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Saturday, March 14, 2026  
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# GULF TIMES SPORT



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Qatar 1812 KM to be held from October 22-24 at Lusail International Circuit

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**FOOTBALL**

## Umm Salal stun Sadd as title race tightens

Sadd are four points ahead of Al Shamal, who have a game in hand



Umm Salal's Cristo Gonzalez (centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring his second goal against Al Sadd. **PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil**

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**A**l Sadd failed to stretch their lead to seven points after a shock 2-5 defeat to Umm Salal in the Qatar Stars League at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.

Reigning champions Al Sadd started the first half strongly and managed to score an early goal in the sixth minute through Brazilian Giovanni Henrique, before Jean Kouassi scored the equaliser for Umm Salal in the 29th minute.

Spaniard Cristo Gonzalez succeeded in adding two consecutive goals for Umm Salal in the 35th and 38th minutes, before Abdulaziz Hazaa added Umm Salal's fourth goal in the 45+5 minute.

In the second half, Umm Salal managed to score their fifth goal through Salem al-Hajri in the 60th minute. Al Sadd reduced the deficit by scoring their second goal in the 88th minute from a penalty kick by Akram Afif.

With four matches remaining, Al Sadd are on 38 points, four ahead of Al Shamal, who have a game in hand. Al Gharafa, who lost to Qatar SC on Thursday, are third also with 34 points. Umm Salal, meanwhile, raised its points tally to 19 and jumped to ninth place.



Al Shahania clinched a 2-1 win over Al Rayyan at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium.

In another match, a late goal from substitute Moameen Mutasem saw Al Shahania clinch a thrilling 2-1 win over Al Rayyan at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium. The valuable three points took Al Shahania's tally to 17 points and lifted them to tenth place in the standings

while Al Rayyan remained in fourth with 28 points.

Sudanese Mutasem slotted home the winner from centre inside the box after being beautifully set up by Abdoulaye Traore in the 81st minute of the game after Belgian pro Francesco Antonucci

fetches a spectacular equaliser in the 23rd minute, striking a long ranger from the right which clipped the top of the left post before dashing in.

Portuguese Tiago da Silva had earlier provided Al Rayyan the lead in the 19th minute with a blazing shot taken from outside the box. Al Rayyan were however unlucky in the 25th minute when a Rodrigo Machado kick found the bottom of the right post.

Meanwhile, Al Ahli and Al Arabi drew 1-1 at Al Thumama Stadium. Al Arabi took the lead through Rodrigo Sanchez in the 47th minute, before Omar Seko equalised for Al Ahli in the 86th minute in an exciting and intense match between the two teams. Al Ahli are 11th with 16 points, while Al Arabi are sixth with 25 points.

On Thursday, Al Gharafa's Qatar Stars League title ambitions had suffered a setback after a 0-2 defeat to Qatar SC, while Al Shamal climbed into second place with a dramatic late win over Al Wakrah as the league resumed on Thursday following a short suspension due to regional tensions.

Al Duhail had returned to winning ways with an emphatic 4-0 victory over Al Saliya.

The 11-day pause had led to the postponement of two Round 17 matches - Qatar SC against Al Shamal and Al Arabi versus Al Saliya - which have now been rescheduled for April 7.

### Iran says no one can exclude it from World Cup after Trump warning

**Paris:** Iran says no one can exclude it from the World Cup later this year, in response to President Donald Trump's warning that their "life and safety" would be at risk in the US.

The Iranian team also said in the social media post on Thursday that the United States should not be allowed to co-host the tournament if it could not guarantee the safety of the teams taking part. 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.

"The Iran National 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 on his Truth Social platform on Thursday.

Iran's team responded: "The World Cup is a historic and international event and its governing body is FIFA - not any individual, country. Iran's national team, with strength and a series of decisive victories achieved by the brave sons of Iran, was among the first teams to qualify for this major tournament. Certainly no one can exclude Iran's national team from the World Cup; the only country that can be excluded is one that merely carries the title of 'host' yet lacks the ability to provide security for the teams participating in this global event."

The war, triggered by US-Israeli strikes on February 28, has thrown into doubt Iran's participation at this summer's tournament, jointly hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico. Trump later posted another message on his social media platform to emphasise that the event would be safe for players and spectators from around the world. "The United States of America looks very much forward to hosting the FIFA World Cup," Trump wrote. "Ticket sales are 'through the roof!'"

### IRAN WOMEN'S TEAM COACH SAYS TELEVISION COMMENTS CREATED DIFFICULT ATMOSPHERE FOR PLAYERS

Meanwhile, comments from an Iranian state television presenter about the country's women's team during their Asian Cup campaign affected the players psychologically and drove some to seek asylum in Australia, coach Marziyeh Jafari said.

The tournament, hosted by Australia, started just as the US and Israel launched air strikes on Iran. After the team opted to stand in silence during Iran's anthem before their first match against South Korea, they were labelled as "wartime traitors" by Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting presenter.

In a statement posted by Iran's football federation (FFIRI) on its Telegram page, which has since been deleted, Jafari said: "Our girls were affected in the first match by the heavy atmosphere that had been created... But the greater mistake was made by those who, at home, failed to understand that atmosphere and sounded the call to arms against the daughters of this land," she added, referring to the presenter's comments. What I have asked of the federation is to pursue the matter, because it affected our players psychologically, and we suffered the consequences. I am certain that if that atmosphere had not been created, not a single one of our players would have stayed in Australia."

Australia this week granted humanitarian visas to five Iranian players who sought asylum during the tournament. Two more squad members were granted asylum on Wednesday, and one decided to return to Iran.

"Australian police called the players in several stages and sat down with them one-on-one to persuade them to stay, influenced by the political atmosphere that had arisen," Jafari said.

"Fortunately, the majority of the team members responded negatively. Even Mohaddeseh Zolfi, who had responded positively, soon changed her mind and, God willing, will come to Iran with the team. The rumours about Golnoosh Khosravi and Afsaneh Chatreanor are also not true at all, and they are now with us in Malaysia and we will be leaving for Iran soon."

**FORMULA ONE**

## Bahrain, Saudi races set to be cancelled

Reuters  
Melbourne

**N**ext month's Bahrain and Saudi Arabian Formula One Grands Prix are set to be cancelled over the weekend due to the conflict in the Middle East.

Multiple sources told Reuters an announcement, seen within the sport as just a matter of time, was expected by Monday at the latest with a March 20 deadline looming for freight that has to be transported to Bahrain for logistical reasons.

Sky Sports television, which has the broadcasting rights in Britain where most of the 11 teams are based, said it understood the races would be called off by

Sunday night. US and Israeli attacks on Iran are continuing while Iranian drones and missiles have hit some Middle Eastern capitals including Bahrain's Manama, where most team personnel would be staying in hotels. Formula One is racing in China this weekend for the second round of the season after the opener in Australia last weekend.

Sources have indicated previously that neither Middle Eastern race is likely to be replaced or rescheduled, leaving April an empty month for the series and the championship reduced to 22 rounds.

Bahrain was scheduled for April 12 with the Saudi race in Jeddah on April 19.

The Japanese Grand Prix, round three, is on March 29 with the next race then in Miami on May 3.

"I think we follow the guidance of the FIA and Formula One, as we always do. They've always led us in the right direction," Audi team principal Jonathan Wheatley told reporters after practice at the Shanghai circuit.

"Nobody's going to compromise on anything that would put teams into an uncomfortable situation." There was no immediate comment from Liberty Media-owned Formula One or the governing International Automobile Federation (FIA).

The World Endurance Championship (WEC) has already postponed what would have been its season-opener in Qatar on March 26-28, with the first race now scheduled for Italy's Imola circuit on April 19. The Qatar round at the Lusail circuit outside Doha, which also hosts



Formula One in November, has been rescheduled for October 24 as the penultimate round before the finale in Bahrain

on November 7. MotoGP is due to race in Qatar on April 12 with that round also likely to be cancelled.

FORMULA 1

# Russell puts Mercedes on pole for China sprint race

Young Antonelli completes front row lockout for Mercedes

Reuters  
Shanghai

Formula One championship leader George Russell put Mercedes on pole position for the first sprint race of the season in China yesterday in a front-row lockout with teammate Kimi Antonelli.

Russell led every phase of the session at the Shanghai circuit to take his first career sprint pole in a time of one minute 31.520 seconds. Antonelli was 0.289 slower.

McLaren's Lando Norris will start third after the reigning champion told stewards he had not been on a proper "push" lap when Antonelli, who had risked a grid drop, impeded him during the second phase.

Ferrari's Lewis Hamilton, who started the 100km race on pole in China last year, was fourth fastest ahead of McLaren's Oscar Piastri and Ferrari's Charles Leclerc.

Today's race brings eight points to the winner with the top eight scoring. The main Grand Prix is tomorrow.

**MERCEDES CAR 'A REAL JOY TO DRIVE'**

"The car has been feeling amazing," said Russell, winner of the Australian season-opener last weekend. "We knew after Melbourne we had a really good car, the engine is performing really well, and today it was a real joy to drive. It felt really quick and that was pretty cool, very different to Melbourne."

Russell was the third successive British sprint pole-sitter in Shanghai after Norris in 2024 and Hamilton in 2025.

He had also been fastest in the day's sole practice session, ahead of Antonelli, with Mercedes comfortably ahead of the rest.

The stewards said in a statement that Antonelli would have been guilty of unnecessarily impeding had Norris been on a quick lap but



Mercedes' British driver George Russell (also inset) gets off his car after taking pole position in the sprint qualifying ahead of the Chinese Grand Prix at the Shanghai International Circuit in Shanghai yesterday. (AFP)

they took no action in light of the champion's words.

Pierre Gasly was seventh fastest for Renault-owned Alpine, after also being cleared of impeding, with Red Bull's four-times world champion Max Verstappen eighth.

Haas's Oliver Bearman took the ninth slot on the grid and Verstappen's new teammate Isack Hadjar completed the top 10 but a massive 2.2 seconds off Russell's pace.

Norris was happy with his lap. "P3 is as good as we can do for the time being," he said.

"I'm actually pretty happy to beat both the Ferraris today because they seemed pretty good the whole day. So I'm satisfied. Good position for tomorrow."

**FERRARI EXPECT TO BE CLOSER TO RACE**

Leclerc said Mercedes were still a step ahead but Ferrari, who removed their so-called "Macarena" rear wing for the session due to reliability concerns, should have been stronger. "In qualifying for some reason the Mercedes power unit finds a lot of lap time," said the Monegasque. "We don't quite find that amount of lap time just yet in qualifying but in the race we are closer so I'm hopeful we can come back tomorrow."

Hamilton said the engineers had done a fantastic job to get the car ready after he spun off in a tricky practice session.

"The car generally felt great. I

think it is on the straights, it's a lot of time to be losing so we have a lot of work to do, we really have to push so hard to improve on power," Hamilton said.

Further back, Audi continued to perform well with Nico Hulkenberg qualifying 11th and Gabriel Bortoleto 14th. Newcomers Cadillac filled the bottom two positions, with Mexican Sergio Perez unable to take part in the session due to a fuel system issue.

Troubled Aston Martin, struggling with their new Honda power unit, had Fernando Alonso 19th and Lance Stroll 20th. Williams, whose car has been slowed by excess weight, had Carlos Sainz 17th and Alex Albon 18th.

**VERSTAPPEN NOT LIKING NEW F1 CARS, ENJOYS 'POSITIVE DISTRACTIONS'**



Red Bull's Max Verstappen during practice at the Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai yesterday. (Reuters)

Shanghai: Max Verstappen admitted that he is having more fun with his endurance racing projects as opposed to competing in Formula 1.

That's a tricky spot given Verstappen is under contract until 2028.

"I don't want to leave," the four-time world champion said yesterday of competing with Red Bull. "I wish I had a bit more time and a bit more fun, for sure, but I'm also doing other stuff that is a lot of fun."

"I get to race the Nordschleife. I hope, in the coming years, I can do Spa, Le Mans, so I'm combining stuff to find other stuff that I find really fun as well. Of course, my team, so I have a lot of distractions at the same time."

"Positive distractions, I would call it. But at the same time, it's a bit conflicting because I don't really enjoy the car, but I do enjoy working with all the people in the team and from the engine department as well."

Verstappen, 28, was voted the Formula 1 Driver of the Year for the fifth straight year in 2025. That said, he admitted to having other career ambitions.

"I don't need to be only a Formula 1 driver. I can also do other things," he said. "I've done this for a while and I've achieved everything that I wanted to achieve, so that's why I want to explore other things, and I don't want to do them when I'm 40 years old. So now I think this is the perfect age to do it."

COMMENT

## 'New regulations take bravery out of sport'

Reuters  
Shanghai

The new Formula One engine and chassis regulations for the 2026 season have taken some of the bravery out of the sport, several drivers said ahead of this weekend's Chinese Grand Prix, as teams grapple with the biggest rules overhaul in decades.

Last weekend's season-opening race in Australia drew a mixed response from fans and drivers. Some praised an increase in overtakes due to new 'Overtake' and 'Boost' modes, while others compared the on-track action to racing video game Mario Kart.

With more power generated by electricity this season than from

last year's engines, there is greater emphasis on being tactical with energy deployment and regeneration.

That has led drivers to sometimes be best served by lifting off the throttle on high-speed straights and coasting into corners, rather than slamming on the brakes, to ensure they have sufficient battery to deploy elsewhere.

"We used to fight for our life," twice world champion Fernando Alonso told a news conference, including the Shanghai circuit's fast and sweeping Turn 8 in a list of nail-biting corners from various tracks around the world.

"We were challenging the limits of the physics going through those corners, and the driver had to use all the skills and be brave in some moments as well," he added.

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc told reporters he had enjoyed racing Mercedes' George Russell towards the beginning of last weekend's race, which the Briton won, but agreed the regulations had changed what gave drivers an edge over the field.

"It's a bit more strategic than it used to be in the past, where it was more who was braking later kind of battles," the eight-times race winner from Monaco said.

"In the past, you could take quite a lot of risk and make an overtake work. Now, it's always: 'If I have this action now, what will happen in the next straight, in two straights time?'"

McLaren's Oscar Piastri and Williams driver Carlos Sainz sounded less impressed.

"It's a very different kind of challenge. It's not quite as simple

as just who's the bravest and who's willing to carry the most speed," Piastri said, when asked if he agreed with Alonso's assessment.

"I got braver and braver in qualifying, and it made me slower and slower down the straights," the Australian added, referring to his fifth-place lap that set the grid for his home race.

Sainz said the 2026 regulations needed a bit of a rethink to make the experience better for the drivers.

"I don't like seeing the top speed decreasing in the middle of a straight ... I don't like having to lift and coast in the middle of a qualifying lap and I don't like, let's say, the racing that we saw in Melbourne ... it's not a real overtake of Formula One," the Spaniard told reporters.



Haas F1 Team's British driver Oliver Bearman drives off the track during the sprint qualifying session ahead of the Chinese Grand Prix at the Shanghai International Circuit yesterday. (AFP)

CRICKET

## Pakistan thrash Bangladesh by 128 runs in rain-hit One-Day International



Pakistan's Maaz Sadaqat plays a shot during the second one-day international against Bangladesh at Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Dhaka

Pakistan defeated Bangladesh by 128 runs via the Duckworth-Lewis-Stern (DLS) method in the rain-affected second ODI at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium yesterday.

Maaz Sadaqat was the stand-out performer of the game, blasting a rapid 75 for Pakistan before picking up three wickets.

Chasing a revised target of 243 in 32 overs after a two-hour rain and hailstorm delay, Bangladesh collapsed for 114 in 23.3 overs despite a brief counterattack from Litton Das.

Bangladesh had already been in trouble before the weather halted play.

Tanzid Hasan fell early for one, caught at backward square leg off Shaheen Shah Afridi, while Saif Hassan departed for 12 after offering a catch to short mid-off off Mohammad Wasim Jr.

Captain Najmul Hossain Shanto was bowled by Afridi for a duck, leaving the hosts reeling at 27 for 3 in 6.3 overs when a sudden thunderstorm accompanied by

hail forced the players off the field. When play resumed, Litton attempted to revive the chase with a series of boundaries including two sixes. He was eventually trapped lbw for 41 by part-time spinner Maaz Sadaqat.

Tawhid Hridoy made 28 off 38 balls before falling lbw to Haris Rauf, while Afif Hossain added 14 before becoming Sadaqat's second victim.

Captain Mehidy Hasan Miraz managed just one run as Bangladesh's innings folded quickly. Rauf and Sadaqat claimed three wickets each to complete a dominant bowling performance for Pakistan.

Sadaqat, Player of the Match, said yesterday: "In our meeting, we spoke about playing our natural game. In the last game, it was my debut, so there was some pressure too. This time I played my natural game and God helped me. I am a batting allrounder basically and helping with our coach helped me."

Pakistan captain Afridi said yesterday: "The last game didn't go our way. The simple message was to go and play your natural game. I think the pitch was helpful for fast bowlers, that's why we played four of them. And they bowled well too, so re-

ally happy. Really happy for Maaz."

Earlier, Bangladesh had fought back with the ball to bowl Pakistan out for 274 in 47.3 overs after a blistering start by the visitors. Pakistan raced to 103 for the opening wicket inside 13 overs through an aggressive partnership between Sahibzada Farhan and Sadaqat.

Sadaqat struck 75 off 46 balls with six fours and five sixes, while Farhan scored 31 before falling to Taskin Ahmed.

Salman Agha later top-scored with 64 from 62 balls and shared a 109-run stand with Mohammad Rizwan (44), though Agha's innings ended in a dramatic run-out by Mehidy Hasan Miraz at the non-striker's end that sparked animated reactions on the field. Leg-spinner Rishad Hossain finished as the pick of the bowlers with 3 for 56 as Pakistan were eventually bowled out for 274, a total that proved more than enough on a rain-shortened night in Mirpur.

**BRIEF SCORES**

**Pakistan 274 all out** (Sadaqat 75, Salman Agha 64, Hossain 3-56) **beat Bangladesh 114 all out** (Litton 41, Sadaqat 3-23, Rauf 3-26) **by 127 runs (DLS method)**

TENNIS

# Alcaraz sets up Medvedev semi-final at Indian Wells

MEDVEDEV BEATS DEFENDING CHAMPION DRAPER AS SINNER, ZVEREV TO FACE OFF IN LAST FOUR

Reuters  
Indian Wells

**W**orld number one Carlos Alcaraz charged past Cameron Norrie 6-3 6-4 on Thursday to set up an Indian Wells semi-final with Daniil Medvedev after the Russian ended Jack Draper's title defence with a 6-17-5 win following a controversial umpiring call.

Top-ranked Aryna Sabalenka also reached the last four in the women's draw with a 7-6(0) 6-4 victory over 19-year-old Canadian Victoria Mboko but Iga Swiatek was unable to find her way past Elina Svitolina and fell 6-2 4-6 6-4.

Australian Open champion Alcaraz improved his record to 16-0 to start the year with a solid display against a tricky opponent in the final contest of the evening to remain on course for a third Indian Wells crown.

The Spaniard eased through the opening set and though he was briefly in trouble at 0-2 down in the second he quickly regained the momentum to see off Briton Norrie and set up a meeting with twice runner-up Medvedev.

"It was really difficult, I struggled with Cameron's style," Alcaraz said. "His forehand has super top-spin and his backhands are flat so it's tricky to play against him and find the correct shots. I played solid and aggressive when I could and I'm happy to be at this level."

Russian 11th seed Medvedev was also in impressive form against Briton Draper, who had little time to recover after his stunning three-set win over Novak Djokovic on Wednesday.

Draper raised his level in the second set and stayed with his opponent up to 5-5 but Medvedev secured a late break after a contro-



Carlos Alcaraz of Spain signs autographs for fans after his straight sets victory against Cameron Norrie of Great Britain in their quarter-final of the BNP Paribas Open at Indian Wells Tennis Garden. (AFP)

versial hindrance call from chair umpire Aurelie Tourte. Medvedev was awarded a point to go 30-0 up following a late video review request after the Russian said he was distracted by Draper's raised arm during the rally when the Briton thought the ball went out.

Draper insisted he had not caused a major distraction but the umpire stuck with her decision to award Medvedev the point, prompting jeers from the crowd when the call was made.

"If you look at the first forehand I did after it happened, I think I could have done a better shot if there was no gesture from Jack," Medvedev told reporters.

"Was I distracted big time? No. Do I feel good about it? Not really. But I also don't feel like I cheated or something. I got a bit distracted. I let it go and I let the umpire de-

cide." Fourth seed Alexander Zverev beat Frenchman Arthur Fils 6-2 6-3 to make the semi-finals for the first time and become only the fifth man to complete the set of last-four appearances at all nine ATP Masters 1000 events.

The German faces a big challenge in the next round, however, as he takes on world number two Jannik Sinner after the Italian made light work of American Learner Tien 6-1 6-2.

**SVITOLINA UPSETS SWIATEK**

World number two Swiatek struggled early against Svitolina, with the Ukrainian capitalising on five double faults to secure three breaks and take the opening set in 38 minutes.

She found her rhythm in the second to force a decider, but Svitolina regained the upper hand by secur-

ing the only break in a tight third set before confidently closing out the match to return to the semis for the first time in seven years.

Belarusian Sabalenka had a battle on her hands against Mboko and the top seed was taken to a first-set tiebreak which she won to love - a career first.

The second set followed a similar script with Mboko clawing her back to 5-4 and threatening another tiebreak but four-times Grand Slam champion Sabalenka held firm.

"She's a future Grand Slam champion," Sabalenka said. "It's incredible to see how brave these young girls are these days."

Sabalenka next plays Linda Noskova, who ended Australian qualifier Talia Gibson's fairytale run 6-2 4-6 6-2, the Czech reaching her second WTA 1000 semi-



Russia's Daniil Medvedev hits a shot during his quarter-final as he defeated Great Britain's Jack Draper at the Indian Wells Open. (Reuters)

final. Australian Open champion Elena Rybakina advanced with a 6-1 7-6(4) victory over Jessica Pegula to reach another Indian Wells semi-final where she will play Svitolina. Victory ensured Rybakina will leapfrog Swiatek and reach a career-high world number two when the WTA rankings are updated on Monday.



Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus hits a shot in her quarter-final match against Canada's Victoria Mboko in Indian Wells. (AFP)

GOLF

# McNealy, Straka among 5 tied for The Players lead

Reuters  
Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida

**M**averick McNealy, Lee Hodges, Sahith Theegala and Sepp Straka formed a tie for the lead in Thursday's weather-hit opening round of The Players Championship when play was suspended in fading light.

Surprise package Austin Smotherman, one of four players yet to complete the opening round, has a chance to seize the outright lead when play resumes in the second round as he faces a 15-foot birdie putt on his final hole - the par-5 ninth.

Smotherman was at 5 under after mixing four birdies with a lone bogey on his back nine, but he regretted playing a chip shot from 40 yards out before deciding to mark his ball on the green and return the following morning to complete his round.

"It was just getting so dark," said Smotherman, a three-time winner on the Korn Ferry Tour who was a runner-up at last month's Cognizant Classic in The Palm Beaches. "Greens are getting - I mean, the rain softened them enough to where spike marks, footprints, all that stuff's kind of adding up."

"So a 15-, 16-footer, whatever I have. I mean, it's not worth it right



Maverick McNealy of the United States prepares for a shot on the 18th hole during the first round of The Players Championship. (AFP)

now (and he will) get fresh greens in the morning, which is the benefit of that. Do I wish I hit the chip in the morning as well? Went back and forth. The fact I was even questioning it, I probably should have maybe backed off."

McNealy, Hodges, Theegala and Straka fired matching 5-under-par 67s on a day of mixed weather conditions at TPC Sawgrass, where the course was relatively firm in the morning before being softened by early afternoon thunderstorms.

Former world No. 1 amateur McNealy, who teed off in the morning wave, reeled off five

birdies in his first 12 holes on his way to an early one-shot lead. He was then caught late in the day by fellow American Hodges, who birdied two of his last three holes, and Austrian Straka, who eagled the par-5 16th with a chip-in from 50 feet.

American Theegala made it a four-way tie at the top after covering his back nine in 3 under, highlighted by a hole-out eagle at the par-4 12th where he hit a stunning 99-yard approach from the right fairway, his ball bouncing sharply to the left off the fringe before disappearing into the cup.

"I hit it a little skinny and just came out a little right," said Theegala, whose only PGA Tour victory came at the 2023 Fortinet Championship.

"Got a nice bounce ... it was probably going to spin left off that slope, was probably going to go like 20, 25 feet down that slope, just straight left of the hole."

"So for it to crash into the pin and go in is pretty cool. It's a nice bonus."

World No. 6 Russell Henley and fellow American Justin Thomas, who won this event in 2021 and is making his second PGA Tour start of the year after undergoing back surgery in November, were among a group of four players who opened with 68s on a tightly bunched leaderboard.

Top-ranked Scottie Scheffler, bidding for a rare third victory at The Players Championship, produced a mixed bag as he opened with an even-par 72. He birdied his final hole, the par-5 ninth, following consecutive bogeys.

World No. 2 and defending champion Rory McIlroy, looking to shrug off a back injury that led to his withdrawal from last week's Arnold Palmer Invitational, experienced a frustrating day as he battled to a 74.

Often wayward off the tee, he mixed three bogeys with a lone birdie to finish seven strokes off the pace.

## Blitz Golf to bring fast-paced format to England

**London:** Billed as golf's answer to T20 cricket, a high-octane, three-hour format that has taken off in Australia will burst onto the British scene this year - and organisers believe it could ignite a new wave of fans.

Blitz Golf will roll out four events in England in June, pitching professionals, sports stars, celebrities and influencers into a rapid-fire 10-hole showdown packed with multiple cuts and a winner-takes-all finale on a 'stadium hole'.

"You look at traditional golf - it's four days. LIV Golf - four days. TGL is indoors on simulators. We're a proper outdoor golf product that's done and dusted in three hours," Blitz Golf CEO Simon Zybek told Reuters.

"It still ticks the boxes for golf purists - real courses, real competition - but we layer celebrities and influencers into the mix. It opens up a whole new world of fans."

The high-energy format features 24 players starting in six-hole shotgun rounds, cut to 12 for a three-hole phase, and finally four players in a one-hole shootout. Scores reset each round.

Around the golf sits a festival-style atmosphere: DJ sets, live music, fan zones, mid-round interviews and spectators allowed to roam the fairways and interact with players.

"It's super-engaging and poles apart from what you see on the PGA Tour or LIV Golf," Zybek said. Entry lists will be announced at the end of March with Australian

and British professionals likely to be involved in an Ashes-style rivalry.

Since launching in 2018, Blitz Golf has built a strong following in Australia, drawing 10,000 fans to four events in its latest series. Australia cricketers Travis Head and Glenn Maxwell have teed it up alongside male and female Tour professionals, further boosting its appeal.

Zybek comes from a basketball background and said the concept was born from a simple frustration: "Watching a traditional golf tournament is a massive time commitment. Lots of people who loved Blitz Golf in Australia wouldn't go near a normal event. "We are very excited to be coming to England and that's the start of many global events for us. There will be six events in the UK next year and in the US and adding continental Europe."

**24 tournaments have been planned by 2028**

"By the time 2028 rolls around we will have 24 events around the globe and a world final."

Three of the events in England will be on Sunday afternoons at Leeds Golf Centre (June 14), Gaudet Luce in the West Midlands (June 21) and Lincoln Golf Club (June 28) while the London edition at Bush Hill Park Golf Club will be a twilight event.

"England is one of golf's spiritual homes," Zybek said. "Bringing Blitz here is a landmark step for our global series."



Australian cricketer Glenn Maxwell during his appearance in the 2026 Blitz Golf tournament in Yarrowonga near Melbourne.

## DeChambeau fires 65, up three at LIV Singapore

**Singapore:** Bryson DeChambeau separated from the pack at LIV Golf Singapore yesterday with five birdies and an eagle to fire a second-round 65 and build a three-shot lead over the field. DeChambeau began the round with consecutive pars, then birdied No. 3 and eagled the par-5 fourth to set the tone for his round. He's 10-under through 36 holes and walked off the course after missing the chance to birdie his final hole.

"I played great today. I had a few more opportunities out there that I didn't capitalize on, but I played plenty well and gave myself plenty of opportunities to go low today."

At 7-under and three back of DeChambeau are Thomas Detry (67 yesterday), Louis Oosthuizen (67), Jon Rahm (68), Lee Westwood (68) and Richard T Lee (68).

Detry was runner-up to Rahm at LIV Golf Hong Kong last week.

He recorded one of the shots of the second round, a chip-in eagle on the 18th. Detry rolled it in from 40 yards out starting at the back of the green. DeChambeau avoided a larger disaster at the par-4 15th when he hooked his tee shot into the harbor. He took a drop and successfully scrambled to earn a bogey.



## WORLD ENDURANCE CHAMPIONSHIP

## Qatar 1812 KM to be held from October 22-24

The Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) and Lusail International Circuit (LIC) confirm that the Qatar 1812 KM, part of the FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC), has been rescheduled and will now take place from Oct 22 to 24, 2026 at Lusail International Circuit.

Originally scheduled for March, the event was postponed earlier this year following a decision made by FIA WEC, while QMMF and LIC confirmed their respect and support for the decision.

The new October date ensures the race will remain on the 2026 FIA World Endurance Championship calendar, allowing teams, partners and fans to experience

endurance racing at one of the Middle East's premier motorsport venues later in the season.

Additionally LIC will play a pivotal role as it will be hosting the penultimate race of the season creating a more dramatic environment for leading teams.

The Qatar 1812 KM has quickly established itself as a key event on the FIA WEC calendar since Qatar joined the championship in 2024. As one of the world's leading endurance racing series, the FIA WEC brings together some of the most prestigious automotive manufacturers to compete in long distance races that test speed, strategy and mechanical resilience.

Entering its 14th season, the championship continues to show-

case a remarkable level of global competition.

In 2026, 14 major manufacturers with 35 full season entries including 17 Hypercars and 18 LMGT3 cars will be represented, including Alpine, Aston Martin, BMW, Cadillac, Ferrari, Genesis, Peugeot and Toyota in the premier Hypercar class, alongside leading GT manufacturers such as Corvette, Ford, Lexus, McLaren, Mercedes-AMG and Porsche in LMGT3. Together, these brands create one of the most diverse and competitive grids in international motorsport.

The championship's endurance format, where teams of up to three drivers share a single car over races lasting several hours, combines engineering excellence with

strategic precision. From hybrid prototype Hypercars to production based LMGT3 machines, the FIA WEC continues to highlight innovation, sustainability and technological development at the highest level of motorsport.

All previously purchased tickets will remain valid for the rescheduled event. Ticket holders seeking additional information may contact tickets@lisc.qa. Further details regarding the race weekend and spectator activities will be announced in due course. QMMF and LIC remain committed to supporting the long term growth of the FIA World Endurance Championship in Qatar, reinforcing the nation's position as a key destination on the global motorsport calendar.



Lusail International Circuit.

## PREMIER LEAGUE

## Arsenal's Arteta shrugs off siege mentality talk

Gunners sit seven points clear of Manchester City, who have a game in hand

Reuters  
London

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta dismissed suggestions the Premier League leaders had adopted a siege mentality amid mounting pressure, saying that the squad's focus remains firmly on their own performances rather than outside noise.

Arsenal sit seven points clear of Manchester City, who have a game in hand, and the North London side's dreams of an unprecedented quadruple are still alive.

"You just have to go in that dressing room and feel the mood, the energy and the way we talk to each other and how much we value the position that we have right now," Arteta told reporters ahead of today's home game against Everton.

"So our focus is on what we have to do, what we have to maintain and what we have to improve together."

Arsenal are in the League Cup final, the FA Cup quarter-finals and the last 16 of the Champions League, where they came away with a 1-1 draw at Bayer Leverkusen in the first leg on Wednesday.

With Arsenal set to compete across three different competitions in the span of a week, Arteta acknowledged the quadruple question is impossible to ignore entirely.

"Not think about it? Not really. We're going to play in seven days in three different competitions," he said.

"So that drags you from one to another, the urgency to get prepared, to translate the messages that you want, to make the right decisions and to make sure that we arrive into any game in the best possible way. The rest is a consequence of that process and how well we do it, which is still very far"



Apart from leading the Premier League, Arsenal are in the League Cup final, the FA Cup quarter-finals and the last 16 of the Champions League, where they came away with a 1-1 draw at Bayer Leverkusen in the first leg on Wednesday.

Bukayo Saka's performances have come under scrutiny after the Arsenal winger scored just three goals since the November international break, but Arteta opted to lavish praise on the 24-year-old.

"We fully trust him and love him. What he's doing for us, for this club, is just incredible at his age and he's continued to

have that massive impact for us," Arteta said. "He can have an individual performance that is not probably a reflection of his level, like every human, every player in the world. But overall when you look at his strength and the impulse he has in the team, it's just incredible."

On the injury front, Arteta said there

were no new concerns and they will take late calls on Martin Odegaard and Leandro Trossard.

## GUARDIOLA WARNS TITLE BID 'OVER' IF MAN CITY LOSE TO WEST HAM

Pep Guardiola believes Manchester City's Premier League title challenge "will be over" if they fail to beat resurgent West Ham today. City could kick off at the London Stadium 10 points behind leaders Arsenal should the Gunners beat Everton earlier in the day. Guardiola's men have a game in hand on the Gunners and home advantage when the sides meet next month. But they must bounce back from the disappointment of a 3-0 Champions League drubbing at the hands of Real Madrid on Wednesday that means their chances of progressing to the quarter-finals are slim.

"The league was the most difficult title," Guardiola said. "So the Premier League always, I believe, is the most difficult one and still we are there, knowing that if we drop points, it'll be over."

The City boss has won six Premier League titles in his nine previous seasons in England. But his team were well off the pace last season, finishing 13 points behind champions Liverpool, in third spot.

"Now it is a pleasure to be here. Last season we could not live that in this stage, so it's nice," said Guardiola. "Always I said when I arrived in the last 10 games every team plays for something - for relegation, for Europa League, for Conference League, for Champions League, to be champions. So it's normal. Now it is no second chances."

West Ham remain in the relegation zone, but have lost just two of their past 11 games in all competitions to climb to within one point of safety and reach the FA Cup quarter-finals.

## BUNDESLIGA

## Bayern coach Kompany hopes to have fit squad for season finale

Reuters  
Munich

Bayern Munich will have a fully fit squad after this month's international break and going into a title-chasing finale, coach Vincent Kompany said, amid a growing injury list and a busy match schedule.

The Bundesliga leaders, in the running for three titles, were already without goalkeeper Manuel Neuer and defender Hiroki Ito when second-choice keeper Jonas Urbig suffered a concussion and Jamal Musiala and Alphonso Davies picked up injuries in Tuesday's 6-1 Champions League round of 16 first leg at Atalanta. They will all be unavailable for today's league game at Bayer Leverkusen, and Kompany said this month's international break was coming at just the right time to give his players time to recover. Veteran Sven Ulreich will be in goal.

"It could have been worse," Kompany told a press conference. "Jonas will hopefully be back sometime next week. Jamal, maybe next week he will train again. For Phonzie the international break will help

and I hope we will have a full squad after the international break. That is positive for the final stretch of the season."

The Bavarians lead the Bundesliga on 66 points, 11 clear of second-placed Borussia Dortmund, with nine matches left. They are also through to the German Cup semi-finals where they will face Leverkusen on April 22. They host Atalanta in Munich next week for the return leg.

The Bundesliga will break in the last week of March for internationals and World Cup playoffs and will resume on April 4. Canada international Davies has been ruled out for the World Cup co-hosts' friendlies against Iceland and Tunisia. "The good thing is there are no bad long-term injuries," Kompany said. "It is just frustrating for the lads who just want to play."

Kompany, however, could have top striker Harry Kane back in the squad for Saturday, after the England captain missed their last two matches with a minor muscle injury. "He might play tomorrow," the coach said. "He had a full week of training. We didn't take any risks with him. We can't let up, even though we're 11 points ahead. If Harry is fit, he'll play"



Bayern Munich's Belgian head coach Vincent Kompany with his players. (AFP)

## Carrick dismisses Scholes dig as Man United gear up for Villa test

Manchester: Michael Carrick brushed off criticism from former Manchester United teammate Paul Scholes as he prepares his side for a crunch Premier League game against Aston Villa.

The third-placed Red Devils return to action tomorrow after losing 2-1 at Newcastle earlier this month. Unai Emery's Villa are behind United only on goal difference in a tight race to secure Champions League football next season.

The top five teams in the Premier League are almost certain to qualify for Europe's top club competition. The Newcastle defeat was Carrick's first since taking over for the rest of the season in January and Scholes made a sarcastic jibe on Instagram about the man he played alongside in midfield at Old Trafford.

"Michael has definitely got something special about him... cos United have been bad last four games," read the post from Scholes, who later said he had meant no offence and had contacted his former teammate. But Carrick told reporters at his pre-match press conference that he was not dwelling on the issue.

"There's nothing to say about it really," he said. "I think that's just where we are in terms of social media and things and captions and quotes. It can be taken in different ways, so just be calm about

it and understand actually the real meaning of things. Listen, there's different opinions out there and it's fine. People can have different opinions. It's just things get taken away out of one extreme to the other and it is what it is, but I'm not worried about it. I don't make a big deal of it either."

United finished an embarrassing 15th in the Premier League last season under Ruben Amorim. Carrick's men were on a roll until their last-gasp defeat by Newcastle at St James' Park, but the former United midfielder said it was inevitable they would suffer a defeat at some stage.

"It's a tough league," he said. "Most teams, if not every team, has suffered that in recent times."

"It's putting things in perspective really and putting it in shape where we know where we can improve, what we can do better."

Carrick said was "excited" by the challenge of hosting Villa at Old Trafford.

"We've put ourselves in a position now where there's an awful lot to play for," he said. "So we're really embracing the situation at the moment and looking forward to the next game."

Carrick said midfielder Mason Mount had taken a "big step" and could return from a two-month absence this weekend.

## Chelsea's Neto handed one-match suspension for misconduct

London: Chelsea forward Pedro Neto has been fined 70,000 pounds (\$93,000) and suspended for one match for misconduct after he was sent off in the Premier League defeat by Arsenal this month, the Football Association said.

Neto received two yellow cards in the space of three minutes - one for dissent after an Arsenal goal and the second for a foul on Gabriel Martinelli, in the 2-1 loss to the league leaders.

"It was alleged that the player acted in an improper manner by failing to leave the pitch promptly and/or using abusive words towards the match official/s following his dismissal in the 70th minute," the FA said.

It was Chelsea's ninth red card of the season across all competitions and Neto admitted the charge against him. He will miss the match against Newcastle United today. The Portuguese winger also faces UEFA disciplinary proceedings after pushing a ball boy during Wednesday's 5-2 Champions League loss at Paris St Germain.

## ARBELOA 'CONFIDENT' MBAPPE FIT FOR MAN CITY TRIP IN CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Real Madrid coach Alvaro Arbeloa said he was "confident" that Kylian Mbappe will be available to face Manchester City in the second leg of their Champions League last 16 tie.

"He's getting better day by day," Arbeloa said at a press conference. "He won't be there tomorrow (in La Liga against Elche), but I'm confident he'll be on the trip to Manchester."

With Mbappe sidelined by a knee injury and several other key players missing, Real thrashed City 3-0 in the first leg at the Bernabeu on Wednesday, thanks to a hat-trick from Federico Valverde.

City host the second leg next Tuesday and risk being knocked out of Europe by Madrid for the third season in a row.

France forward Mbappe, hampered by a sprain to his left knee since late December, has not played since withdrawing from the squad to face Benfica in the second leg of the Champions League knockout phase play-off round on February 25.

Mbappe has scored 38 goals in 33 appearances for his club this season. His expected return for Madrid comes ahead of the international break, where France will face Brazil and Colombia in pre-World Cup friendlies in the United States.

## JAMES SIGNS NEW SIX-YEAR CHELSEA DEAL

Chelsea boss Liam Rosener hailed Reece James as the "best player in world football in his position" after the captain signed a new six-year deal at Stamford Bridge. The England defender, 26, who first trained with the club 20 years ago, said he wanted to remain at the club for his "peak years".

James has won five major trophies with Chelsea, including the Champions League and Club World Cup twice. He has made more than 200 appearances for the Blues, over 50 of which have been as captain. "I can't stop smiling because we've secured the best player in world football in his position," manager Rosener said. "He had many, many opportunities to leave this magnificent club and the good thing is not just the size and the stature of the club that he's come through from a very, very young age, but it's his belief and confidence in what we're doing here, where we want to go."