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GULF TIMES SPORT



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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Qatar SC stun Gharafa as Shamal move second

Duhail produce their most convincing display of the season as they thrash Saliya

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Gharafa's Qatar Stars League title ambitions suffered a setback after a 0-2 defeat to Qatar SC, while Al Shamal climbed into joint second place with a dramatic late win over Al Wakrah as the league resumed yesterday following a short suspension due to regional tensions. In the third match of the night, Al Duhail returned to winning ways with an emphatic 4-0 victory over Al Saliya at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

The results left Al Shamal and Al Gharafa level on 34 points, four behind leaders Al Sadd, who are in action today. Qatar SC moved up to 27 points, while Al Duhail climbed to sixth place with 24 points.

At Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium, Al Shamal secured a hard-fought over Al Wakrah thanks to a stoppage-time strike from Pau Prim. The two sides battled evenly for most of the match, struggling to find a breakthrough despite creating several chances.

Neither side was able to score in regulation time, though the crossbar denied both teams once during the contest. Wakrah's task became more difficult in the closing stages when Radwan Berkane was shown a red card around 10 minutes from time.

Shamal eventually found the decisive moment deep into stoppage time when Spanish midfielder Prim struck from the centre of the box following a corner kick to secure three valuable points for the visitors.

At Al Thumama Stadium, Qatar SC delivered a strong performance to defeat Al Gharafa and deal a blow to the Cheetahs' pursuit of the title. Musab Battat gave Qatar SC the lead in the 26th minute, beating goalkeeper Khalifa Ababacar with a shot that deflected slightly off a defender after a through cross.

Gharafa's hopes of mounting a comeback were dented early in the second half when Seydou Sano was sent off in the 47th minute following a VAR review. The defender had brought down a charging Faiz Selemanni outside the box, leaving the referee with little choice but to show a red card.

With the numerical advantage, Qatar SC maintained control and doubled their lead in the 66th minute through Joao Pedro. The Brazilian forward sprinted onto a long ball and calmly finished past the advancing Ababacar to seal the victory. The crucial win lifted Qatar SC to 27 points, strengthening their push for a top-four finish.

Meanwhile, Al Duhail produced one of their most convincing displays of the season as they thrashed Al Saliya. Benjamin



Qatar SC delivered a strong performance to defeat Al Gharafa and deal a blow to the Cheetahs' pursuit of the title. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

Bourigeaud was instrumental in the victory, contributing a goal and three assists, while Krzysztof Piatek scored twice as the Red Knights ended a difficult run of results.

Piatek opened the scoring in the 12th minute with a powerful header from a Bourigeaud corner before doubling the lead just three minutes later, again heading home from another precise delivery by the French midfielder.

The Polish striker then turned provider in the 63rd minute, setting up Bourigeaud to make it 3-0 with a composed finish. Ibrahim Bamba completed the scoring in the 78th minute to put the result beyond doubt.

The win moved Al Duhail to 24 points and temporarily into sixth place, while Al Saliya remained 10th with 15 points as they continue to battle near the bottom of the standings.

Three more matches are scheduled today, including leaders Al Sadd hosting Umm Salal at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium. Al Ahli will face Al Arabi at Al Thumama Stadium, while Al Rayyan take on Al Shahania at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium.



Al Shamal's Spanish midfielder Pau Prim (left) struck a stoppage-time winner against Al Wakrah at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium yesterday.

Trump says it is not "appropriate" for Iran to be in World Cup

New York: US President Donald Trump said yesterday the Iranian men's national football team was welcome to participate in the 2026 World Cup but that he believed it was not appropriate that they be there "for their own life and safety."

"The Iran National Soccer Team is welcome to The World Cup, but I really don't believe it is appropriate that they be there, for their own life and safety," Trump said in a post on Truth Social.

Trump's comments came just two days after he told FIFA chief Gianni Infantino the Iranian players would be welcome despite the Middle East war. Infantino said earlier this week that during a meeting with Trump at the White House they had discussed the "current situation in Iran."

"President Trump reiterated that the Iranian team is, of course, welcome to compete in the tournament in the United States," he wrote after the meeting on Tuesday.

Iran's sports minister said on Wednesday that it was not possible for his nation's athletes to participate after the US launched airstrikes alongside Israel against Tehran. The attacks triggered a region-wide conflict that has shown no signs of abating.

The 48-team World Cup will be held in the US, Canada and Mexico from June 11 to July 19, with Iran scheduled for matches in Los Angeles and Seattle. An official withdrawal by Iran from the showpiece event, which has not yet happened, would be a first in the modern era and would leave football's global governing body FIFA with the urgent task of finding a replacement team.

Iran was the only nation missing from a FIFA planning summit for World Cup participants held last week in Atlanta. FIFA did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Late last year it awarded Trump - who has campaigned aggressively for the Nobel Peace Prize - its own inaugural peace prize.

Earlier this week, Australia granted humanitarian visas to five Iranian women soccer players after they sought asylum, fearing persecution on their return home for their refusal to sing the national anthem at an Asia Cup match.

Trump had urged Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese to grant asylum to members of the Iranian women's team, saying the U.S. would if Australia did not. (Reuters)

SPOTLIGHT

Jorge praises Qatar's security, eyes strong finish with Rayyan

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Rayyan's Portuguese coach Artur Jorge has expressed relief on the resumption of Qatar Stars League in difficult times with ongoing conflict in the Middle East. Fourth-placed Rayyan face Al Shahania in their round 18 match at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium today.

Speaking to the media on eve of the match Al Shahania, Jorge said: "We are happy the league is back after a break. We feel safe in Qatar and we thank the country for the security and safety it has been providing to all."

He added: "Our focus now is on finishing the league in a position befitting Al Rayyan's ambition and those of the club's fans. The team's preparations for the Al Shahania match have been good and the upcoming game represents an important opportunity for us to continue working and achieve a positive result."

Al Rayyan goalkeeper Sami Baldi emphasised on the team's readiness. "We are excited to return to competition after the



Al Rayyan coach Artur Jorge speaks at a press conference yesterday.

recent break, and the players are ready. We have worked as a team during this period, and we strive to perform well in the next

stage."

Among the other matches today, Al Ahli will face Al Arabi at the Al Thumama Sta-

dium while table toppers and defending champions Al Sadd will meet Umm Salal at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

Al Arabi's Romanian coach Cosmin Contra also expressed his gratitude to Qatar for the well-being. "Aside from football, we would like to express our deep gratitude to Qatar. The security situation and the calmness we are experiencing reflect a high level of professionalism in dealing with such situations. We extend our sincere thanks to those responsible for protecting the country and ensuring everyone's safety, which allows us to carry out our work in a completely secure environment," he said.

Meanwhile, Al Ahli coach Younes Ali warned that his side face a difficult challenge against Al Arabi and stressed the need for focus and hard work as they look to move away from 11th and penultimate place in the standings.

"The challenge stems from Al Arabi's strength and impressive performances under coach Cosmin. The match will demand significant effort and focus on the field to secure a victory and move away from the bottom of standings.

"It is important to maintain focus in the

match against Al Arabi and the remaining matches in the competition to improve our position in the league table," said Younes.

AL SADD WARY OF UMM SALAL

Al Sadd's assistant coach Sergio Allegri said the match against Umm Salal will be tough and intense. "The match against Umm Salal will certainly be difficult and we will need have to give our 100% to get the three points. We need to continue with our top efforts to continue winning and extend our lead at the top of the league," he said.

Al Sadd star Akram Afif added: "From now on, every remaining match in the league is crucial; we have to win every single one of them. We are ready to face Umm Salal. Our focus is on achieving the three to maintain our lead and retain the title."

Umm Salal coach Ruben Albes said his side will try to bet at their best against Sadd.

"We know it's a big match against the league leaders but we will go in aiming for a positive result. We shall try to maintain our performance from the previous matches and put on a good show that will benefit the team in its league campaign."

FORMULA 1

Championship means nothing at this point: Russell

'There's still room to improve and that's what I'm most pleased about'

AFP
Shanghai

George Russell said yesterday the "championship means nothing at this point" as the Mercedes ace enters the second weekend of the Formula One season top of the pile following victory in Melbourne.

The Briton began the campaign as favourite to win a maiden world championship and showed why as he led home a Mercedes one-two with teammate Kimi Antonelli in Sunday's season-opener.

The Australian Grand Prix heralded a new era for the sport with numerous rule changes, including a 50-50 split between conventional and electrical power.

Rivals had pinpointed Mercedes as the team to beat in the build-up to the season, but Russell was eager not to sound too triumphant going into the Chinese Grand Prix this weekend.

"It feels no different to any other day, to be honest, here in China," the 28-year-old said in Shanghai.

"Preparing as usual, going about my business as usual.

"I'm most happy about the fact that the car is quick and reacting as we think.

"There's still room to improve and that's what I'm most pleased about.



Mercedes' driver George Russell poses in his car during preparations yesterday, ahead of the Formula One Chinese Grand Prix at the Shanghai International Circuit in Shanghai. (AFP)

"A championship means nothing at this point."

Ferrari were the closest challengers to Mercedes in Melbourne, with Charles Leclerc third and seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton fourth.

Russell believes the season will be "quite a close fight between ourselves and Ferrari", a view he

said was shared by fellow Briton Hamilton.

The pair, former teammates at Mercedes, shared a flight to Shanghai together.

Russell warned it was not only Ferrari who posed a threat, even if they are shaping up as the prime challengers ahead of Red Bull and McLaren.

"My view is a lot of teams didn't optimise qualifying. I think we did a really great job of qualifying," he said, having started the Albert Park race from pole.

"But I think Sunday showed the true pace. And, you know, when you look at Ferrari... they were basically doing the same lap times as us."

World champion Norris says McLaren must 'improve in all areas'

World champion Lando Norris said yesterday that McLaren have made some progress since a disappointing opening to the season in Australia but warned they still need to "improve in all areas".

Pre-season favourite George Russell led home a Mercedes one-two in Melbourne, ahead of both Ferraris, with Britain's Norris fifth - 51 seconds behind the race winner.

All weekend Norris had railed against the latest version of F1 cars, which have a 50-50 split between conventional and electrical power, saying they were "probably the worst" the sport had produced.

Ahead of this weekend's Chinese Grand Prix in

Shanghai, the second stop in the calendar, Norris struck a slightly more upbeat tone.

"It should be a little bit more simple and therefore we expect to be a bit closer," he told reporters.

"Even if we were to go back to Melbourne now, though, I think we would expect to be closer anyway from what we've understood and been able to learn and figure out.

"But at the same time we also know we have to improve in all areas, it's not just power unit, it's the car itself. It's decent, we're in a good starting position, but we still want it to be better than what it is currently."

Norris at least fared better than his teammate

Oscar Piastri, who crashed out of his home Australian Grand Prix before it even began. Piastri, who qualified fifth fastest in the Melbourne season-opener, hit the kerb at Turn 4 and spun into the concrete barriers on the way to the grid.

"It's certainly not going to be my favourite moment of my career, but I think I still tried to learn as much as I can from the race," he said in Shanghai, where he won the grand prix last year.

"There's definitely positives to take in amongst last weekend, but I think back to the start of last year, I'm only two points worse off even though it's a lot more embarrassing."

CRICKET

Sunrisers Leeds sign Pakistan's leg-spinner Ahmed for Hundred

AFP
London

Leg-spinner Abrar Ahmed was snapped up by Sunrisers Leeds - a Hundred franchise with links to the Indian Premier League - yesterday despite fears Pakistani players would be frozen out due to political tensions.

The England and Wales Cricket Board last month issued a statement saying all eight of the city-based franchises in the 100-ball-a-side competition were committed to selection based solely on performances.

A longstanding political stand-off between India and Pakistan mean the two nations only play each other in major global cricket events.

Cricketers from Pakistan have not featured in the Indian Premier League (IPL) since 2009 because of diplomatic tensions.

The only two Pakistan players in Wednesday's women's auction, Fatima Sana and Sadia Iqbal, went unsold.

Fast bowler Shaheen Shah Afridi withdrew from the men's sale and fellow paceman Haris Rauf failed to attract an offer

when put up for his reserve price of £100,000 (\$134,000) at the auction in London yesterday.

But Sunrisers bought 27-year-old Ahmed for £190,000, while fellow Pakistani spinner Usman Tariq, 28, was snapped up by Birmingham Phoenix for £140,000.

Sunrisers are owned in full by the group behind IPL outfit Sunrisers Hyderabad.

London Spirit paid £390,000 for uncapped English all-rounder James Cole while Welsh fire spent a combined £540,000 on batsman Jordan Cox and former England captain Joe Root.

The Hundred is staging the first auction of its kind in a major British sport after previously using a draft system to select players.

Stakes in the eight franchises were sold last year to private investors, raising huge sums for cricket in England and Wales.

Four of the franchises - MI London, Manchester Super Giants, Sunrisers Leeds and Southern Brave - are at least part-owned by companies that control IPL teams. The 2026 edition of the Hundred, featuring men's and women's competitions, starts on July 21 and runs for four weeks.



Last South Africa, West Indies players leave India after flight delays

The final batch of players from South Africa and the West Indies have left India after being stranded for more than a week following the T20 World Cup, cricket's governing body said yesterday. International air travel was thrown into chaos after airlines cancelled or rerouted flights because of the war in the Middle East. The International Cricket Council (ICC) said that in the last 24 hours "South Africa's remaining 29 members and the West Indies' final 16 members have departed on flights to their respective homelands".

It added the departures brought to a close "a complex operation that has taken place under exceptionally challenging global travel conditions". Cricket West Indies had called the uncertainty surrounding their return "increasingly distressing" and pointed to "continued delays with charter flight arrangements organised by the ICC". The two-time champions exited the competition on March 1.

MOTORSPORT

Alonso fears more pain in China with struggling Aston Martin

AFP
Shanghai

Fernando Alonso said yesterday he expects another difficult weekend wrestling with his new Aston Martin at the Chinese Grand Prix after failing to finish the season-opener in Australia.

Silverstone-based Aston Martin endured a horror start after serious issues with their Honda power unit and a lack of spare parts.

Two-time world champion Alonso and teammate Lance Stroll had to endure extreme vibration in the chassis caused by the power unit, which was feared could cause the drivers permanent nerve damage. "The situation unfortunately didn't change within four or five days since Melbourne, so it will be a difficult weekend," Alonso told reporters at the Shanghai International Circuit.

"We'll limit the laps in one or two sessions as we are short on parts. We need laps, to find the window on the chassis side.

"I'll be happy if we leave China with a more or less normal practice, more or less normal qualifying."

The Spaniard could not put a timeframe on when improvements might come.

"What can I do within the team? Work harder, help Honda as much as I can," said Alonso.

"We can allocate resources to help Honda with the power unit. We are one team, it is a bumpy start that I hope won't last too long.



Aston Martin's driver Fernando Alonso signs an autograph for a fan at the paddock yesterday, ahead of the Formula One Chinese Grand Prix at the Shanghai International Circuit. (AFP)

"We are pushing, we have very talented people in the team, so I hope within a couple of grands prix, we can have a normal weekend.

"To be competitive will take more time. Once we fix the reliability, we will be behind on power and things."

The 44-year-old veteran has been in Formula One for more than two decades and has driven vastly different iterations of cars from the old V10 petrol engines through to the current complex hybrid configuration.

Despite the issues he said was

embracing the challenge of the new cars enthusiastically in what could be his final season on the grid. His Aston Martin contract expires at the end of 2026.

"Do we enjoy driving these cars? Yes, because we love racing," Alonso said.

"I do four or five 24-hour races because I love racing and I love driving. So if you jump into an F1 car, you enjoy going fast.

"But it is a challenge, a different challenge."

"I was super lucky to race in (the last) era and I feel lucky to race in both."

SPOTLIGHT

King Charles invited to 150th anniversary Melbourne cricket Test celebration

AFP
Melbourne

King Charles and global cricket royalty have been invited to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the first Test match in Melbourne, officials said yesterday, with ticket sales through the roof a year before a ball is bowled.

Australia will play England under lights at the Melbourne Cricket Ground to celebrate the landmark from March 11-15 next year. It will commemorate the first ever Test, played between the two arch-rivals, at the same stadium in 1877.

All members of the Australia and England teams that played in the 1977 Centenary Test - also at the MCG - are set to attend.

The late Queen Elizabeth II was at that game and officials are hopeful King Charles will make the trip in 2027.

"We've extended (an invitation) through all the appropriate channels, both government here and in the UK, for the King or a subset to be here," Cricket Australia chief Todd Greenberg told the Sydney Morning Herald. "That's certainly high on our list."

Cricket Australia confirmed to AFP that an invitation had been issued.

"We might bring his visit slightly earlier in the Test match, as opposed to the end of day five, given modern-day Test matches may not get that far," added Greenberg.

"We'll make sure a royal visit is there for the opening ball on day one, for sure."

It will be the first time the MCG has hosted a men's day-night Test and more than 125,000 tickets have already been sold following a ballot, with most of the public allocation across days one-to-three gone.

"We knew there would be

strong demand for tickets to the 150th anniversary Test but the response both locally and from overseas has been phenomenal," said Greenberg.

"We have some fantastic plans in place to ensure the Test and the accompanying entertainment and events will provide a fitting celebration of a very significant milestone.

"Most importantly, we will honour the great players who have made Test cricket such wonderful and enduring sporting theatre, and we can't wait to welcome the cricket world to Melbourne."

Also invited are all living male and female International Cricket Council Hall of Fame inductees, former Test captains and a who's who of ex-Australia and England Test players.

Officials are also hopeful that the priceless Ashes urn - which is kept at the Marylebone Cricket Club at Lord's in London - will make the trip.

Ireland's Olympic 1500m champion Delany dies aged 91

DUBLIN: Irish athletics great Ronnie Delany, who won the 1500m Olympic title in Melbourne in 1956, has died aged 91 after a short illness. He was just 21 when he won gold, setting a then Olympic record of 3min 41.2sec. Delany went on to win bronze in the 1958 European Championships. But instead of defending his 1500m title at the 1960 Olym-

pics, he competed in the 800m, went out in the quarter-final round and retired the following year. Ireland did not win another Olympic gold until boxer Michael Carruth in 1992. "Throughout his brief athletic career, Ronnie inspired young Irish runners to follow their dreams," Ireland's sports minister Patrick O'Donovan said in tribute. "His remarkable victory in Australia



Ireland in two decades... and would mark a high point for Irish sport until 1992 in Barcelona."

FOCUS

Swiatek routs Muchova to reach quarter-finals

AFP
Indian Wells

Two-time champion Iga Swiatek barreled into the Indian Wells quarter-finals on Wednesday, beating in-form Czech Karolina Muchova 6-2, 6-0.

World number two Swiatek, who lifted the trophy in the prestigious ATP and WTA Masters 1000 in 2022 and 2024, won the last 10 games to halt Muchova's eight-match winning streak, which included her first title since 2019 in the Qatar Open last month.

"I felt great," Swiatek said after reaching her fifth straight Indian Wells quarter-final.

"I felt really solid and like I could really, from the beginning till the end, play my kind of game and just play how I wanted to."

That included being "proactive" with her forehand.

"I just chose the right balls to go forward or stay back and grind a bit more," she said. "I think the decision-making was good today. I didn't rush and I had comfortable situations to do what I wanted to."

Swiatek next faces ninth-seeded Ukrainian Elina Svitolina, who advanced when 44th-ranked Czech Katerina Siniakova retired with a right hip injury while trailing 6-1, 1-1.

"Of course very unlucky for her to finish a tournament like this," Svitolina said of Siniakova, a former doubles number one who ousted defending champion Mirra Andreeva in the third round.

"For me, it's a little bit more time to recover for tomorrow's big match," said the 31-year-old who has lost four of five prior encounters with Swiatek.

Australian Open champion Elena Rybakina, the 2023 Indian Wells winner, also advanced by retirement, with unseeded Briton Sonay Kartal calling it a day as she trailed 6-4, 4-3. Kartal had received treatment for a lower back injury during a medical timeout late in the first set.

She continued to receive massages on the changeovers in the second before finally calling a halt after going down a break.

"Definitely not the way I wanted to finish the match," Rybakina said. "It's not easy, this kind of injury."

Rybakina next faces fifth-seeded American Jessica Pegula, whose 6-3, 7-6 (7/5) victory over Belinda Bencic marked her first victory over the Swiss veteran after four defeats.

"Really happy being able to turn around my pretty poor record against Belinda," Pegula said.

"When you're able to figure that out and get over that hump it's always a good feeling."

Up 5-3 in the second set, Pegula thwarted a late comeback bid from Bencic, who produced a love service game then broke Pegula as she served for the match at 5-4.

Bencic then held serve to force the tiebreaker, saving a pair of match points before Pegula closed out the win on her third opportunity.

"She made me have to earn it today," Pegula said.

"I felt like in the second set, when I got up there, I had a little bit of a lull where I had a couple of game points and I could have maybe finished the match."

"But she's a really good player and when you don't quite finish those off that's where she can come in, and that's what she did."



Iga Swiatek celebrates after winning against Karolina Muchova in the fourth round of the Indian Wells Open. (Jayne Kamin-Oncea-Imagn Images)

TENNIS

Djokovic ousted by Draper, Alcaraz enters quarters

'MY FIRST SET, I THINK I WAS UNPLAYABLE TO BE HONEST'

AFP
Indian Wells

Novak Djokovic was dumped out by Jack Draper in a slugfest Wednesday as the defending champion won 4-6, 6-4, 7-6 (7/5) to reach the quarter-finals at Indian Wells.

World number one Carlos Alcaraz sailed into the last eight of the Masters 1000 event for the fifth straight year and there were straight-sets wins for Daniil Medvedev and Cameron Norrie.

But Britain's Draper did it the hard way, wearing down 38-year-old Djokovic in a punishing third set to deny the Serb superstar his first return to the quarter-finals since he won his fifth Indian Wells title in 2016.

"I came out here tonight and I won that match through determination and trying to problem-solve and do my best and have a great attitude," said Draper, who kept the former world number one on the move with multiple drop shots.

The margins were razor-thin over the first two sets. The tide turned on an epic point in the opening game of the third that saw both players chasing down drop shots and scrambling for lobs before Djokovic sealed it with an overhead for a 40-30 lead.

He flopped on the court exhausted and was on his knees again after Draper won the next point. Djokovic would go on to hold serve, but he said it was the difference in the match for him.

"One point," he said. "It was great winning that point in that game, but I just ran completely out of gas."

Draper broke Djokovic in his next service game, but couldn't close it out when he served for the match at 5-4. The reprieve wasn't enough for Djokovic, who led 4-3



Jack Draper of Great Britain is congratulated by Novak Djokovic of Serbia after winning the Indian Wells Open match. (AFP)

in the tiebreaker but couldn't hang on. "He played a sloppy game to close it out 5-4, and, you know, I got the crowd, you know, backing me, and I felt the energy," Djokovic said. "It was, like, maybe I'm gonna take this one. It was so, so close."

Draper, playing just his second tournament since missing the better part of six months with an arm injury, was delighted.

"To come out here against Novak, for me the greatest tennis player there is, I'm just incredibly proud of myself," he said.

He won't have long to savor the victory, with a quarter-final against two-time finalist Daniil

Medvedev coming up on Thursday. Medvedev beat American Alex Michelsen 6-2, 6-4.

Alcaraz advanced with a sparkling 6-1, 7-6 (7/2) victory over Casper Ruud, extending his perfect start to 2026.

Alcaraz, who lifted the trophy in the California desert in 2023 and 2024, was untouchable in the first set, conjuring winners from every angle of the court.

"My first set, I think I was unplayable to be honest," Alcaraz said. "I was really, really happy about playing at that level."

Ruud stepped it up in the second set, but even he could only smile when Alcaraz seized a 5-1

lead in the tiebreaker with another leaping volley, the Spaniard closing proceedings fittingly with a backhand winner.

Alcaraz, 22, became the youngest man to complete a career Grand Slam with his victory at the Australian Open.

He followed that up with the Qatar Open title and with three wins under his belt in Indian Wells is now 15-0 on the season.

He next faces 29th-ranked Briton Norrie, who beat Australian qualifier Rinki Hijikata 6-4, 6-2.

Norrie, the 2021 Indian Wells champion, beat Alcaraz in the second round of the Paris Masters 1000 last year.

GOLF

DeChambeau, Rahm among leaders at LIV Singapore

AFP
Singapore

Bryson DeChambeau and Jon Rahm are among four players tied for the lead at 4-under par following the opening round of LIV Golf Singapore yesterday, but the leaders should feel far from comfortable.

Lee Westwood of England and Canadian Richard Lee, an LIV wild card, also shot first-round 68s, giving the group a one-stroke lead over seven players tied for fifth place and 10 more who are two back and tied for 12th.

The golfers had to contend with hot and windy conditions at the Sentosa Golf Club, and DeChambeau said a primary goal is "staying competitive with that leaderboard. It's about hitting better iron shots, better drivers and making sure I'm on those uncomfortable holes comfortable."

Despite the number of players under par - 30 - the course was made tougher by the wind. Only two golfers played a bogey-free round.

"There's a lot of trouble out there," Westwood said. "You don't have to get much out of position for it to become tricky. Obviously you do get it in the rough, the rough is not that long, but it is flying rough. You lose a lot of control over the golf ball."

"But the golf course is in incredible condition. The greens are some of, if not the best I've ever seen, certainly in Asia but anywhere, really. There's no excuse for missing putts on these greens. You start them on line, they really do hold the line and stay true."

He was pleased with his no-bogey round. "I started last week with no bogeys the first round.

It's a good habit to get into, really, first round with no bogeys," he said. "But this week feels better because the golf course is so demanding."

Rahm, who had five birdies and a bogey for his round of 68, said putting and accuracy will be the keys this week.

"This golf course is not easy. The greens are firm. They're very, very good. They're rolling great," Rahm said. "So if you're feeling good with the putter, you can have a lot of good chances. But it's not easy. You've got to hit fairways and be really accurate with the mid-irons."

Lee won LIV Promotions in January to earn one of three wild-card spots in the league this season. The best finish ever by a wild card is a T12.

"That could possibly change this week," he said. "I mean, I've played this course so many times on the Asian Tour, and I think I have a bit of an advantage on this course knowing where the slopes are and where to miss it. I think it's going to be a great week."

The group that stands one shot back after rounds of 69 includes South African Louis Oosthuizen, Tyrrell Hatton of England and Charles Howell III.

Joaquin Niemann of Chile posted a five-stroke win last season in the Singapore event. Yesterday, he shot a 70 to finish in the group of 10 golfers who are two shots off the lead.

Others in the group include Tom McKibbin of Northern Ireland, Cameron Smith of Australia and Anthony Kim, who won LIV Golf Australia last month.

In the team competition, Rahm's Legion XIII is at 11-under, based on his play as well as the scores of McKibbin and Hatton. DeChambeau's Crushers GC is six strokes back at 5-under.



Morikawa withdraws from Players Championship due to back injury

World number four Collin Morikawa has withdrawn from The Players Championship in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, with a back injury after completing one hole, the PGA Tour said.

Morikawa, who arrived at the PGA Tour's flagship event this week as one of the pre-tournament favourites, parred his opening hole at TPC Sawgrass, the par-four 10th, and then withdrew at the tee at the par-five 11th. The two-times major champion took a practice swing at the 11th tee and then immediately reached for his back with his right arm. He then went to a golf cart, removed his hat and placed his arms on his head as he was taken from the course.

Morikawa won the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am last month for his seventh PGA Tour victory and followed that with top-10 finishes at the Genesis Invitational and Arnold Palmer Invitational.

VINGEGAARD SOLOES TO VICTORY IN PARIS-NICE FIFTH STAGE

Former Tour de France winner Jonas Vingegaard crossed the line alone after an impressive 21km solo break for his second win in two days in stage five of the Paris-Nice race yesterday.

The Dane had pulled on the leader's yellow jersey in the lashing rain at Uchon on Wednesday and tightened his grip on overall victory after shaking off his rivals to coast to victory in the sunshine at Colombier-le-Vieux in south-east France. The Visma-Lease-a-bike rider had attacked on the Saint-Jean-de-Muzols climb during the hilly 206.3km stage and crossed the line 2min 02sec ahead of French rider Valentin

Paret-Peintre. Soudal Quick-Step's Paret-Peintre pulled clear of the pursuing group who arrived some 18sec later. Vingegaard increased his lead at the top of the overall standings to 3min 22sec on Colombian Dani Martinez and is well set to claim victory in Nice on Sunday. The Dane is competing in his first race of the season ahead of targeting a Giro d'Italia-Tour de France double. Today's sixth stage of the 'Race to the Sun' is a 179.3km hilly ride from Barentane south of Avignon heading east to Apt.

Van der Poel wins 4th stage

Mathieu van der Poel won the fourth stage of

Tirreno-Adriatico yesterday as Giulio Pellizzari snatched the overall race lead from Isaac Del Toro. Dutchman Van der Poel claimed his second stage win in three days with a powerful show of speed in the final few hundred metres in Martinsicuro on Italy's Adriatic coast. The 31-year-old prevailed after an eventful 213-kilometre ride which came down to the short but punchy final Tortoreto climb, when the peloton split under pressure from Del Toro and Wout van Aert. A dozen or so of the race's leading contenders, including Pellizzari and Del Toro, broke clear with around 15km to race, ensuring that they would contest the stage victory.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Valverde helps Real batter City as PSG sink Chelsea

PSG have one foot in quarter-finals after two late goals from Khvicha Kvaratskhelia at Parc des Princes



Paris Saint-Germain's Portuguese midfielder Vitinha (centre) and his teammates celebrate their side's victory at the end of the UEFA Champions League round of 16 first leg match against Chelsea at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris on Wednesday. (AFP)



Real Madrid's Federico Valverde scores past Manchester City goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma to complete his hat-trick at the Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid on Wednesday. (Reuters)

AFP
Paris, France

Federico Valverde scored an unlikely hat-trick as Real Madrid trounced Manchester City 3-0 in the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie Wednesday, while holders Paris Saint-Germain beat Chelsea 5-2.

Premier League leaders Arsenal snatched a 1-1 draw at Bayer Leverkusen to preserve their unbeaten record in Europe this season, while Bodo/Glimt continued their fairytale run with a 3-0 win over Sporting.

Alvaro Arbeloa's record 15-time European champions avenged their loss to City in the league phase as Valverde struck three times in the first half to hand Madrid full control of the tie despite the absence of the injured Kylian Mbappe.

"(It was) incredible, you dream of nights

like this," Valverde told *Movistar*. "It's been a long time since I enjoyed a game like this."

Valverde ran onto a long kick from Thibaut Courtois and dribbled past Gianluigi Donnarumma to slot home and give Madrid the lead at the Santiago Bernabeu against City as the teams met in a knockout tie for the fifth season running.

The Uruguayan midfielder arrowed a low drive into the far corner to double Madrid's advantage and then completed his hat-trick with a sublime touch and finish after linking up with Brahim Diaz.

City could have suffered an ever heavier defeat but Donnarumma saved a second-half penalty from Vinicius Junior after the City goalkeeper brought down the Brazilian.

"I had a feeling that we were better than the result said... but the result is here," City boss Pep Guardiola told *TNT Sports*, refusing to write off his team's chances

next week. "In football you never know. We will try."

PSG have one foot in the quarter-finals after two late goals from Khvicha Kvaratskhelia at the Parc des Princes.

Bradley Barcola fired PSG in front but Malo Gusto's scruffy effort skipped past Matfei Safonov to bring Chelsea level.

Ousmane Dembele finished off a clinical counter to restore the lead for the hosts before half-time, only for Enzo Fernandez to reply once more for Chelsea after excellent work from Pedro Neto.

A mistake from Filip Jorgensen saw Vitinha lob the Chelsea goalkeeper to put PSG on top for the third time, with Kvaratskhelia hammering in a superb fourth and then potentially applying the fatal blow for Luis Enrique's side in stoppage time.

"It is a special moment because we are maybe not quite as precise as usual..." said Luis Enrique, whose team have struggled to consistently replicate last season's form.

"There are all the comparisons with last year but it is impossible to be at that level... we are very resilient, I think that is a word which defines our team."

Chelsea boss Liam Rosenior admitted his team paid the price for losing their composure late on.

"A very disappointing result in an evening where for so much of the game I was really happy. The last 15-20 minutes were crazy," he said.

"We need to be better with setbacks and we need to stay calm and we didn't."

Despite an unprecedented six English teams featuring in the last 16, not a single one won and only two avoided defeat in Europe this week.

Arsenal needed an 89th-minute penalty from Kai Havertz against his former club to snatch a draw away to Bayer Leverkusen.

Robert Andrich headed in a corner for Leverkusen moments into the second half to leave Arsenal, who won all eight of their

league phase matches, staring at defeat in Germany.

But Havertz came off the bench and converted from the spot after a foul on Noni Madueke to ensure Arsenal remain favourites to reach the quarter-finals.

"I know how hard it is to come here... and we knew what to expect," said Havertz. "We didn't play our best today. But we're going home with a good result. We need to step on the gas next week."

Bodo/Glimt enjoyed another remarkable Champions League night as they swept Portugal's Sporting aside 3-0 to register their fifth win in a row in the competition.

Sondre Brunstad Fet put Bodo ahead from the penalty spot just after the half-hour mark and Ole Didrik Blomberg made it two in first-half injury time.

Kasper Høgh scored his fifth goal in as many European games with 19 minutes remaining to spark wild celebrations for the Norwegian underdogs.

PREVIEW

Arsenal, City resume title duel after woeful week

Reuters
London

After a sobering week in Europe for English clubs, some bruised egos return to domestic issues this weekend with the Premier League title race and relegation battles both reaching potentially pivotal moments.

The Premier League's boast of being the best in Europe took a bit of a hammering over 48 hours this week with none of the six clubs in last-16 action winning.

Manchester City were one of the four teams to suffer defeat and they will need to dust themselves down quickly from a 3-0 defeat at Real Madrid when they face West Ham United away today evening, by which time they could find themselves 10 points behind leaders Arsenal, albeit from two fewer games.

City were well-beaten in the Bernabeu and will need a remarkable recovery in the second leg to salvage their European hopes, but first they must ensure they do not suffer what could be a knockout blow in the title race.

Arsenal, who needed a last-minute Kai Havertz penalty to scramble a 1-1 draw away to Bayer Leverkusen on Wednesday, have the opportunity to really turn the screws on City as they host Everton earlier today.

Mikel Arteta's side start the weekend seven points clear having played one game more, and while they appear to be labouring of late, they are grinding out results.

They are on a three-match winning run in the league, but the last two - at home to Chelsea and away at Brighton and Hove Albion were both nervy affairs as the pressure of trying to secure a first title since 2004 began to show.

Everton have won only once in the Premier League at Arsenal's iconic Emirates Stadium, in 2021, but will be well-rested and will arrive on the back of successive victories and with their eyes on a potential European qualification slot.

MAN CITY CONFIDENCE SHAKEN

City were beginning to look ominous in pursuit of Arsenal after a four-game winning burst had them breathing down their necks but the suspicion that they are way off Pep Guardiola's clinical machines of the past remains.

The 2-2 draw at home to Nottingham Forest killed their momentum and the way Real Madrid cut through them on Wednesday will have shaken confidence.



Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta reacts during the UEFA Champions League match against Bayer Leverkusen in Leverkusen on Wednesday. (Reuters)

City have won their last seven Premier League games against West Ham but will be wary of a side scrapping for their Premier League lives and showing signs of form.

Chelsea manager Liam Rosenior suffered his first major setback since replacing Enzo Maresca as his side went down 5-2 at Paris St Germain on Wednesday.

The London club, fifth in the table, will need to quickly shrug that off as they host a Newcastle United side who produced arguably the best display by an English club this week as they drew 1-1 at home with Barcelona.

Reigning champions Liverpool, whose 1-0 loss at Galatasaray on Tuesday began the dismal set of results for English clubs, are in danger of finishing outside the top five.

Although they will be confident of getting back to winning ways against a Tottenham Hotspur side who lurch from one crisis to the next and who are in serious danger of relegation for the first time since 1977.

Tottenham lost 5-2 at Atletico Madrid on Tuesday, gifting away three goals in the opening 15 minutes as interim manager Igor Tudor's reign went from bad to worse with de-

fender Micky van de Ven fearing a 'doomsday scenario'.

The Croatian has lost all four of his games in charge since replacing Thomas Frank and a bad defeat at Liverpool for 16th-placed Tottenham could force the club's hierarchy to act before it's too late.

FIXTURES

Tomorrow, March 14
Burnley vs. AFC Bournemouth - 15:00 GMT
Sunderland vs. Brighton & Hove Albion - 15:00 GMT
Arsenal vs. Everton - 17:30 GMT
Chelsea vs. Newcastle United - 17:30 GMT
West Ham United vs. Manchester City - 20:00 GMT
Sunday, March 15
Crystal Palace vs. Leeds United - 14:00 GMT
Manchester United vs. Aston Villa - 14:00 GMT
Nottingham Forest vs. Fulham - 14:00 GMT
Liverpool vs. Tottenham Hotspur - 16:30 GMT
Monday, March 16
Brentford vs. Wolverhampton Wanderers - 20:00 GMT

FOCUS

Chelsea's Neto faces UEFA punishment for pushing ball boy

AFP
Paris, France

Chelsea's Pedro Neto is set to be punished by UEFA for pushing a ball boy during his team's 5-2 defeat by Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League after European football's governing body announced yesterday it had opened disciplinary proceedings.

"Disciplinary proceedings have been instigated against... Pedro Neto for unsporting behaviour," a UEFA statement said.

"UEFA's disciplinary bodies will take a decision on this case in due course."

Neto knocked over the ball boy as he ran over to grab the ball late in Wednesday's last 16 first leg, with Chelsea trailing 4-2 at the time.

The incident led to a mass altercation involving players from both teams, and Neto later apologised and gave the ball boy his shirt.

"We were losing and in the emotion of the game I wanted to get the ball fast and I gave him a little push," Neto told broadcaster *TNT Sports*.

"I'm not like this. It was in the heat of the moment and I want to apologise. I gave him my shirt. I'm really sorry about it - I feel I have to apologise to him."

Chelsea coach Liam Rosenior added: "If there was anything from our side that was wrong or out of order, I apologise on behalf of the club."

Neto, who has scored 10 goals in 42 games in all competitions for Chelsea this season, could face a suspension for next Tuesday's second leg.

SWEDEN COACH POTTER EXTENDS CONTRACT UNTIL 2030

Stockholm: Sweden coach **Graham Potter** has extended his contract until 2030, the Swedish Football Association (SvFF) announced yesterday.

The 50-year-old, who made his name in Swedish club football during a hugely successful seven-year spell at Ostersund before managing Premier League clubs Chelsea and West Ham United, took the Sweden job on a short-term contract in October 2025.

"To be able to continue in this role means a lot to me. I feel both a great pride and a great responsibility," Potter said in a statement published by the SvFF.

"It's a big day for me and a fantastic opportunity to do something important going forward... Sweden is a football country with a proud history of teams that have made it to the finals of major championships and competed there, which we want to



return to." Sweden, whose poor performance in their World Cup qualifying group under Potter's predecessor Jon Dahl Tomasson led to the Dane's sacking, can still get to the tournament. They take on Ukraine in a playoff in Valencia, Spain on March 26. If Sweden beat Ukraine they will face Poland or Albania in Stockholm on March 31, with the winners qualifying for the World Cup in the US, Canada and Mexico starting in June.