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CRICKET | Page 2

Rehan and Jacks late show leads England to win over Kiwis



TENNIS | Page 3

Medvedev to face Griekspoor in bid for second Dubai title

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FOOTBALL

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Page 4

Qatar cruise past India in FIBA Basketball World Cup Asian qualifiers



Qatar opened their second-window campaign of the Asian qualifiers for the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027 in emphatic fashion, defeating India 99-73 at the Lusail Multipurpose Hall. Qatar set the tone early in the Group D encounter by taking the first quarter 28-17 before India responded to narrow the gap with a strong second period. However, the hosts regained full control after the break, producing a decisive 30-9 third-quarter surge that effectively settled the contest. The victory reinforces Qatar's push towards the next round ahead of Monday's crucial clash against Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile in Beirut, Lebanon registered a commanding 99-64 win over Saudi Arabia, tightening the race in Group D as qualification battles intensify. The Asian and Oceania qualifiers feature 16 teams competing across six windows through March 2027, with the top sides advancing toward qualification for the World Cup, which Qatar will host.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Real Madrid face Man City, PSG draw Chelsea in last 16

Liverpool take on Galatasaray, while Arsenal meet Leverkusen

AFP
Paris, France

Real Madrid and Manchester City will face off in a Champions League knockout tie for the fifth season running after being drawn to play each other in the last 16, while reigning champions Paris Saint-Germain will take on Chelsea.

The Spanish giants, record 15-time European champions, will host City in the first leg at the Santiago Bernabeu next month before travelling to England for the return the following week. The clubs have already played each other this season, with Pep Guardiola's City winning 2-1 in Madrid in December during the league phase, in which the Premier League club finished eighth and Real ninth.

That allowed City, Champions League winners in 2023, to advance straight to the last 16 while Madrid had to come through the knockout phase play-offs, in which they beat Benfica 3-1 on aggregate. This is the eighth season in which the teams have played each other since 2012. Real beat City in the knockout phase play-offs last season, and in the quarter-finals on the way to winning the trophy in 2024. They also emerged victorious in the semi-finals in 2022 with City winning at the same stage the following year.

PSG will be at home to Chelsea in the first leg after qualifying for this stage with a 5-4 aggregate win over Ligue 1 rivals Monaco in the play-offs. Chelsea progressed straight to the last 16 after finishing sixth in the league phase. The sides played each other in the knockout stages in three consecutive years from 2014 to 2016, with Chelsea winning the first of those confrontations in the quarter-finals and PSG triumphing in the last 16 in the following two.

Their last encounter came in July's Club World Cup final in the United States, when Chelsea won 3-0 against last season's European champions.

"The draw is fascinating, as usual," said PSG coach Luis Enrique. "It will be fascinating to play against one of the best English teams, who we know well, but it will not be about revenge. These are two different competitions."

Chelsea have been coached since January by Liam Rosenior, who had previously come up against PSG in Ligue 1 as coach of Strasbourg.

There is a record total of six English clubs in the last 16. None will play each other in the last 16 but there are two potential all-English quarter-finals. Liverpool will have a last-16



UEFA Champions League trophy is displayed next to a screen bearing the results of the round of 16, quarter-final and semi-final draw in Nyon, western Switzerland. (AFP)

rematch against Galatasaray, the Turkish giants having defeated the Anfield club 1-0 in September in the league phase.

The winner of that tie will play either PSG or Chelsea in the quarter-finals, meaning there is a chance Liverpool will get the opportunity to avenge their defeat by the Parisians on penalties a year ago.

Meanwhile, Newcastle United will take on Barcelona with the first leg at St James' Park - the Spanish side won 2-1 there during the league phase in September. Barcelona's only other possible opponents were holders PSG, but their coach Hansi Flick insisted: "We are not celebrating not getting PSG. We must respect our opponents. Everyone wants to reach the final and Newcastle will also be eager to win the Champions League."

Tottenham Hotspur were drawn to play Atletico Madrid, with the winners of that tie then facing Newcastle or Barcelona in the last eight. Arsenal, who finished first in the league phase, will come up against Bayer Leverkusen and if they win that would then be huge favourites in a quarter-final against Bodo/Glimt or Sporting of Portugal. The last-16 meeting with Sporting is the Norwegian upstarts' reward for knocking out last season's beaten fi-

nalists Inter Milan in the play-offs.

German champions Bayern Munich will play Atalanta, the sole Italian club left in the competition. The first legs will take place on March 10 and 11, with the second legs a week later. The teams who qualified directly for this stage after finishing in the top eight in the league phase will all be at home in the return matches. This season's Champions League final will take place at the Puskas Arena in Budapest on May 30.

ASTON VILLA MEET LILLE AGAIN IN EUROPA LEAGUE LAST 16

Aston Villa will play Lille for the second time in three seasons after the sides were drawn together in the last 16 of the Europa League, while Nottingham Forest have a rematch against Midtjylland of Denmark.

Unai Emery's Villa, who finished second in the league phase of this season's competition, behind another French side in Lyon, will go to northern France for the first leg on March 12 before the return in Birmingham on March 19.

Villa, who lost to Paris Saint-Germain in the quarter-finals of last season's Champions League, defeated Lille on penalties in the last eight of the Conference League in 2024.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Traore nets brace as Shahania secure important victory

By Sports Reporter
Doha

A fine brace from Abdoulaye Traore helped bottom-side Al Shahania find winning ways as they edged Al Ahli 2-1 in the Qatar Stars League at the Al Thumama Stadium. Traore scored for Al Shahania in the 46th and 53rd minutes while Julian Draxler pulled one back for Al Ahli in the 81st minute.

Al Ahli were reduced to ten men after Erik Exposito was given the marching orders in the 72nd minute for elbowing Al Shahania's Artur Jorge. Later, Al Shahania's Khalid Muftah was shown the red card in 90+6 minute for a foul.

The result propped Al Shahania's tally to 14 points, while still being in 12th and last place, while Al Ahli currently remained on 15 points slipping down a rung to 10th place.

Ivorian Traore put his side ahead seizing the chance on a defensive back pass of the rivals as he sprinted to beat an advancing goalkeeper. His second strike was all the more spectacular as Traore weaved his way past defenders inside the box and struck low past the left post. Ahli's Draxler scored off a rebound after a block by the goalkeeper following a free kick to reduce the deficit.

In another match, Al Wakrah battled to a 2-2 draw against Umm Salal at the Al Khor Stadium. While Abdulrahman al-Rashidi (37th minute) and Oussama Tannane (73rd minute) scored for Umm Salal, the goals for Al Wakrah came from Yousef Abdulrazaq (18th minute) and Redouane Berkane (89th minute). The shared spoils meant Al Wakrah stayed in seventh place with 23 points while Umm Salal's are ninth with 16 points.

Abdulrazaq put The Blue Wave ahead early making a diving header, to an aerial ball, which found the top left corner. Al-Rashidi equalised for the Barzan's Falcons as he beat a chasing defender and the goalkeeper.

Umm Salal then moved into lead as Tannane produced a fabulous free kick taken from about 20 yards away from the box. His left-footed shot swung into the right corner and beat a diving goalkeeper. In the end, Al Wakrah's Berkane deflected in a fine lob of Luis Alberto from the right to level scores again.

Tonight, 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 Salliya as both teams attempt to bounce back from recent setbacks.



Al Shahania's Abdoulaye Traore celebrates after scoring against Al Ahli at the Al Thumama Stadium.

PREVIEW

Defending champs India aim for 'fearless cricket' ahead of West Indies showdown

AFP
Chennai, India

India revived their T20 World Cup campaign with their "fearless" brand of cricket ahead of a winner-takes-all decider against the West Indies for the last semi-final berth.

Hot favourites to defend their title on home soil, India thrashed Zimbabwe by 72 runs in Chennai on Thursday to bounce back from their heavy defeat against South Africa in their Super Eights opener.

India's batting, led by opener Abhishek Sharma's blistering 55, and an unbeaten 50 by Hardik Pandya, piled up 256-4, the second-highest total in the history of the tournament.

In a brutal show of power hitting, the Indian batters demolished the opposition bowling with 17 sixes and 17 fours at the MA Chidambaram Stadium.

India face the West Indies, who went down to South Africa by nine wickets, in Kolkata tomorrow to decide the second semi-finalist from Group 1.

"We want to play the fearless cricket, the brand of cricket we

played today and we played since last year," batsman Tilak Varma said.

"The same intent we want to keep in the next game as well.

"And going ahead in the tournament, we take the same intensity (forward)."

The left-handed Varma hit a 19-ball 44 as he put together an unbeaten 84-run stand with Pandya, who capped off the innings with two sixes to raise his fifty.

It all came together for India after they rejigged their opening combination with the return of Sanju Samson, who handed the team a quick start with his 24 off 15 balls.

The left-handed Abhishek hit form with his first T20 World Cup fifty after he struggled in the tournament with three ducks in four innings.

"It's important when the openers give us a good start, the same confidence follows to number three, four and five," said Varma.

"And we discussed that whatever the situation is, (even) if we lose three-four wickets in powerplay, we will bat with the same rhythm," he added.

"And we want to show the fear in opposition bowlers, that these guys are ready to hit each and every ball."



India's Hardik Pandya plays a shot during the 2026 ICC Men's T20 World Cup Super Eights match against Zimbabwe in Chennai on Thursday. (AFP)

India, the world's top-ranked T20 team, came into the World Cup on the back of huge totals in bilateral contests, and were

tipped to cross the 300-run mark at the tournament.

But their batting had looked fragile and was often exposed,

including by minnows the United States, who reduced them to 77-6 in their opener.

Varma remains cautious of his

team's plans against the West Indies, who posted 254-6 against Zimbabwe in their Super Eights opener.

"So if the wicket is not good, then we'll adjust, and we'll keep that intensity on," said Varma.

"I would not say we want to score more than 250 - but if we get a good start, then of course we'll go for it."

The Indian bowling has looked good.

On Thursday, left-arm quick Arshdeep Singh returned figures of 3-24 to limit Zimbabwe to 184-6.

He surpassed senior paceman Jasprit Bumrah as the leading bowler for India at the T20 World Cup with 35 wickets to Bumrah's 33.

"We have been doing well for the past couple of years, so even after a blip or a defeat, the belief of the group was there," Arshdeep told reporters.

"We knew we just have to come and follow our processes, and the result will come our way. So the thought was very simple and we are enjoying it."

The 2024 champions have the weight of history against them. No team has ever retained the T20 World Cup and no side have ever won the trophy on home soil.

MATCH REPORT

Ahmed and Jacks late show leads England to win

THE TWO PLAYERS PLUNDER 44 RUNS FROM LAST 3 OVERS

Reuters
Colombo

Rehan Ahmed and Will Jacks' rapid 44-run partnership turned the game as England chased down a target of 160 with three balls to spare to beat New Zealand by four wickets in the Twenty20 World Cup Super Eights on yesterday.

England, who had already qualified for next week's semi-finals, topped Group Two by winning all three of their games.

New Zealand must wait for the result between Pakistan and Sri Lanka today to see if they advance to the last four.

Jacks made an unbeaten 32 off 18 as the pair saw England to 161-6 with three balls to spare.

Jacks, who also took 2-23 to be England's leading bowler, was named player of the match for an incredible fourth time in seven T20 World Cup outings this campaign.

"I reckon this is the best," said Jacks of his growing collection of player of the match awards.

"I'm absolutely buzzing with that, to be not out at the end in a tight finish.

"When I went out there, it was on a bit of a knife-edge, and I'm over the moon."

New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner paid tribute to Ahmed and Jacks.

"Rehan showed his class with the bat in the last couple of years and is obviously a very good player of spin," said Santner.

"So he wasn't really fazed on that wicket. The way Willy J and Rehan put those finishing touches was a good bit of batting."

England will move on to a semi-final almost certainly in Mumbai against either India or the West Indies, who meet tomorrow in a winner-takes-all clash to decide the last semi-final berth.

"We're not bothered (who we play)," said England captain Harry Brook, whose side played two group matches in Mumbai, beating Nepal but losing to the West Indies.

"Whoever we're facing, they're going to be a tough opponent anyway. We've already played



England's Will Jacks and Rehan Ahmed in action during their ICC T20 World Cup Super 8 match against New Zealand in Colombo yesterday. (Reuters)

against the West Indies, so a little bit of experience there.

"It's nice to go back to a ground that we've already played on as well."

New Zealand chose to bat first and although Jofra Archer bowled a maiden first over, openers Tim Seifert and Finn Allen picked up 54 runs in the powerplay.

The English spinners reined back the 2021 finalists, however, with Adil Rashid getting Seifert (35) stumped and Allen (29) falling to Jacks four balls later.

New Zealand did not hit a boundary between the 13th and 17th overs, as Rashid (2-28) dismissed Mark Chapman (15) and Daryl Mitchell (3) fell to Liam Dawson.

Glenn Phillips made a rapid 39 and Cole McConehie (14) added

late runs before captain Mitchell Santner hit a six off the last ball to get New Zealand to 159-7.

New Zealand started well, Matt Henry bowling a perfect delivery to get Phil Salt (2) caught behind, before Lockie Ferguson dismissed Jos Buttler for a duck.

With England reeling at 2-2, captain Harry Brook set about stabilising the innings with Jacob Bethell.

They added 48 runs for the third wicket before Brook, fresh from his brilliant hundred against Pakistan, fell for 26 trying to hit Phillips over long off.

Bethell (21) pulled Ravindra to deep mid-wicket, where Phillips dived forward to take a spectacular low catch and leave England in trouble at 58-4.

Tom Banton and Sam Curran

kept England in the game with a solid partnership before the latter holed out. Rachin Ravindra (3-19) found sharp turn and had Banton (33) caught at mid-wicket, leaving England needing 43 to win from the last three overs.

Rehan (19) and Jacks hit Phillips for a six each to pick up 22 runs from the 18th over and they closed out the victory with ease.

Pakistan need to beat Sri Lanka by 64 runs or chase down a target in around 13.1 overs to deny New Zealand a place in the semi-finals.

BRIEF SCORES

England 161 for 6 (Banton 33, Jacks 32*, Ravindra 3-19) **beat New Zealand 159 for 7** (Phillips 39, Seifert 35, Jacks 2-23) **by four wickets**

SPOTLIGHT

India batsman Rinku leaves the team after his father's death

AFP
Chennai, India

India batter Rinku Singh has left the team during the T20 World Cup in the middle of the tournament after the death of his long-ailing father, official sources told AFP.

The middle-order batter had rejoined India ahead of Thursday's Super Eights victory against Zimbabwe, but did not feature in the playing XI in Chennai.

India hammered Zimbabwe by 72 runs to move into a winner-takes-all decider against the West Indies in Kolkata tomorrow for a last semi-final berth.

The Press Trust of India news agency said Khanchand Singh had been battling liver cancer and died yesterday morning at a hospital on the outskirts of New Delhi.

An attacking left-hander, 28-year-old Singh emerged as a finisher for his Indian Premier League team Kolkata Knight Riders before making his place in the Indian T20 team. Singh rose from



a humble background, with viral videos of his father delivering gas cylinders emerging after he made his India debut in 2023.

Tributes poured in from former cricketers for Rinku's father.

"This must be an especially difficult time for Rinku and his family," former spinner Harbhajan Singh wrote on X.

FOCUS

Pybus embraces move to Afghanistan as coach

Kabul
Reuters

Richard Pybus said he had no issues with moving to Afghanistan to take over as head coach of the national cricket team following Jonathan Trott's departure last week at the end of their Twenty20 World Cup campaign.

Cricket has yet to resume in Afghanistan due to the political situation and the national side play their home fixtures in the United Arab Emirates.

Previous foreign coaches were based outside the country and typically joined the squad during training camps in the UAE or India before international tournaments.

However, Afghanistan's board (ACB) chief Naseeb Khan told cricket news website Cricbuzz last week that they wanted the

new coach and support staff to be based in the country to work more closely with domestic players.

"I've lived in lots of different parts of the world and so I am fine with it," England-born Pybus, 61, told Cricbuzz. "I'm looking forward to getting out into the provinces and being able to scout players and work with the selectors and get busy on the development of the players. The side's really developed over a period of time so, as we would have seen at the last couple of World Cups, they're a really serious cricket team now and so yeah, very excited."

Pybus, who previously had coaching stints with West Indies, Pakistan and Bangladesh, will begin his role by preparing the team for a limited-overs series against Sri Lanka in March.

The teams will play three Twenty20s in Sharjah and three One-Day Internationals in Dubai.

TENNIS

Medvedev and Griekspoor to battle for Dubai crown

Medvedev, a former world number 1, boasts 22 career titles but has never won the same tournament twice

AFP
Dubai

Daniil Medvedev is one victory away from repeating a title run for the first time in his career after he punched his ticket to the Dubai final with a 6-4, 6-2 success over top seed Felix Auger-Aliassime yesterday.

Medvedev, a former world number one, boasts 22 career titles but has bizarrely never won the same tournament twice.

The ex-US Open champion has a chance to change that when he takes on Dutch world number 25 Tallon Griekspoor in the final today in Dubai, where he lifted the trophy in 2023.

"If you give me some fast courts like they were before, maybe I can do something like this, but there aren't many courts like this on the tour anymore," said Medvedev, who is through to the 42nd final of his career.

"If I manage to put (on an) even better performance tomorrow, I have a chance to win," he added.

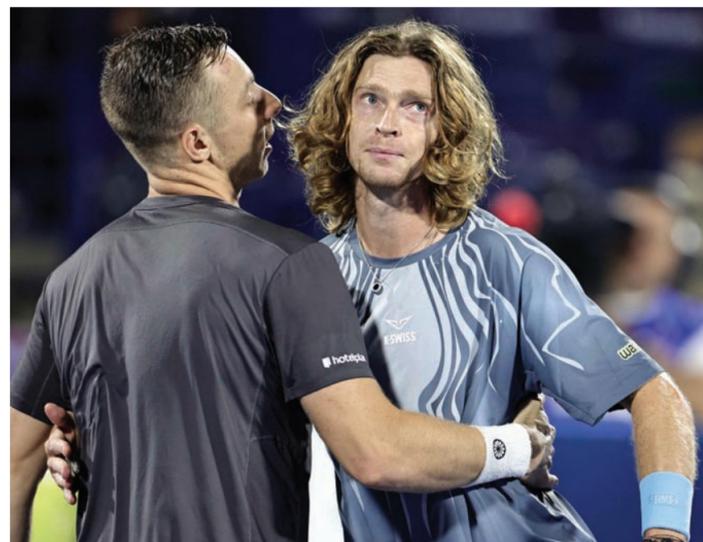
Griekspoor shocked Russian fifth seed Andrey Rublev 7-5, 7-6 (8/6) in a match that included controversy.

After saving three break points to hold for 6-5 in the opening set, Griekspoor took an off-court medical timeout for what appeared to be a groin/hamstring injury.

Griekspoor returned several minutes later, broke Rublev's serve and took the opening set.



Russia's Daniil Medvedev celebrates after winning his semi-final match against Canada's Felix Auger Aliassime at the Dubai Open, United Arab Emirates, yesterday. **Right:** Netherlands' Tallon Griekspoor and Russia's Andrey Rublev embrace after their semi-final match. (Reuters/AFP)



The 29-year-old Dutchman was putting on a brilliant serving performance despite his mobility issues and he kept it up in the second set. The contest turned into an ace-fest and the set fittingly went to a tiebreak.

Rublev squandered a 3-0 lead in the breaker and two set points from 6-4 up as Griekspoor once again found his best tennis.

"I have no idea how I pulled off this one," said Griekspoor, who

produced 19 aces to Rublev's 20. "I could barely walk from the end of the first set. I guess unlucky and lucky at the same time.

"And then I got very lucky in the tiebreak to win it in two sets. Because if this was going three, it was going to be an extremely hard story for me," he added.

Griekspoor's third consecutive top-20 win of the week earned him a spot in a sixth tour-level final - his second at the 500 level.

It is unclear how fit he will be for his final against Medvedev today though.

"I landed with a serve and I felt something in my hamstring," Griekspoor said of his injury.

"I'm just going to try to recover as well as possible, do everything I can and hopefully be ready for tomorrow," he added. Rublev was understandably disappointed.

"Tallon, I guess he was not feeling well, but out of it he did as

best as he could. He started to go for the shots and all of them went through," he said. "I don't know if he will be able to play tomorrow, but today was his day."

Earlier on centre court, Medvedev played a perfect match to improve his record against Auger-Aliassime to 8-2.

In a high-quality semi-final, the players were neck and neck through the first nine games before a perfectly-struck lob from

Medvedev drew the error that gave the third seed a set point on the Canadian's serve.

Medvedev converted it on the back of a 24-shot rally to secure a one-set lead in 44 minutes.

The 30-year-old kept pressuring the Auger-Aliassime serve and broke in game four on his way to a 4-1 advantage in the second set and he never looked back, wrapping up the win in one hour and 23 minutes.

MOTOGP

Bezzecchi beats Marquez in season-opening practice

AFP
Buriram, Thailand

Marco Bezzecchi set a new track record to finish fastest ahead of defending world champion Marc Marquez in practice for the season-opening Thailand MotoGP yesterday.

Aprilia's Bezzecchi roared round the Buriram course in 1 min 28.526 sec to top the timesheets, 0.421 sec in front of Ducati's second-placed Marquez.

Marquez is launching his bid for a record-equalling eighth world title this weekend after dominating the competition last season.

But Bezzecchi proved he will be a force to be reckoned with in a practice session that somehow stayed mostly dry despite ominous dark clouds and rumbles of thunder.

The Italian came through at the end of the session to update his own track record, which he set in pre-season testing last week.

He was also fastest in the morning's free practice.

VR46's Fabio Di Giannantonio was third-fastest in the afternoon session, followed by KTM's Pedro Acosta, Aprilia's Jorge Martin and Gresini's Alex Marquez.

Ducati's Francesco Bagnaia, the 2022 and 2023 world champion, finished 15th, forcing him into today's first qualifying session.



Aprilia Racing's Italian rider Marco Bezzecchi rides during a practice session at the Buriram International Circuit in Buriram yesterday. The Thailand Grand Prix, the season's first race, will be held this week. (AFP)

His teammate Marc Marquez was also struggling until he surged up the timesheets with around 20 minutes of the session to go.

The Spaniard begins the season still suffering the effect of a shoulder injury that forced him to miss the final four races of last season.

He said on Thursday that the injury had forced him to change his riding style until he returns

to full fitness. Turkey's Toprak Razgatlioglu, a three-time Superbike world champion making his MotoGP debut, finished the practice session 21st out of 22.

EARLY CRASH

Martin, whose defence of his title last season was wrecked by injuries, crashed 10 minutes into the morning free practice session.

Trackhouse's Ai Ogura also came off in the afternoon session.

The top 10 fastest riders in practice book their tickets for today's second qualifying session, which shapes the first four rows of the grid.

This group are then joined by the two fastest riders from the first qualifying session.

Qualifying determines the grid for both the sprint race today and the main event Grand Prix scheduled for tomorrow afternoon, the event programme shows.

ANNOUNCEMENT

US 'set in stone' as 2031 Rugby World Cup hosts despite worries

AFP
Paris, France

World Rugby chief executive Alan Gilpin says the United States will host the 2031 men's Rugby World Cup despite serious doubts over the sport's health in the country.

The Eagles are 16th in the world rankings, they have never reached the World Cup knock-out stages and were hammered 85-0 by Scotland in November in their most recent major Test.

The professional Major League Rugby is now down to six teams after four clubs quit the competition and reports in British newspapers claim there are questions over how the US will deliver the tournament on a commercial level.

The country will also host the women's World Cup in 2033.

"It's set in stone, it's been set in stone since that decision of the World Rugby Council in May 2022," Gilpin told reporters yesterday after the annual Shape of the Game summit.

"That's not to say we don't contingency plan, we contingency

plan for everything as you'd expect.

"We've got an enormous number of host cities, of state sports commissions really excited about it and there's fantastic engagement across the US."

Before the summit in London, the French Rugby Federation and the body overlooking the Top 14 league in France raised their concerns about the potential damage to the sport's "DNA" that possible law changes could make.

They are worried scrums and line-outs are set to be diluted in attempt to make the sport simpler to a wider audience.

"None of those issues were actually debated this week at all, they weren't on the table to be discussed," World Rugby chairman Brett Robinson told reporters.

"In no way were there any discussions about the de-powering of the scrum.

"Resets in the scrum is one of the most frustrating things for fans, that dead time that we're looking to try and take out of the game because it kills momentum and engagement with the fans.

"That's probably where the conversations were."

ENGLISH PREM RUGBY TO SCRAP PROMOTION AND RELEGATION

London: Promotion and relegation from the top-flight Prem is to be scrapped from next season as part of a major shake-up of English club rugby union.

A "criteria-based expansion and demotion model" will take its place instead following an "overwhelming" vote yesterday in favour of a new set-up by the council of England's governing Rugby Football Union.

The Prem, as the English Premiership is now known, will look to expand from 10 teams to 12 teams by 2030, with a further increase possible if clubs meet criteria on and off the field.

As a result, teams such as Wasps, Worcester and London Irish - all of whom went bust in the 2022/23 season - could now return to the top flight.

"We recognise that moving away from a traditional system of automatic promotion and relegation represents a significant change,"

said RFU chief executive Bill Sweeney following yesterday's vote. "However, it is equally clear that the professional game must evolve if it is to thrive. The previous structure was not delivering the financial stability, investment confidence or wider system benefits the game now requires."

At present, promotion and relegation to and from the Prem is theoretically possible via a play-off is with the top-placed side in the Champ. But London club Ealing Trailfinders, consistently the best team in the second tier, have failed to meet the existing standards, especially around stadium size, meaning promotion and relegation has been effectively suspended for several seasons already. A team has not been relegated from the Prem since Saracens in 2020 after they suffered a points deduction for breaching salary-cap regulations.

FORMULA 1

'McLaren will start new season on the defence'

Reuters
London

Formula One champions McLaren will start the season next week "playing a bit defensively" with Ferrari and Mercedes expected to be setting the pace, team boss Andrea Stella said yesterday.

McLaren are defending both titles this year after Britain's Lando Norris ended the four-year reign of Red Bull's Max Verstappen.

The Woking-based team will be chasing their third successive constructors' title.

Stella said McLaren were satisfied with how testing had gone over nine days in Bahrain and Barcelona, with the team completing 1,108 laps and ticking off all the items on their check

list. "From a reliability point of view, we have made good progress and, above all, we have managed to make the car faster," he said in a Q&A provided by the team ahead of the opening Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne.

The Italian said both Norris and Australian teammate Oscar Piastri felt positive also.

"With all the unknowns involved (in testing)...I feel I can confirm what I said in Bahrain: the 'usual suspects' - strictly in alphabetical order: Ferrari, McLaren, Mercedes and Red Bull - are a step ahead of the competition," he added. "Within this leading group, we believe that Ferrari and Mercedes are a step ahead although it is difficult to quantify how large the gap is.

"Once the cards are on the table, development will become the major challenge. To use

a football metaphor, the first part of the season will see us playing a bit defensively, trying to exploit the counterattack."

Stella said the MCL40 car would essentially be the same in Melbourne as it was in Bahrain, with some minor aerodynamic updates.

The team would also continue to work on reducing the weight of the car.

Formula One is entering a new engine and chassis era with the biggest regulation shake-up in decades and an increase in the electrical element to near parity with the combustion engine.

Some fear that the need for energy management and other new functions such as boost and overtake modes will lead to a different kind of racing that may not go down so well with fans.

HORSE RACING

Wathnan Racing's Dabida clinches Al Wakra Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Wathnan Racing's Dabida delivered an impressive performance to shed her maiden tag with victory in the Al Wakra Cup at Al Rayyan Racecourse on late Thursday evening.

Contesting the feature event for four-year-old Purebred Arabian fillies over 2000m, the grey filly was expertly guided by Soufiane Saadi and trained by Alban de Mieulle. Travelling strongly throughout, Dabida asserted her authority in the closing stages to score by a clear length. The success also provided her owner-trainer combination with a second winner on the evening, capping a productive night at the races.

Nah'ash Al Shahania took the penultimate race on the card, the Purebred Arabian Handicap (85-105) over 1400m (Class 2) for five-year-old+ and 10 runners. The six-year-old bay gelding, carrying the colours of HE Sheikha Reem bint Mohammed



Soufiane Saadi guides Dabida to victory in the Al Wakra Cup at Al Rayyan Racecourse.

bin Khalifa al-Thani, from the yard of Rudy Nerbonne and partnered by Lukas Delozier, returned to winning ways after three placed finishes this campaign, registering his second success in six starts with a de-

termined performance to score by a length while providing his trainer with a second winner on the evening and his rider with a third in succession.

Fateh HCM won the opener, the Pure-

bred Arabian Handicap (45-65) over 1200m (Class 6) for four-year-old+ and 14 runners by a length. The five-year-old grey horse, owned and trained by Osama Omer al-Dafea and ridden by Charles Boudot, was back in the winner's enclosure following a placed effort last time, recording his second success of the season despite a wide berth in barrier 11.

Earlier in the day, Anika landed the Local Purebred Arabian Novice Plate over 1400m (Class 5) for four-year-olds and 13 runners in the fourth race.

The grey filly, representing Wathnan Racing, trained by Alban de Mieulle and ridden by Megane Peslier, recorded her second straight victory at just her fourth career start, which also includes a placed finish, with a commanding display to score by nine lengths from a wide draw in barrier 11.

RESULTS 56TH AL RAYYAN RACE MEETING - WAKRA CUP

WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1. Al Wakra Cup, Purebred Arabian fillies, 4yo, 2000m

Dabida, Alban de Mieulle, Soufiane Saadi
2. Purebred Arabian Handicap (85-105), 5yo+, 1400m Nah'ash Al Shahania, Rudy Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier
3. Thoroughbred Handicap (60-80), 4yo+, 2000m

Mysteryofthesands, Mohammed al-Ghazali, Lukas Delozier

4. Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (60-80), 4yo+, 2000m

Mou'nes Al Shahania, Rudy Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier

5. Local Purebred Arabian Novice Plate, 4yo, 1400m

Anika, Alban de Mieulle, Megane Peslier

6. Purebred Arabian Premium Maiden Plate, 4-7yos, 2000m

Guindol Dei Ribo, Hamad al-Jehani., Pierre Charles Boudot

7. Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate, 3yo, 1200m

Spareo, Hamad Ahmed Hassan al-Malki al-Jehani, Pierre Charles Boudot

8. Purebred Arabian Handicap (45-65), 4yo+, 1200m

Fateh HCM, Eng. Osama Omer al-Dafea, Pierre Charles Boudot

PREMIER LEAGUE

Recent wins over Chelsea mean nothing: Arteta

League leaders Arsenal have not lost to Chelsea since 2021

Reuters
London

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta is taking no comfort from his team's good record against Chelsea, and the Premier League leaders will be fully prepared to deal with their London rivals' adaptability when they meet tomorrow.

Arsenal beat Chelsea twice in the League Cup semi-finals recently and have not lost to them since 2021, with Arteta's side winning 10 of the last 16 matches between them. Arsenal were held to a draw by 10-man Chelsea in November, and Liam Rosenior's Chelsea are coming into tomorrow's game looking to continue a six-match unbeaten run in the league.

"We know the importance of the game and the team we are going to have in front of us. We just have to prepare in the best way to earn the right to win it, as I always said," Arteta told reporters. "What you have done two weeks or two years ago is irrelevant because every game and every context is different, the players might change, the mood of the team might be different. We are prepared."

Arteta praised Chelsea's ability to adapt to the game under Rosenior, who is yet to lose a league game as Chelsea manager. "They can change throughout the game and they have a manager very comfortable doing that, so we are prepared for the possible scenarios we can face and then we will try to be better than them," Arteta added.

Asked if Arsenal can become the first English club to win the quadruple - including the Premier League, FA Cup, League Cup and the Champions League - this season, Arteta shrugged off the idea. "Has it been done? That is how difficult it is," he said. "So let's go game by game and try to earn the right to be there in the last stage of every competition, and then we will see what happens."

CHELSEA PRIMED FOR ANOTHER ARSENAL SHOWDOWN, SAYS ROSENIOR
Meanwhile, Chelsea manager Liam Rosenior is happy with the challenge as they push for a Champions League place as the Blues face a tough run of games in the Premier League with trips to leaders Arsenal and third-placed Aston Villa coming up next.

Chelsea were eighth when Rosenior took



Arsenal's Declan Rice (left) and Jurrien Timber train in London yesterday.

charge last month, and are unbeaten in the league since. The only blemishes on Rosenior's record were two losses in the League Cup semi-final against Arsenal.

"Take it game-by-game. The Premier League is so difficult every week, the different tactical problems you face... I don't judge one game as harder than the other," Rosenior said. "I'm very happy with this group, with the start we've made. We've won eight out of 12, it should be 10 out of 12. That's not a bad foundation to start from."

If Chelsea lose in London derby, it will be the first time Arsenal beat Chelsea three times in the same season since 2003-04, when Ar-

senal won their last Premier League title. "In terms of going out to win the (League Cup) games, there was a clear idea that the players carried out very well. We didn't get the result we wanted and we want that to change," Rosenior said.

Chelsea have welcomed Romeo Lavia and Dario Essugo back to training after injuries, although winger Estevao will be out for more time after suffering a hamstring injury. "They've looked very good in training this week. We've got players coming back from injury. We need to stay calm, consistent in our process and tick each game off as it comes," Rosenior added.

Messi knocked down by fan in Puerto Rico pitch invasion

Miami: Lionel Messi was knocked to the ground as fans invaded the pitch during chaotic scenes at a match in Puerto Rico on Thursday.

Messi was playing for Inter Miami in a friendly against Ecuador's Independiente del Valle when supporters raced onto the field in the game's 88th minute. While one fan demanded a selfie with the Argentine great and another asked for his shirt to be signed, a third rushed to embrace Messi from behind. A security guard tackled the fan, who dragged the World Cup winner to the floor.

Messi did not appear to be injured in the incident, landing on the fan, before picking himself up and walking away in apparent frustration.

It capped a farcical night for a friendly that started an hour late due to a disagreement over which colors each team should wear. The argument was seemingly never resolved, as both teams ended up playing in black.

A penalty kick by Messi gave

Miami a 2-1 victory. Messi, who came on as a substitute at the start of the second half, scored the winning goal in the 70th minute. Inter Miami had opened the scoring in the 16th minute with a goal from fellow Argentine Santi Morales.

Ecuadorian international Patrik Mercado leveled the score in the 17th minute. The friendly was originally scheduled for February 13 but was postponed due to a Messi injury. Nearly 20,000 spectators in Bayamon, on the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico, a US territory, gave the Argentine idol a standing ovation when he finally entered the game.

An eight-time Ballon d'Or winner widely considered one of the greatest soccer players of all time, Messi is expected to represent Argentina at a record sixth World Cup this summer. He has not yet officially confirmed he will participate in the tournament, taking place across the United States, Mexico and Canada.

Amorim axe could cost United £16mn

London: Manchester United's decision to sack Ruben Amorim as their manager could end up costing the Premier League giants almost £16mn according to financial figures released by the club.

Amorim's turbulent 14-month reign came to an end on January 5 following the Portuguese boss's public attack on United's hierarchy, with his five coaches also following him out of Old Trafford. A United filing to the New York Stock Exchange on Thursday disclosed the possible payments to Amorim and his staff, a day after the club confirmed they had made a profit of £32.6mn in their second-quarter results to December 31, 2025.

Described as an "event that occurred after the reporting period", United said: "A charge of £6.3 million for the write off of related intangible assets and a provision of £15.9 million, representing the maximum potential amount of future settlement payments, will be recognised in the statement of profit or (loss) during the second half of the year ending 30 June 2026."

It has been reported the maximum amount of £15.9mn depends on certain factors, such as the 41-year-old Amorim getting a new job within a specific time frame. The accounts showed United have also paid Sporting



£6.3mn, which is what they owed the Portuguese club in compensation for hiring Amorim.

United confirmed in a similar November 2024 filing they were paying Sporting £10mn to hire Amorim to replace Erik ten Hag, whose Old Trafford exit cost £10.4mn. The total bill for Amorim's appointment could cost United £37.3mn.

Amorim won 25 of his 63 games in charge, finishing 15th in the Premier League in what was United's worst performance since being relegated from the top flight in the 1973/74 season. United were sixth in the Premier League when Amorim was sacked, having had a reported major argument with director of football Jason Wilcox days before his final game at Leeds. But under caretaker boss Michael Carrick the club have moved up to fourth following a run of five wins and a draw that has given United renewed hope of playing in next season's Champions League.

SPOTLIGHT

Liverpool manager Slot says Salah victim of 'his own standards'

AFP
London

Mohamed Salah may be experiencing the worst goal drought of his Premier League career but Liverpool manager Arne Slot believes the Egyptian striker is paying the price for his own high standards.

Salah, 33, has won the Golden Boot four times as the English top-flight's leading goal-scorer since arriving at Anfield in 2017, the latest in last season's title-winning campaign. But he has now gone nine league matches without a goal.

That is his worst run in the Premier League but Slot, speaking ahead of today's match at home to West Ham, told reporters: "He set his own standards and those are so high and the moment he doesn't

score for a few games people are immediately surprised - that is the biggest compliment he can get."

The Dutch boss, whose side are sixth in the table and three points off a Champions League place, added: "We are used to Mo scoring a lot of goals and at this moment in time that is maybe the biggest difference in his performance and game time. But we also know this has happened before, I don't know if it happened nine games in a row but I've had these questions earlier if he didn't score for three or five but I know in the end he always starts scoring again. He is not our only attacker at this moment in time that doesn't score as much as we are used to."

"The focus is totally on him because of everything he did for the club but Hugo (Ekitike) and Cody (Gakpo) haven't scored that many goals recently as well. It is a

team thing which we have to improve."

Liverpool, meanwhile, announced they had returned to profit after their title triumph last season with a pre-tax surplus of £15.2mn that owed much to a £60mn increase in media revenue.

But performance bonuses, plus the contract renewals of high-profile stars such as Salah and skipper Virgil van Dijk, helped leave Liverpool with the highest wage bill in the Premier League as staff expenditure rose by £42mn to £428mn. That put Liverpool ahead of Manchester City, whose employee costs for the same season were £408mn.

As these figures relate to the 2024/25 campaign, with the accounting period ending on May 31, they do not include Liverpool's £450m summer spending spree on the likes of British record transfer Alexander Isak, Florian Wirtz and Ekitike.



Mohamed Salah has now gone nine league matches without a goal.