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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Leaders Sadd storm back to sink Duhail in statement win

Gharafa keep title chase alive with comeback win over Rayyan, stay four points adrift of Sadd

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Leaders Al Sadd produced a strong comeback to defeat Al Duhail 3-1 in a thrilling Qatar Stars League clash at Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium last night.

Duhail took the lead shortly after the break through Edmilson Junior in the 47th minute, but the momentum quickly shifted in Sadd's favour.

The visitors drew level in the 52nd minute when Yousef Ayman turned Akram Afif's cross into his own net, before Rafa Mujica completed the turnaround just two minutes later. Giovanni Henrique sealed the victory for the defending champions in the 83rd minute, finishing off a well-worked move set up by Afif to secure three valuable points for the Wolves.

The win marked Sadd's 10th consecutive league victory and strengthened their grip at the top of the standings, maintaining a four-point advantage over closest challengers Al Gharafa. In contrast, Al Duhail's struggles continued as they extended their winless run to four matches - two draws and two defeats - leaving them eighth with 21 points and drifting further from the top-four race.

Meanwhile at Thani Bin Jassim Stadium, Gharafa came from behind to claim an entertaining 3-2 victory over Al Rayyan. Rodrigo Moreno gave Rayyan an early lead in the fourth minute, finishing clinically after collecting a pass from Aleksandar Mitrovic. Gharafa responded after the break when Ferjani Sassi equalised in the 57th minute following a deflected delivery from Alvaro Djalo Fernandes.

Amro Surag put the hosts ahead four minutes later, arriving to finish from close range, before Joselu extended the lead in the 84th minute with a powerful strike from outside the box after another contribution from Surag. Roger



Al Sadd's Roberto Firmino (left) and Al Duhail's Almoaz Ali vie for the ball during the Qatar Stars League match at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium. **PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil**

Guedes converted a stoppage-time penalty for Rayyan, while late drama saw Gharafa's Saifedeen Fadlalla sent off deep into added time. The victory moved Gharafa into second place on 34 points, with Al Rayyan remaining fourth on 28.

Action continues today with Umm Salal facing Al Wakrah at Al Khor Stadium as both sides seek crucial points. Umm Salal aim to build on consecutive wins that have revived their survival hopes, while Al Wakrah look to recover from defeat to Al Sadd. Elsewhere, Al Ahli meet bottom side Al Shahaniya at Al Thumama Stadium in a key relegation encounter.

Tomorrow, in-form Al Shamal take on Qatar

SC seeking a third straight win, although they will be without suspended striker Baghdad Bounedjah. The round 17 concludes with Al Arabi facing Al Saliya as both teams attempt to bounce back from recent setbacks.

REMAINING FIXTURES

(All matches kick-off at 9:30pm)
Today: Umm Salal vs Al Wakrah at Al Khor Stadium; Al Ahli vs Al Shahaniya at Al Thumama Stadium
Tomorrow: Al Shamal vs Qatar SC at Al Shamal Stadium; Al Arabi vs Al Saliya at Al Thumama Stadium



Al Sadd's Rafa Mujica (right) celebrates after scoring against Al Duhail.



At Thani Bin Jassim Stadium, Al Gharafa came from behind to claim an entertaining 3-2 victory over Al Rayyan yesterday.

PREVIEW

Qatar face India today in FIBA World Cup 2027 qualifier at Lusail Arena

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar will open their campaign in the second window of the Asian qualifiers for the FIBA Basketball World Cup 2027 by hosting India today at 10pm at the Lusail Multipurpose Hall.

The Group D encounter is one of the stand-out fixtures of the window, while Lebanon face Saudi Arabia in Beirut. Saudi Arabia currently lead the standings with four points after consecutive victories over India (75-51 and 81-57). Qatar sit second on three points following a narrow 75-74 defeat to Lebanon before responding with an impressive 86-83 away win in the opening window.

Lebanon are level on points with Qatar in third place, while India remain fourth with two points after losing both of their opening matches. The clash therefore presents Qatar with an important opportunity to strengthen their position ahead of Monday's decisive meeting against Saudi. Qatar prepared for the India and Saudi fixtures with an overseas training camp in Turkey under head coach Hakan Demir.

The camp focused on improving team chemistry, expanding tactical options and enhancing physical readiness ahead of the demanding qualification window.

But Qatar seem to have overcome a huge psychological barrier in the previous window by beating the Lebanon in Beirut. The fact that they are hosting the next FIBA Basketball World Cup lends additional heft to the argument that they will continue to find ways to improve. The flipside though, is the risk of complacency. With a spot in the global showpiece assured, Qatar look to vital experience.

The national side will again rely on key performers Brandon Goodwin and Alen Hadzibegovic, who impressed during the opening round. Hadzibegovic averaged 16.5 points and 11 rebounds, while Goodwin contributed 21



Qatar sit second in Group D on three points following a narrow 75-74 defeat to Lebanon before responding with an impressive 86-83 away win in the opening window.

points, seven rebounds and 7.5 assists per game, forming the backbone of Qatar's offensive and defensive approach.

The Asian and Oceania qualifiers feature 16 teams divided into four groups. Group A includes Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines and Guam, while Group B consists of Japan, China, South Korea and Chinese Taipei. Group C features Iran, Jordan, Syria and Iraq, with Group D comprising Qatar, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and India.

The top three teams from each group will ad-

vance to the second round, where they will be reorganised into two new groups. From there, three teams from each group along with the best fourth-placed side overall will qualify for the 2027 World Cup.

The qualification process will be played across six competition windows running from November 2025 to March 2027, allowing teams preparation time between official rounds. The remaining windows are scheduled for June-July 2026, August-September 2026, November-December 2026 and February-March 2027.

SPOTLIGHT

Former West Ham forward Antonio set to join Al Saliya: report

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Former West Ham United striker **Michail Antonio** is set to resume his club career after agreeing to join Qatar Stars League side Al Saliya on a short-term deal, according to a report by BBC.

The 35-year-old is expected to sign until the end of the current season, with Al Saliya, who are ninth in the QSL, have six matches remaining in the season. BBC reported confirmation of the move is anticipated in the coming days. Antonio has been without a club since leaving West Ham United last year and has not featured in competitive English football since surviving a near-fatal car crash in December 2024 that resulted in multiple leg fractures.

The Jamaica international had recently been training with Charlton Athletic and held exploratory discussions over a potential pay-as-you-play contract. However, the striker has opted for a move to Qatar as he continues his return to full fitness.

Talks were also held with Premier League clubs Brentford and Leicester City, while Portsmouth manager John Mousinho confirmed he had considered signing the experienced forward, though no agreement materialised.

Antonio briefly returned to international action with Jamaica at the 2025 Concacaf Gold Cup,



marking his first competitive appearances following the accident. In an interview with BBC Sport earlier this year, Antonio revealed he felt he was "close to dying" after the crash in Essex and described his recovery as being given "another chance at life".

The powerful striker remains West Ham United's all-time leading Premier League scorer, netting 68 top-flight goals as part of an 83-goal tally across 323 appearances during a decade-long spell with the London club.

Having rebuilt his fitness over recent months, Antonio now looks set to continue his career in the QSL, League, taking the next step in a remarkable comeback following one of the most serious setbacks of his career.

SPOTLIGHT

South Africa thrash Windies, enter semi-finals

AFP
Ahmedabad

South Africa captain Aiden Markram led from the front with an unbeaten 82 as South Africa registered a nine-wicket win over the West Indies in Ahmedabad yesterday.

Later in the evening match, defending champions India thrashed Zimbabwe by 72 runs, a result that guaranteed South Africa a place in the semi-finals.

After the West Indies fought back from deep trouble at 83-7 to post 176-8, Markram and Quinton de Kock put on 95 for the first wicket to set the platform for a thumping victory. South Africa raced to their target with 23 balls to spare, scoring 177-1. Ryan Rickleton was not out on 45 at the end.

"Whether I'm captain or not, opening is a responsibility... we try to make sure the team gets off to a good start especially on wickets like this and hope to continue this," Markram said.

"The wicket got really good again

for batting, it was slightly tacky earlier when we bowled. Steep bounce came from the tackiness. Fortunately we ended up on the right side of the toss. The guys bowled really well up front to take wickets."

South Africa are the only unbeaten side, having also dismantled the pre-tournament favourites India by 76 runs in the Super Eights. It will also make India's clash against the West Indies in Kolkata on Sunday a winner-takes-all decider for the final semi-final berth.

Markram reached fifty off 27 balls and hit four sixes and seven fours.

De Kock scored 47 off 24 balls, with four sixes and Rickleton hit two sixes in his 28-ball knock in an utterly dominant display of batsmanship.

The West Indies earlier needed a record eighth-wicket partnership by Romario Shepherd and Jason Holder to set a target of 177 after an early collapse. The pair came together with their team in deep trouble at 83-7 and put on 89, the highest eighth-wicket stand in the history of T20 internationals.

Shepherd was unbeaten on 52 off 37

balls with four sixes. Holder was run out off the penultimate ball of the innings for 49 off 31 balls with three maximums.

"Very important to get a big score, and losing so many wickets in the powerplay cost us," said West Indies captain Shai Hope.

"We were 40-50 runs short. Must commend the guys in the bottom half for giving us a chance."

"Everything will not be easy. The way we play our cricket, there will be a loss, the aim was to get it out early. Next game will be a quarter-final," Hope said, referring to their make-or-break clash with India. Both teams came into the match with a perfect five wins in the T20 World Cup so far.

South Africa have played four of their five matches in Ahmedabad and captain Aiden Markram had no hesitation in opting to bowl when he won the toss. The West Indies took 17 off the first over, bowled by left-arm spinner Keshav Maharaj. Kagiso Rabada's introduction halted their charge as Hope (16) edged his second ball to keeper

Quinton de Kock. Shimron Hetmyer was dropped at mid-on by Corbin Bosch off the next delivery, but lasted only two more when he miscued to midwicket where Maharaj snapped up the catch.

Lungi Ngidi got in the act in his first over when Brandon King on 21 edged to De Kock and two balls later Roston Chase chopped on. From 29-0 after two overs, the West Indies had slumped to 43-4 after four. Ngidi took 3-30 from his four overs, Rabada 2-2 and Bosch 2-31.

BRIEF SCORES: South Africa 177 for 1 (Markram 82*, de Kock 47, Rickleton 45*) beat West Indies 176 for 8 (Shepherd 52, Holder 49, Ngidi 3-20, Rabada 2-22, Bosch 2-31) by nine wickets.

South Africa's captain Aiden Markram in action against West Indies during the World Cup Super Eights match in Ahmedabad yesterday. (AFP)



FOCUS

Hosts India thump Zimbabwe to revive title defence

India's 72-run win sets up knockout clash with WI

AFP
Chennai

Defending champions India thrashed Zimbabwe by 72 runs in their Super Eights T20 World Cup match yesterday, a result that guaranteed South Africa a place in the semi-finals.

India posted a mammoth 256-4 and then restricted Zimbabwe to 184-6 in Chennai to make their clash with West Indies in Kolkata on Sunday a winner-takes-all decider for the last semi-final berth.

South Africa hammered the West Indies by nine wickets earlier in Ahmedabad.

At Chennai's M.A. Chidambaram stadium, opener Abhishek Sharma blasted 55 and Hardik Pandya an unbeaten 50 as India piled up the second highest total in the history of the tournament after being invited to bat first.

"I think we wanted to leave everything behind. We didn't think too much about what we did in the league stage or in the last game in Ahmedabad," said India captain Suryakumar Yadav.

"With contributions from the top order right down to number seven, I think there was hardly anything missing in our performance."

He said they had not thought about what is now a knockout match against the West Indies on Sunday.

"Once we reach Kolkata, we'll sit down and plan properly for that game," Suryakumar said.

"For now, it's about taking a day off, travelling, and relaxing."

Zimbabwe, who stunned Australia and Sri Lanka to reach the Super Eights, were never in the chase despite a brisk start as the asking rate kept rising. Opener Brian Bennett was not out 97, the highest individual score by a Zimbabwean in T20 World Cup history, as his side exited the semi-final reckoning with a game still to play. India's left-arm quick Arshdeep Singh took 3-24 from his four overs.

"We are also a work in progress," said Zimbabwe captain Sikandar Raza. "We have a lot of youngsters, most of them are playing their first World Cup, first time ever in India for us."

"Not that I want to use that as an excuse, but certainly the lessons from the last game, from a batting point of view, I thought we took them really well. And you can see how quickly these boys are willing to improve and they showed up today."

Zimbabwe's bowlers conceded 510 runs in 40 overs in two Super Eights matches after West Indies posted 254-6 against the tournament's surprise packages on Monday. Raza won the toss and opted to field for the second match running, and again saw his bowlers flogged to all parts. Left-handed Abhishek, who had struggled with three ducks in four innings in



India's Abhishek Sharma plays a shot during the World Cup Super Eight match against Zimbabwe at the MA Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai yesterday. (AFP)

this tournament, hit four fours and four sixes to return to form.

Pandya and left-handed Tilak Varma, who hit a 16-ball 44, put on an unbeaten stand of 84 at the end, but India came up just short of the T20 World Cup record score of 260-6 made by Sri Lanka against Kenya in 2007.

Wicketkeeper-batsman Sanju Samson returned to the team to break the left-handed opening combination of Abhishek and Ishan Kishan and handed India a flying start. Samson fell for 24 off Blessing Muzarabani but Abhishek

kept up the charge, reaching his fifty off 26 balls in a 72-run stand with Kishan (38).

Abhishek fell to Tinotenda Mafosa, caught at long-on, but his knock laid the platform for a big total. Skipper Suryakumar hit 33 off 13 balls. Pandya finished with a flourish with two sixes off Brad Evans to get to 50 on the final ball of the innings.

BRIEF SCORES: India 256 for 4 (Abhishek 55, Hardik 50) beat Zimbabwe 184 for 6 (Bennett 97*, Arshdeep 3-24) by 72 runs.

PREVIEW

New Zealand want to leave nothing to chance in battle to reach semis

Reuters
Colombo

New Zealand head into today's showdown with England knowing their Twenty20 World Cup fate hangs by a thread, with a win the only way to avoid leaving their semi-final hopes at the mercy of rivals and net run rates.

New Zealand's first Super Eights game against Pakistan was abandoned due to rain, but a 61-run win over Sri Lanka on Wednesday boosted their chances of qualification, with a win over England in Colombo guaranteeing a semi-final berth.

But if England, who are already through to the semis, beat New Zealand, then Pakistan will have a chance to make the last four provided they beat Sri Lanka on Saturday, and end the Super Eights with a better net run rate than New Zealand.

"It's not doom and we're not dead if we don't win," coach Rob Walter told reporters yesterday.

"But certainly we leave it up to external factors then and it is out of our own hands. So we certainly don't want to be in that position. It's really about taking care of the ball-by-ball process, and hopefully that takes care of the result."

Harry Brook's 50-ball hundred for England against Paki-

stan earlier this week came at number three, sparking discussion around his batting position, but the New Zealand coach played down its significance.

"Where in the order he comes in is probably irrelevant. You've still got to bowl him whether it's in the first over or the 15th over," Walter said.

"Batting orders can be sort of overstated at times and I think whatever decision they make, we will be ready for him."

For two-time champions England, the match will be an opportunity to test themselves against a good side before the semi-finals, said Tim Southee, the former New Zealand captain who is a specialist skills consultant with England.

England looked shaky earlier in the tournament after losing to West Indies in the group stage, but became the first team to reach the semis with clinical wins over Sri Lanka and Pakistan in the Super Eights.

"I think although we haven't played the perfect game, and to sit here being already qualified with a game to go, it's only a good thing," Southee said.

"The mood in the camp is brilliant. It's a side where all the lads get on so well, great spirit... we've got a great opportunity for them to go out and represent England against a good New Zealand side."

'Bit strange' not to be in New Zealand change room: England's Southee

England bowling consultant Tim Southee admitted yesterday it will be "a little bit strange" to be in the opposing change room to New Zealand at the T20 World Cup. The winner of the England-New Zealand clash at Colombo's R. Premadasa Stadium today will secure top spot in Super Eights Group 2.

England have secured a semi-final place, whereas New Zealand need a win to be sure of a place in the final four. A defeat will leave them having to rely on Pakistan failing to beat the already eliminated Sri Lanka by a big margin on Saturday. Southee played 394 times in all formats for New Zealand and took 391 wickets in 107 Tests.

"It is a little bit strange seeing the guys around the hotel and obviously with that series in New Zealand end of last year," Southee said. "It's a great opportunity to work with England."

"I always want New Zealand cricket to do well, always following them closely, but now in the role that I'm in, things are slightly different. I'm looking forward to going out there against a good side and some good mates as well."

Southee said he has enjoyed working with Jofra Archer, who has grown into the tournament. The express paceman conceded 98 runs in his eight overs in the first two group matches. But he took 3-20 against Sri Lanka and 2-32 against Pakistan in England's two Super Eight games, regularly sending down deliveries around 150 kph (93 mph).

"The good sign is that we've seen over the last few games he looks like he's getting better and better so that bodes well for the next few games," Southee said.

"He's obviously a class bowler. He can bowl fast, move the ball and he has an unbelievable amount of skill. It's been brilliant to see how he goes about his stuff. He absolutely loves cricket, loves bowling, so it's been great to work alongside such a great bowler."



England bowling consultant Tim Southee (right) with pacer Jofra Archer in Colombo.

CALLS FOR HEADS TO ROLL AFTER FEEBLE SRI LANKA EXIT

Pressure is mounting on Sri Lanka's captain, coach and the selection panel to step down after the co-hosts' feeble exit from the T20 World Cup with a match to spare. A second Super Eights defeat, where Sri Lanka never threatened to get near their 169 target against New Zealand ended their hopes of reaching the semi-finals. It also provoked unprecedented booing from the 35,000-strong crowd in Colombo and calls for heads to roll. The group win over Australia had

hopes high for a run to at least the semi-finals, but it is now a distant memory after Sri Lanka's batting was exposed time and again on turning pitches. Sri Lanka head coach Sanath Jayasuriya had already informed the board that he would step down after the World Cup. Now captain Dasun Shanaka and the selectors seem likely to follow or be axed after an embarrassing campaign. "We have one more game in the competition and we will address

what went wrong during the World Cup after that game and take the necessary steps," a Sri Lanka Cricket spokesperson told AFP. Former captain Marvan Atapattu was scathing about Sri Lanka's preparations. "Most teams have moved on with the times playing T20 cricket, but we have stagnated and made little progress," Atapattu told AFP. "You need to identify your core players and stick with them. "In Sri Lanka's case, they had no idea what their team was going to

be even a week before the tournament. "It doesn't work that way in international sport." Sri Lanka lost three front-line bowlers to injury in the first week of the tournament, with fingers being pointed at the amount of lucrative franchise cricket being played. "When your players are involved in league cricket all over the world, there is a good chance that they break down just before a crucial campaign and that's what happened to Sri Lanka," Atapattu added.

TENNIS

Medvedev sets up semi clash with Auger-Aliassime

'I'm happy with the way I'm playing here and I'm looking forward to semis'

AFP
Dubai

Daniil Medvedev produced a clinical 6-2, 6-1 performance against Jenson Brooksby yesterday to advance to his third Dubai semi-final and book a showdown with Felix Auger-Aliassime.

The former world number one boasts 22 career titles but has never won the same tournament twice. He is trying to change that this week in Dubai, where he lifted the trophy in 2023.

"I felt great. I know that maybe he had some issues, shoulder or elbow, I'm not sure, but his first serve was not going as probably he can usually do," said Medvedev, who is seeking a second title of the season to go with the one he won in Brisbane.

"But you still need to play, you still need to put the returns in. He's a big fighter..."

"I'm happy with the way I'm playing here and I'm looking forward to the semis."

In what was his second career meeting with Brooksby, two breaks of serve helped Medvedev scoop the opening set in just 28 minutes.

The third-seeded Russian kept up his momentum in the second, breaking early and cruising towards victory in just 57 minutes.

Medvedev advanced to the 53rd hard-court semi-final of his career, trailing just Novak Djokovic among active players.

He said ahead of the tournament he is searching for consistency, something that came to him easier when he was younger, playing care-free tennis without much overthinking.

"I think there were moments in my career where I was better prepared. Funny enough, less with experience... You know how they say, rookies get lucky," added Medvedev on Thursday.

"Everything was new. I just didn't care, I was just playing the way I felt it. Now I have a lot of thoughts in my head, which can help me sometimes, but sometimes I need to get rid of them to play better."

The 30-year-old former US



Daniil Medvedev in action during his Dubai Open quarter-final against Jenson Brooksby. (Reuters)



Felix Auger-Aliassime celebrates after winning his quarter-final against Jiri Lehecka in Dubai yesterday. (Reuters)

Open champion will next take on top-seeded Auger-Aliassime, who defeated Czech eighth seed Jiri Lehecka 6-3, 7-6 (7/2).

Auger-Aliassime, 25, punched his ticket to a second straight Dubai semi-final with a one hour, 52-minute dismissal of Lehecka.

The Canadian world number eight has made the quarter-finals or better at 10 of his last 11 tournaments, and has won 11 of the 12 matches he contested this month - a stretch that includes a title run in Montpellier and a runner-up showing in Rotterdam.

Auger-Aliassime put on a serving masterclass on Thursday, firing 16 aces and winning 83 per cent of his first-serve points.

He is wary of his next opponent though, given his inferior 2-7 head-to-head record against Medvedev.

"I feel good, but sport goes fast. Maybe tomorrow night I'm sitting and you're saying that I'm not playing that good," said Auger-Aliassime.

"I'm going to come with a game plan, but he's going to come with his as well. And we'll see who gets the better of the match. But I fear his level a lot."

Later on centre court, Russian fifth seed Andrey Rublev maintained his unbeaten record against Arthur Rinderknech with a 6-2, 6-4 result, his fourth win in as many meetings with the Frenchman. Rublev joins Roger Federer and Djokovic as the only players to have reached five semi-finals in Dubai.

On Friday, the 28-year-old Rublev will square off with Tallon Griekspoor, who matched his run to the final four from last year by ousting in-form sixth seed Jakub Mensik 6-3, 3-6, 6-2.

AL THUMAMA RAMADAN TOURNAMENT

Palestine defeat Al Dafna, Al Shahania overcome Al Shaab

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Palestine secured a 2-1 victory over Al Dafna in the standout result of the third edition of the Al Thumama Ramadan Tournament at Al Furjan Stadium.

Mohammed al-Shaer was named Man of the Match after inspiring his side to all three points. In the second fixture on Wednesday night, Al Shahania defeated Al Shaab 1-0, with Abdullah Haji earning the Man of the Match award following a decisive performance.

Al Waab were later awarded a 3-0 victory over Al Shaqab after lodging a protest with the organizing committee. Although Al Shaqab had won 1-0 on the field, the absence of two Qatari players constituted a breach of tournament regulations.

The result was overturned in favour of Al Waab, and Nasser Abdulrahman Ziada was named Man of the Match.

In Group A, Abdullah Bin

Turki lead the standings with seven points, level with Al Zaeem in second and Al Wajba in third, while Al Rayyan top their section with four points ahead of Al Thumama and Al Doha.

In Group B, Palestine head the table with seven points, followed by Al Shaab (six), Al Waab (five) and Al Shahaniya (four). Al Dafna and Al Raya Medical have one point each, while Al Shaqab remain without a point.

A total of 48 goals have been scored in the tournament so far. Saif Al Darwish of Al Shaab leads the scoring charts with five goals, ahead of Ziad Khader of Al Zaeem on four.

Mohammed Al Hammadi (Abdullah Bin Turki), Mohammed Al Hajri (Al Wajba) and Taim Allah Mohammed (Al Rayyan) have each scored three times.

The tournament, organised in cooperation with the Qatar Sports for All Federation, features players in the 10-14 age group (born between 2012 and 2016) and concludes next Friday.



Austin WTA tournament sets up 'rage room' for players to blow off steam

A WTA tournament in Texas has unveiled a "rage room" for players to take out their frustrations away from the cameras after Coco Gauff's racket-smashing outburst at the Australian Open last month sparked debate about privacy at tournaments.

Shortly after Gauff's 59-minute quarter-final loss to Elina Svitolina at Melbourne Park, the American went to the match call area and repeatedly smashed her racket

on the ground, unaware that it was being broadcast to viewers around the world.

Novak Djokovic and Iga Swiatek were among the players calling for more privacy off the court following the incident.

The ATX Open in Austin, Texas, has come up with a solution. "Introducing the ATX Open rage room - the first of its kind - where players can privately express frustration or emotion in a safe,

camera-free environment," the WTA 250 tournament posted on its social media platforms.

The post also featured a sign with the words "don't smile" and "count to three" along with a broken racket.

While reaction online was largely positive, some questioned whether the room would encourage players to vent their frustrations in a physical manner.

Dubai Tennis Championships

organisers have set up a "Smash Room" truck for fans this week, with Chinese player Shang Juncheng invited to try it out in front of the cameras.

"I smashed a few items, including DVDs and big containers," he said. "It's loud and it's intense but in a good way. You get everything out of your system in there instead of taking that frustration onto the court."

(Reuters)

Welteji banned for 2 years for doping violation

Ethiopian middle-distance runner Diribe Welteji has been banned for two years by the Court of Arbitration for Sport after failing to provide a doping sample in February 2025.

The court also disqualified all her competitive results since that time, a period which includes her 1,500 metres silver medal at the World Indoor Championships in Nanjing, China in March last year. Welteji, also a silver medalist outdoors in the women's 1,500m at the 2023 world championships, was provisionally suspended in September, causing her to miss last year's world championships in Tokyo. The Ethiopian national anti-doping body (ETH-NADO) had initially found that Welteji had not violated any anti-doping rules, but World Athletics appealed to CAS, seeking a four-year suspension. CAS ruled that Welteji would be suspended for two years.

KECMANOVIC TOPPLES ZVEREV TO REACH ACAPULCO QUARTER-FINALS

Top-seeded Alexander Zverev crashed out of the ATP Acapulco Open on Wednesday, losing in three sets to unseeded Serbian **Miomir Kecmanovic** who claimed his first career win over a top-five player.

Kecmanovic, ranked 84th in the world, triumphed 6-3, 6-7 (3/7), 7-6 (7/4) over world number four Zverev, who was playing his first tournament since an epic semi-final defeat to eventual champion Carlos Alcaraz at the Australian Open. Kecmanovic, 25, had come up empty in 11 prior career matches against top-five players.

He cruised through the opening set, before Zverev clawed his way back into the match, finally sealing the victory after two hours and 35 minutes. "It feels amazing," said Kecmanovic, who was aided by 17 unforced backhand errors from the German.

"Obviously he's the big favorite, so I didn't have any pressure there, but you still have to play well when it matters, close out the match and thankfully it went my way," he added. With Zverev's defeat, the 500 level hardcourt tournament has now lost its top four seeds. Second-seeded Australian Alex de Minaur was eliminated on Monday, third-seeded Casper Ruud of Norway lost on Tuesday.



SPOTLIGHT

Oracle, Red Bull extend F1 title partnership

Reuters
London

Oracle and Red Bull Racing announced on Thursday a multi-year extension of their data-driven Formula One title partnership and heralded a 'ground-breaking' AI-powered strategy agent for the sport's new era starting in Australia next week.

No financial details were given for the continuation of a deal that started in 2022 and was reported at the time as being worth \$300mn over five years.

"We've done some really cool stuff with AI and there's a lot more to come," the software giant's co-CEO Clay Magouyrk told Reuters.

"We're big racing fans. We believe in F1 as a way to actually prove our technology."

"I think that having a proving ground like this is incredibly valuable as we look at how AI evolves." Red Bull won constructors' ti-

ties in 2022 and 2023 and four successive drivers' championships with Max Verstappen from 2021-24. They finished third overall in 2025, although Verstappen still won more races than anyone else, and start the season on March 8 powered for the first time by their own Red Bull Ford Powertrains engine.

The team's management also changed last year, with former boss Christian Horner and motorsport consultant Helmut Marko leaving and Frenchman Laurent Mekies taking over as principal. Oracle Cloud Infrastructure (OCI) and Oracle AI played a big part in developing the engine - what Mekies called a 'crazy challenge' that could have put the team at risk but now looks a solid move.

The new strategy agent, designed to work alongside human engineers and using automated data collection and interpretation of past and real-time race inputs to speed up decisions in changing conditions, could also be a sig-

nificant step. Mekies told Reuters the biggest regulation change for decades had added "quite a few dimensions to an already complex topic" with drivers having to master energy management and deploy new boost and overtake modes.

Red Bull already run billions of simulations ahead of and during race weekends and the next generation models are set to be more powerful.

Magouyrk expected to see more and more AI-driven strategy and suggested the point could come where "suddenly you could imagine that, in the same way that you have a human strategist today, you could have an AI strategist that is actually calling the race."

"Obviously the person will make the call, but you have that (AI) in real time the entire way. So it's not even just pre-simulated. It's fundamentally able to say 'this is what we should do. And here's the reasons why'."

"We're seeing that across all of

knowledge work and I think it's directly applicable here. And if you do it better, the net result is that you should win more."

Mekies said the agent could also help gauge the risks associated with a driver's actions on track, particularly when an overtake might incur a penalty - something Verstappen fell foul of notably in 2024.

"We have multiple layers of regulations: technical, sporting, financial," said the Frenchman. "And then across these regulations we have a history of live and post-race judgment..."

"What we have developed with Oracle is a sort of AI agent that puts all of that together and allows us to query that agent during the race based on what we saw happening live on the track."

That could mean also deciding on whether to keep or give back a position based on "the AI agent's research on what's the likelihood of us getting away with it or getting punished for it."

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Enrique calls on PSG to raise their game in last 16

Holdings edge Monaco to set up a clash against Barca or Chelsea

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique admitted that his side still had considerable room for improvement after they edged past Monaco in the Champions League on Wednesday to set up a last-16 showdown against Barcelona or Chelsea.

"We had the toughest draw in the league phase, and we are used to playing games like these against anyone," the Spaniard said after Wednesday's 2-2 draw in the all-French knockout phase play-off tie that allowed PSG to squeeze through 5-4 on aggregate. PSG led 3-2 from last week's first leg but Maghnes Aklouché gave Monaco the advantage on the night at the Parc des Princes to level the scores on aggregate.

The sending-off of Monaco's Mamadou Coulibaly early in the second half paved the way for PSG to equalise through Marquinhos and then go 2-1 up in the second leg through Khvicha Kvaratskhelia. But with a man fewer, the principality team still scored again through Jordan Teze and Wout Faes missed a glorious chance to force extra time.

"Of course we can and want to improve, but there is also always an opponent and we knew how difficult it would be," said Enrique. "The next one will be easier, no? Chelsea or Barca - not bad. But if any team is ready, it is us."

PSG lead Ligue 1 and remain in the running to retain the Champions League title they won for the first time last season. They have also won the UEFA Super Cup, the FIFA Intercontinental Cup and the French Champions Trophy in this campaign - all on penalties.

There is a sense that the Qatar-owned club are a long way short of the form they showed in the second half of last season when they blew away their continental rivals on the way to thrashing Inter Milan 5-0 in the Champions League final in Munich. "We knew how difficult it would be and we were not surprised by Monaco," Enrique added. "We showed our resilience and our ability to overcome problems, but this competition is difficult. It is important



Paris Saint-Germain's coach Luis Enrique shouts instructions to forward Khvicha Kvaratskhelia during the Champions League play-off second leg match against Monaco in Paris. (AFP)

to improve and that is what we will try to do."

He will also hope to get last year's Ballon d'Or winner Ousmane Dembele back fully fit - the 28-year-old scored 35 goals last season but has just 11 this season and has started only 14 games out of 38. PSG will find out on Friday their path to this season's final in Budapest, beyond the identity of their opponents in next month's last 16.

They beat Barcelona 2-1 away during the league phase in October and have faced the Catalans in five knockout ties since 2013.

Paris also played Chelsea in knockout ties in three straight seasons from 2014 to 2016 and lost to the Blues 3-0 in last year's Club World Cup final.

Asked how his team can get back to the lev-

els of last year, Enrique said: "Just keep doing the same things. We are ready to play any opponents in any competition. We have had a lot of injuries, but that is not an excuse. There are still more or less three months of the season to go and we have the same mentality. The objective is to win every competition."

Meanwhile, Monaco are left to focus on trying to qualify for Europe again next season after being knocked out in the Champions League play-offs for the second year running. "We could have done more in this campaign but it has still been satisfying," said Monaco coach Sebastien Pocognoli, whose side are eighth in Ligue 1.

"Let's hope this experience helps us progress more quickly in the future."

HORSE RACING

Townsend Manor claims Fuwairit Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Townsend Manor produced a powerful late burst to claim the feature Fuwairit Cup, a Class 2 Thoroughbred Open Handicap for three-year-old+ over 1100m, at Al Rayyan Racecourse on Wednesday.

The five-year-old bay gelding, owned by Al Rufaa Racing and trained by Jassim al-Ghazali, notched back-to-back wins and a third victory from six starts this season. Marco Casamento delivered a perfectly timed ride to complete a quick double on the card.

Smartly away from stall six, Townsend Manor showed early pace before being eased towards the rear, travelling smoothly as the leaders set a solid tempo. Weissmuller took charge after an early shuffle for the lead and straightened in front, pursued by Sardem, Al Mundher and Safwan. Safwan ranged up ominously on the turn for home and briefly looked the likely winner.

But inside the final 200m, Townsend Manor unleashed a sustained run down the centre of the track, sweeping past his rivals to take control. The Dunkirk Lads flew home from the back to issue a late challenge, yet Townsend Manor found more in front to score by a length. The Dunkirk Lads finished 3½ lengths clear of Weissmuller, who stayed on for third.

Earlier in the evening, Mared Al Zaeem made all to break his maiden at the 22nd attempt, North Audley shed his maiden tag with

a strong late surge, and Kafalat edged Yaqoob in a head-bobbing finish. Shadow Army landed the Novice Plate, Fantastic Deal stayed on strongly over 2500m, Husam Al Shahania returned to winning form on dirt, and Nashmyah Al-rekaben overcame a wide draw to secure her first victory.

RESULTS 55TH AL RAYYAN RACE MEETING - FUWAIIRIT CUP WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

- 1 - Fuwairit Cup, Thoroughbred Open Handicap
Townsend Manor, Jassim al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento
- 2 - Purebred Arabian Show Horses & Mares
Nashmyah Alrekaben, Dr. Fahad Salman al-Hajri, Marco Casamento
- 3 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (60-80)
Husam Al Shahania, Mohammed Hassan al-Matwi, Salman Fahad al-Hajri
- 4 - Thoroughbred Handicap (55-75)
Fantastic Deal, Abdulla al-Mulla, Ivan Rossi
- 5 - Thoroughbred Novice Plate
Shadow Army, Alban de Mieulle, Tomas Lukasek
- 6 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (0-75)
Kafalat, Ahmed Kobeissi, Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik
- 7 - Thoroughbred Handicap (45-65)
North Audley, Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, Tomas Lukasek
- 8 - Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate
Mared Al Zaeem, Ahmed Kobeissi, Faleh Bughenaim



Marco Casamento delivered a perfectly timed ride with Townsend Manor in the Fuwairit Cup. PICTURE: Juhaim

SPOTLIGHT

Real win for 'everyone against racism': Tchouameni

AFP
Madrid

Real Madrid midfielder Aurelien Tchouameni said his team's 2-1 win against Benfica on Wednesday to reach the Champions League last 16 was a victory for "everyone who is against racism".

The Frenchman was referring to the first leg of the play-off tie, which Madrid won 1-0 last week, which was marred by alleged racial abuse aimed at Vinicius Junior by Benfica's Gianluca Prestianni. "We didn't play our best match of the season, that's for sure. But I think there are things more important than this match, and more important than football," Tchouameni told reporters.

Vinicius scored Madrid's second goal at the Santiago Bernabeu and Tchouameni said the result was a "victory for everyone who is against racism".

Prestianni was provisionally suspended by UEFA for the game while the incident is under investigation and Benfica had an appeal against his ban rejected earlier Wednesday. "The dance continues," wrote Vinicius on social media afterwards, along



Benfica's Amar Dedic (left) and Vinicius Junior vie for the ball during the UEFA Champions League play-off second leg match at Santiago Bernabeu Stadium in Madrid. (AFP)

with a photo of a big banner hung at the Bernabeu reading "no to racism".

Real Madrid said they had thrown out

one of their own supporters before the game for performing a Nazi salute. "This (club) member was identified by the club's

security staff moments after appearing on the (television) broadcast and was immediately expelled from the Santiago Bernabeu stadium," said Madrid in a statement. "Real Madrid condemns this type of gesture and expression that incites violence and hatred in sports and society."

Real Madrid coach Alvaro Arbeloa said he was happy when Vinicius found the net. "(I reacted) with joy obviously, for the great goal he scored, and because it was him, he deserves it," said Arbeloa. "Without (Kylian) Mbappe I think it's even more important and I am very happy for him."

Before the game Arbeloa said French superstar Mbappe would spend some time out as he recovers from a knee problem. "After yesterday's session, we talked with the doctors, I spoke with him, and we felt the best thing was for him to stop, to recover 100 percent, and to come back in top shape, confident and without any discomfort for everything that's coming, which is obviously very important," Arbeloa told reporters after the match.

Asked if it was discomfort or an injury, he added: "I think we can call it an injury, but it seems, and I hope, that it's not a very serious injury, nothing major, and that he'll be able to come back in a few days or weeks."

Ronaldo buys stake in Spanish second-division Almeria

Lisbon: Cristiano Ronaldo announced that he had acquired a 25 per cent stake in Saudi-owned Spanish second-division club Almeria.

"This strategic investment in UD Almeria reflects Ronaldo's long-term commitment to professional football ownership," said a statement from his new sports holding company CR7 Sports Investments which gave no financial details of the deal. "It has been a long-time ambition of mine to contribute to football," the statement quoted Ronaldo as saying.

Almeria, who were last in the Spanish top flight in 2024, are third in the Spanish second division, one point out of the automatic promotion places. "Almeria is a Spanish club with strong foundations and clear potential for growth."

The club is owned by Saudi group SMC. "I look forward to working alongside the leadership team to support the club's next phase of growth," said Ronaldo, who has played in the Saudi Pro League for Al Nassr since 2023.

Almeria's president, Mohamed al-Khereiji, suggested the player would be particularly involved in the club's youth programme. "He is considered the best on the pitch," Al Khereiji said. "He knows the Spanish leagues very well and understands the potential of what we are building."

Ronaldo, who also owns a stake in his Saudi club, last October became the first footballer included in Bloomberg's 'Billionaire Index'.

He recently returned to the Al Nassr first team after a spat over the way Public Investment Fund (PIF), the national sovereign wealth fund which controls four clubs in the league, handled the winter transfer window.

He has scored four times in the last three games. Ronaldo is set to take part in his sixth World Cup next summer.

Man City case 'damaging' for Premier League, says La Liga chief

London: The protracted disciplinary case involving Manchester City has been "damaging" for the Premier League, according to Spain's La Liga president Javier Tebas. English powerhouse City were charged in February 2023 with over 100 alleged breaches of the league's financial rules, with the club vigorously denying all charges against them. Yet more than three years later no verdicts have been made public, with an independent commission having heard the case between September and December 2024.

Tebas said his problem was not so much the length of time being taken to make a ruling, but rather the drawn-out process had created "uncertainty" regarding the application of rules, with other clubs charged and sanctioned over rule breaches all within the same period.

"I understand that it's a failure (of governance) - this happened with Manchester City and other clubs are looking and watching and listening," Tebas said during a media briefing at the Financial Times Business of Football Summit in London.

"(Other clubs are) being fined, having points deducted, and that's fine if you don't abide by the rules. But Manchester City has impunity. I speak to a lot of Premier League clubs, and the majority don't understand this either. That makes the institution weaker."

The chief of Spanish football's top flight added: "It's not just the delay, it's the general situation. When a great institution like the Premier League, when you have to have rules for financial fair play, you need to have a lot of legal certainty in the competition

and among clubs."

City have previously said they have a "comprehensive body of irrefutable evidence" to prove they've done nothing wrong. Premier League chief executive Richard Masters was asked about the City case when he appeared at the same event later. "I can't talk about it, I can't talk about the timing of it," he said.

Asked whether the case had made the Premier League consider if there might be ways to have a quicker process should a similar incident arise in the future, Masters replied: "I simply can't comment. Having spent three years not commenting, I'm not going to start now. Stepping aside from that (specific case), any regulator wants its judicial system to be efficient and work swiftly. That's about as far as I can go."

CELTIC OUT OF EUROPA LEAGUE DESPITE VICTORY AT STUTTGART

Celtic bowed out of the Europa League after losing 4-2 on aggregate to Stuttgart despite a 1-0 away win in the second leg of their knockout phase play-off tie.

After last week's 4-1 defeat in Glasgow left Martin O'Neill's side facing a three-goal deficit, they made the ideal start to the second leg, with Luke McCowan finding the net inside the opening minute. But Celtic could make no further inroads and their exit left the Scottish champions still seeking a first European knockout tie victory since 2004, with their domestic supremacy also under threat this season from Hearts.

Stuttgart advance to the last 16 and will find out in Friday's draw whether they face Porto or Braga in the next round.

BARCELONA'S DE JONG OUT FOR UP TO SIX WEEKS

Barcelona announced their Netherlands midfielder Frenkie de Jong will be out for up to six weeks with a leg issue. De Jong will miss the Champions League last 16 against Paris Saint-Germain or Newcastle as well as La Liga fixtures with Villarreal, Athletic Bilbao, Sevilla and Rayo Vallecano.

The 28-year-old will also be absent for next Tuesday's Spanish Cup semi-final second leg as the Catalans look to overturn a 4-0 deficit against Atletico Madrid. Barcelona said De Jong had injured his "right hamstring during training this morning and will be out for five to six weeks".

Barca are just a point clear of Real Madrid atop the La Liga table before hosting Villarreal tomorrow.