delighted for Ben again, coming on and making the difference."

United did not hit the height of sparkling performances to beat title challengers Arsenal and Manchester City in Carrick's first two matches in charge during an uninspired clash

at the Hill Dickinson Stadium. But the former Middlesbrough boss was delighted with a third clean sheet in six games. United had held opponents goalless just twice in 29 matches this season before Carrick's arrival. "We had to do a lot of work. Credit to Everton they made it difficult, made us defend our box a lot. The spirit with which we defended the box was top class," added Carrick.

Goalkeeper Senne Lammens made a couple of vital saves to continue an impressive debut season at United for the 23-year-old Belgian. "Senne was outstanding tonight," said Carrick. "You couldn't hope for much more from a goalkeeper. It was an exemplary performance, so delighted for him."



FIFA President Gianni Infantino gestures during his visit to the new Concentration Hotel of the Colombian Football Federation in Barranquilla, Colombia, on Tuesday. (AFP)

## FOCUS

## Qatar Olympic Committee Ramadan tournament begins

The Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) Ramadan tournament got underway on Tuesday evening with men's shooting competitions (individual and family categories) and men's singles table tennis matches. The tournament, organised for QOC employees and their families, runs until March 5 at the Lusail International Shooting Complex, in a vibrant Ramadan atmosphere filled with unity, energy, and sporting spirit.

The opening day featured shooting and table tennis competitions, along with traditional games and recreational activities for children. A range of community services were also provided by the Center for Empowerment and Care of the Elderly (Ehsan), Qatar Diabetes Association, Cyber Sports Events Center, and Naseem Medical Centre. The program included an Olympic quiz segment and the distribution of prizes to participants.

In the shooting (singles) event, Khalid Nasser al-Rumaihi claimed first place, while Mohammed Ahmed al-Rumaihi finished second. In the shooting (doubles) event, the duo of Khalid Nasser al-Rumaihi and Abdulrahman al-Rumaihi se-



cured first place, with Salem Abdulhalim and Abdulrahman Abdulhalim coming in second. Meanwhile, in the men's table tennis singles event, Mohammed Abdul-salam captured first place, while Khalid Al-Akkad finished as runner-up.

This year's tournament includes five diverse sports: shooting, table tennis (in-

troduced for the first time), padel, football (making its debut), and beach volleyball. The variety reflects the QOC's commitment to expanding its sports programs and enhancing competitiveness and renewal in each edition. Football competitions will take place on March 1 and 2, featuring teams from the General Secretariat,



the Shooting Federation, the Procurement and Logistics Department, the Public Relations Department, and the Sports Events Department. Beach volleyball matches will be held from March 3 and 5, with teams representing the President's Office, Sports Events Department, Procurement and Logistics Department, Shooting Federation, Public Relations Department, and Sports Affairs Department.

Mana Ahmed al-Jael, Director of the QOC Ramadan Tournament 2026, con-

firmed that this year's edition includes 250 participants. He explained that the addition of table tennis and football came in response to a staff survey, allowing participants to select sports that suit their physical abilities and personal interests.

He also noted that the Qatar Shooting and Archery Federation, as the host entity, will participate for the first time in football and beach volleyball competitions, after successfully hosting five previous Ramadan editions at its venues.