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# GULF TIMES SPORT



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FOOTBALL

# Dowman makes history as leaders Arsenal strike late

Midfielder, aged just 16, becomes youngest Premier League scorer with a goal against Everton



Arsenal's Max Dowman (centre) celebrates with Declan Rice and Gabriel Martinelli after scoring against Everton in the Premier League at the Emirates Stadium in London yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP  
London

Arsenal moved a step closer to the Premier League title as Max Dowman became the competition's youngest ever goalscorer in a dramatic 2-0 win against Everton, while Chelsea's top four bid was dented a 1-0 defeat against Newcastle.

Mikel Arteta's side struggled to break down obdurate Everton until the closing moments at the Emirates Stadium. But Sweden forward Viktor Gyokeres finally found a way through in the 89th minute,

with a helping hand from Everton goalkeeper Jordan Pickford.

Pickford completely missed Dowman's cross and Piero Hincape bundled the ball back into the six-yard box for Gyokeres to tap into the empty net. The ensuing scenes of delirium on the pitch and in the stands underlined the significance of Arsenal's fourth successive league win.

There was still time for Dowman to run the length of the pitch and slot home with Pickford nowhere to be seen after coming up for an Everton corner that ended in a rapid Arsenal counter-attack in the final seconds. Dowman, aged just 16, is the youngest scorer in the history of the Pre-

mier League, as well as Arsenal's youngest scorer.

Gyokeres on Dowman's said: "It's incredible. You can see how he plays. He stays so calm and without fear every time he gets the ball. He takes the right decision most of the time as well and with the goal, he definitely took the right one. He's an amazing player, it was a great goal for him and I'm so happy for him."

The Gunners are now 10 points ahead of second-placed Manchester City, who were facing West Ham at the London Stadium in the day's late kick-off. Arsenal, trophyless since 2020, are hunting a first English title in 22 years.



Newcastle United's Anthony Gordon scores against Chelsea at Stamford Bridge. (Reuters)

The quadruple chasers rode their luck to beat Everton despite a disjointed performance, adding to the mounting feeling that they will be one of the least stylistically impressive champions in recent memory if they do take the crown. But Arteta and company won't care about that ahead of a huge week.

The Gunners have a Champions League last-16 second leg against Bayer Leverkusen next week with the tie level at 1-1 before heading to Wembley to face City in the League Cup final. Arsenal don't play in the league again until April 11 when they meet Bournemouth.

City's clash with West Ham is the first of their two games in hand on Arsenal, with Pep Guardiola's men also hosting the leaders in April. City must bounce back from their midweek Champions League last-16 first leg defeat at Real Madrid in a match of significance at both ends of the table. West Ham sit in the relegation zone but can leapfrog Nottingham Forest and Tottenham with victory over City.

Fifth-placed Chelsea were beaten by Anthony Gordon's goal at Stamford Bridge to round off a painful week. Thrashed 5-2 at Paris Saint-Germain in the last-16 first

leg, Liam Rosenior's side were breached in the 18th minute when Tino Livramento's pass allowed Joe Willock to burst clear and tee up Gordon for a composed finish.

Chelsea trail Aston Villa and Manchester United by three points having played a game more than their top-four rivals. Brighton beat Sunderland 1-0 to climb into the top half of the Premier League, while second-bottom Burnley held Bournemouth in a 0-0 draw.

Sunderland were unbeaten in their first 11 home games back in the top flight but have now lost their last three at the Stadium of Light to slip to 12th. Yankuba Minteh scored the only goal when his shot somehow squeezed past goalkeeper Melker Ellborg at his near post.

Brighton move above the Black Cats on goal difference and into 10th. The stalemate at Turf Moor did little for either side as Burnley slip closer to relegation and Bournemouth failed to move in on the European places.

The Claret's are eight points adrift of safety with eight games remaining. Bournemouth remain in ninth, three points behind Brentford in what is likely to be the final European spot in seventh.

SPOTLIGHT

# Doha Equestrian Tour ensures safe return of 147 horses to Europe



By Sports Reporter  
Doha

In a rapid and carefully coordinated operation, the Doha Equestrian Tour successfully transported 147 competition horses from Doha to Europe via two emergency flights, ensuring the safe return of all animals and teams amid regional tensions. The flights departed for

Liege, Belgium, carrying 74 horses on the first flight and 73 on the second, along with accompanying personnel.

The entire relocation from approvals to departure was completed in just 36 hours, following intensive coordination between the Tour's organizing committee, national authorities and operational partners.

With commercial flights temporarily suspended from Hamad International Airport, the Tour also implemented addi-

tional logistics solutions to support trainers and crew members unable to board the emergency flights. Ground transportation was arranged from Doha to Riyadh and Oman, allowing teams to travel onward and reunite with their horses in Europe.

The complex transfer required extensive veterinary clearances, international transport documentation and operational coordination with key partners including Qatar Airways Cargo and multiple govern-

**We feel safe here in Doha: American rider Vanderveen**

Doha: American rider Christine Vanderveen praised the Doha Equestrian Tour's swift response and the support extended to athletes during the situation. She noted that organisers worked quickly to provide safe options for riders who wished to relocate their horses while maintaining a supportive environment for those remaining in Doha.

"I feel comfortable here the atmosphere in Doha feels like family," Vanderveen said.

Currently competing in the local show jumping event at Al Shaqab,

she described the decision to hold a domestic competition as a positive step that allowed riders to maintain their horses' rhythm and training schedule.

According to Vanderveen, the past week in Doha provided valuable preparation time, with her horse staying in excellent condition despite the surrounding circumstances.

She also expressed optimism that the five-star competitions at the end of the Tour series will go ahead as planned, highlighting how the Tour continues to provide riders with a strong platform for training and competition.

ment authorities. Organisers emphasised that horse welfare and participant safety remained the top priority throughout the process.

According to Tour Director Mohammed Jaber al-Khayarin, transporting horses is inherently complex, but the situation demanded exceptional teamwork and swift coordination across multiple entities.

Thanks to pre-established risk management protocols and emergency procedures, the operation was executed smoothly despite the extraordinary circumstances. "We extend our sincere gratitude to all official partners and relevant authorities who contributed to the successful and safe

transport of the horses," said al-Khayarin. "We particularly acknowledge the significant efforts of the Internal Security Force (Lekhwiya) of the Ministry of Interior, the Amiri Guard, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, the Civil Aviation Authority, Qatar Airways, our official airline partner, Saleh Al Hamad Al Mana, our official mobility partner, and the Qatar Olympic Committee."

While most international horses have now returned to Europe, some riders, trainers and horses remain at the Longines Arena at Al Shaqab, where local and GCC participants continue preparations to complete the season's competitions.

CYCLING

# Godon wins chaotic Paris-Nice 7th stage, Vingegaard in control

AFP  
Isola, France

France's Dorian Godon won yesterday's shortened seventh and penultimate stage of the Paris-Nice with Dane Jonas Vingegaard poised for overall victory in a race thrown into chaos because of bad weather.

On the eve of the final stage in Nice, two-time Tour de France winner Vingegaard still leads the general classification with a commanding 3min 22sec advantage on Colombian Dani Martinez.

"I never thought I'd win a mountain stage one day on Paris-Nice," joked Godon after triumphing in what was supposed to be the queen stage of the "Race to the Sun".

But the penultimate stage was slashed from the planned 138.7km because of too much snow at the 1600m summit that was cut out of the race. Lashing rain on the Promenade des Anglais on Saturday morning meant organisers scratched the opening sector too.

"It was raining heavily, there were a lot of stones on the road. We absolutely couldn't take that risk," explained race director Yannick Talabardon.

A snowplow had cleared the road in the medieval mountain village of Isola, where there had been snowfall in the morning.

Even the impromptu start was chaotic, as the race's technical director Thierry Gouvenou was nearly knocked over by the peloton.

And a few metres later, several riders went down at a roundabout.

During the team presentation in the downpour, many riders were reluctant to start.

Some preferred to laugh about it with Australian Jensen Plowright arriving with a scuba diving mask on his nose and French rider Axel Zingle in socks and sandals.

The peloton breezed through just 47 kilometres albeit wrapped up in all weather gear in the Nice region usually known for balmy conditions at this time of year.

Ineos rider Godon won the sprint finish ahead of Eritrean Biniam Girmay and Dutchman

Cees Bol after only an hour of racing, securing France's first victory in this 84th edition.

"In my opinion, we could have stopped 10 kilometres earlier, because it was very slippery at the end and we saw several crashes," said Vingegaard.

But that did not diminish Godon's joy, whose only regret was not winning in the blue-white-red jersey, as he was wearing a rain jacket in his team's colours.

He was perfectly positioned by his team to secure the 17th victory of his career and his first with Ineos.

"A crazy pace, I was practically on the couch," the Frenchman laughed.

On Sunday, he said he would give "300 percent" to try and bring his leader Kevin Vauquelin, currently fourth overall, onto the podium.

And then the 29-year-old said he would celebrate.

"Before the start of the season, I bought a bottle of wine called Satisfied. It's at home and I wasn't allowed to open it until I won.

"That's the goal now!"



INEOS Grenadiers' French rider Dorian Godon celebrates his green jersey of best sprinter on the podium after the 7th stage of the Paris-Nice cycling race, 47 km between Le Broc and Isola-Village, yesterday. (AFP)

## Del Toro claims penultimate stage

Isaac Del Toro is set to win Tirreno-Ariatico after winning yesterday's penultimate stage and increasing his lead at the top of the general classification. UAE rider Del Toro won his first stage in the "Race of the Two Seas" and moved 42 seconds in front of Giulio Pellizzari ahead of Sunday's finale, a charge to beachfront town San Benedetto del Tronto which is set up for sprinters. The 22-year-old made his move on the third and final climb to Camerino which ended a punishing 189 kilometres of riding that featured 3,900 metres of elevation gain. Pellizzari tried to wipe out the 23-second gap which separated him from Del Toro at the start of the day, attacking on the climatic climb which started 3km from the finish line. But in the final 500m he was dropped by Tobias Johannessen and Del Toro, the latter of whom surged to the line to effectively win his second stage race of 2026 after the UAE Tour last month. Del Toro is on hot form but he is still most famous for losing last year's Giro d'Italia on the penultimate day of racing after holding the race lead from stage nine.

MOTORSPORT

# Mercedes' Antonelli takes record pole at Chinese Grand Prix

ITALIAN BECOMES YOUNGEST FORMULA ONE POLESITTER AT 19

AFP  
Shanghai

The 19-year-old Italian Kimi Antonelli took pole position for the Chinese Grand Prix yesterday, becoming the youngest driver to achieve the feat in Formula One history.

Antonelli led a Mercedes front-row lockout along with George Russell and erased the record of Sebastian Vettel, who was 21 when he took pole for the Italian Grand Prix in 2008.

"I'm happy with the lap I did," Antonelli told reporters. "And really happy to be starting on pole for my first time."

The Mercedes duo, as in Australia last weekend, have been dominant in Shanghai.

Antonelli blasted round in 1min 32.064sec, 0.222sec ahead of championship leader Russell, who had won the sprint race earlier in the day.

"It was a pretty clean session," added Antonelli.

"It was nice because for the first time in a qualifying session I was able to find lap times every time I was going on track."

The Ferrari pair of Lewis Hamilton and Charles Leclerc will fill the second row of the grid for Sunday's race after qualifying third and fourth.

Then came the two McLarens of Oscar Piastri and world champion Lando Norris.

Max Verstappen was only eighth fastest, continuing an unhappy weekend in a clearly struggling Red Bull.

Pierre Gasly was seventh in the Alpine with the second Red Bull of Isack Hadjar ninth and Oliver Bearman's Haas rounding out the top 10.

Russell had got stuck in gear on his opening lap in Q3 and had to return to the pits.

After the problem had been fixed it left him time for just one flying lap and he was unable to eclipse his teammate.

"Really happy for George who had an issue there," said Antonelli of his teammate.



Mercedes' Andrea Kimi Antonelli celebrates after claiming Chinese Grand Prix pole position in Shanghai yesterday. (Reuters)

Russell said he was relieved to have set a lap time right at the end of the session. "Definitely damage limitation," said Russell.

"In Q2 the front wing broke, and then in Q3 I stopped out on track and then couldn't change gear," he said. "On the last lap I had no battery, no tyre temp or anything. Really happy to be sat here right now because I could easily have been down in P10 without a time on the board," he added.

Hamilton was grateful to be on the second row.

"I had a big snap on the first Q3 lap and was quite a bit down, and then the last lap was okay," said the seven-time world champion.

"I think there's a couple of tenths missing probably, but I'm just grateful to be up here," he added.

Ferrari have been quick out of the blocks at the start of races so far and Hamilton said he would be eyeing up the two Mercedes in front of him on Sunday.

"I'm sure we'll have some fun, I'm looking forward to it," he said.

Leclerc was satisfied to be alongside his Ferrari teammate.

"There wasn't much more for us, for me. I'm struggling a lot on this track for this season, it's always been the case," said the Monegasque.

"It's not that I'm not trying, because I'm putting a lot of effort into it, but I just struggle coming into qualifying."

Russell earlier won a thrilling sprint race after a back-and-forth scrap in the opening laps with Hamilton, who eventually finished third behind Leclerc.

It enabled the Mercedes driver, who won the opening race in Australia, to extend his championship lead to 11 points over teammate Antonelli and Leclerc. Hamilton is a further four points back.

Today's grand prix will be raced over 56 laps of the 5.451km Shanghai International Circuit.

### STARTING GRID

- 1st row**  
Kimi Antonelli (ITA/Mercedes), George Russell (GBR/Mercedes)
- 2nd row**  
Lewis Hamilton (GBR/Ferrari), Charles Leclerc (MON/Ferrari)
- 3rd row**  
Oscar Piastri (AUS/McLaren), Lando Norris (GBR/McLaren)
- 4th row**  
Pierre Gasly (FRA/Alpine), Max Verstappen (NED/Red Bull)
- 5th row**  
Isack Hadjar (FRA/Red Bull), Oliver Bearman (GBR/Haas)
- 6th row**  
Nico Hulkenberg (GER/Audi), Franco Colapinto (ARG/Alpine)
- 7th row**  
Esteban Ocon (FRA/Haas), Liam Lawson (NZL/Racing Bulls)
- 8th row**  
Arvid Lindblad (GBR/Racing Bulls), Gabriel Bortoleto (BRA/Audi)
- 9th row**  
Carlos Sainz Jr (ESP/Williams), Alexander Albon (THA/Williams)
- 10th row**  
Fernando Alonso (ESP/Aston Martin), Valtteri Bottas (FIN/Cadillac)
- 11th row**  
Lance Stroll (CAN/Aston Martin), Sergio Perez (MEX/Cadillac)

CRICKET

# Captain Mehidy ignites 'sportsman spirit' row after debatable run-out

Reuters  
Dhaka

Pakistan batter Salman Ali Agha said Mehidy Hasan Miraz should have shown the "sportsman spirit" after the Bangladesh captain ended his innings with a controversial run-out in Friday's One-Day International in Dhaka.

Short of his crease at the non-striker's end, Agha bent down to pick up the ball to return it to the bowler after his teammate Mohammad Rizwan had driven it towards him.

However, Bangladesh captain Mehidy circled around behind Agha to collect the ball and threw down the stumps.

The dismissal immediately revived discussions about the "spirit of cricket" and had echoes of the 2023 Ashes controversy when Australia's Alex

Carey stumped England's Jonny Bairstow at Lord's.

"I think sportsman spirit has to be there," Agha told reporters after Pakistan's 128-run win.

"What he has done is in the law. I think if he thinks it's right, it's right, but if you ask me my perspective, I would have done differently. I would have gone for sportsman spirit."

Agha reacted angrily in the moment, throwing down his gloves and helmet, but later downplayed his outburst.

"I was just trying to give him the ball back. I was not looking for the run or anything like that, but he already decided.

"If you ask me what would I have done, I would have done things differently. But ... whatever happened after that, it was in the moment."

Pakistan and Bangladesh will play the third ODI on Sunday, with the three-match series level at 1-1.



Pakistan's Salman Agha (right) speaks with Bangladesh's captain Mehidy Hasan Miraz after his dismissal during the second ODI at Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur on Friday. (AFP)

FOCUS

# England pacer Wood making slow progress from knee injury

Reuters  
London

England pacer Mark Wood said his recovery from a knee injury is "real slow going" but the 36-year-old knows that at this stage of his career it could all be over if he pushes too hard.

Wood returned to the longest format after 15 months to feature in the first Ashes test against Australia in November, but was ruled out of the remainder of the series following a recurrence of a left knee injury.

"It's real slow going with the stage I am at in my career," Wood told the BBC's Tailenders podcast.

"It's quite a fine balance, where if I push this too hard then that could be it.

"It's six-week blocks, it's not

day by day, it's specialists and rescans every six weeks. It's been improving since what I got told had been an explosion in my knee in Australia.

"I've started running now and I'm hoping by the next block it's in a position where maybe I can start lightly bowling."

Wood, who has taken 253 international wickets in 38 tests, 70 ODIs and 38 Twenty 20s, said the latest spell on the sidelines has made him start thinking about life beyond the sport.

"I've started thinking about other things, doing podcasts, doing my coaching badges," he said.

"I've now started to try and think for the first time about what I should do if this doesn't go well."

England will next host New Zealand in a three-match test series in June.

## TOYOTAS CHOKE IN KENYAN QUAGMIRE AT SAFARI RALLY

The Safari Rally Kenya turned into a nightmare for the Toyota team in muddy conditions yesterday with the pullout of leaders Oliver Solberg, Sebastien Ogier and Elfyn Evans. Welshman Evans suffered suspension damage and was dragging the car through thick mud, while Solberg spun out of control and into bushes before picking up two punctures. "What can I do?" said Solberg. "I have no spare tyres and I can't see anything," continued the Swedish driver who had zero vis-

ibility after running out of windscreen washer fluid. Ogier's charge came to an abrupt halt after an alternator problem on the road section. The muddy Kenyan tracks at this third round of the WRC World Championship have been clogging engines and the Japanese manufacturer announced the withdrawal of its three leading crews until Sunday. "The last special stage was very muddy and difficult, and the mud got in through the engine and broke the alternators on both cars," said

Toyota Gazoo Racing's deputy director Juha Kankkunen. Takamoto Katsuta moved into the overall lead as the Japanese Toyota GR Yaris driver took a cautious approach. "It is super muddy and tricky and we have no spare, so I completely backed off," Katsuta said. "It is better to stay in the game and anything can happen in the afternoon." Katsuta leads by over a minute on Hyundai drivers Thierry Neuville and Adrien Fourmaux.

TENNIS

# Sabalenka downs Noskova to reach Indian Wells final

Australian Open champion Rybakina beats Ukraine's Elina Svitolina to set up Sabalenka clash

Reuters  
Indian Wells, United States

**A**ryna Sabalenka roared past Linda Noskova on Friday to book an Indian Wells title showdown with Australian Open champion Elena Rybakina.

Sabalenka beat 14th-ranked Czech Noskova 6-3, 6-4 and Rybakina downed Ukraine's Elina Svitolina 7-5, 6-4 to set up a mouth-watering rematch of their Melbourne final.

Rybakina also beat Sabalenka in the 2023 championship match in Indian Wells - where the Belarusian star has come up empty in two prior trips to the final.

"I want that match," said Sabalenka, who has been in imperious form in the California desert this year.

She fired 37 winners with 11 aces, applying relentless pressure from the baseline in a commanding win over Noskova.

She broke the big-serving Czech twice as she powered to a 5-1 lead in the opening set.

There was a hiccup as she tried to serve out the set, and Sabalenka, who had lost just one point in her first three service games, was broken.

Noskova kept the set alive with a battling hold in a marathon eighth game, fending off a set point with a service winner and sealing the game with an ace.

Serving for the set again, Sabalenka opened with a double fault and went down 0-30, but a pair of big serves and a backhand winner brought her to set point, and she claimed it with an ace.

Sabalenka broke Noskova to open the second and was on her way. Noskova fended off a second



Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus shakes hands with Linda Noskova of Czech Republic after winning her semi-final during the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden. (Reuters)

break, but she was unable to convert a break opportunity in the eighth game as Sabalenka brought it home, capping the victory with a forehand winner on her third match point.

"I think I really played great tennis," Sabalenka said. "I was serving well. I was playing well. I like the way I put her under pressure on her serve."

Rybakina, who is set to rise one spot to number two in the world tomorrow, had too much firepower for ninth-ranked Svitolina, who was coming off a three-set win over two-time champion Iga Swiatek in the quarter-finals.

Rybakina recouped an early break in a tight first set and seized control with a break for 6-5, her

steady pressure on Svitolina's serve provoking too many mistakes from the Ukrainian.

**Top-10 streak**

Rybakina won seven straight games from 4-5 down in the first set, breaking Svitolina twice on the way to a 4-0 lead in the second set.

The experienced Svitolina made her keep grinding, saving a match point on her own serve then saving another on the way to a break for 5-3 as she won three straight games.

But Rybakina made no mistake as she served for the match a second time, nabbing her 12th straight victory over top-10 opponents.

"Not, maybe, my best per-

formance, but I'm super happy to win this match and be in the final again," Rybakina said.

Although she trails Sabalenka 8-7 in their career head-to-head, she has won their last two meetings, in the title match of last year's WTA Finals and at the Australian Open - where she claimed her second Grand Slam crown.

Despite those recent successes Rybakina was expecting a battle on Sunday.

"We played so many times, and I think it all depends on close moments, which we usually have - whoever steps in, plays more aggressive, more solid," Rybakina said.

"It's going to be a difficult match.

**Sabalenka says players must halt points for video reviews after controversy**

**Indian Wells:** World number one Aryna Sabalenka said players must halt points straightaway to seek a video review for hindrance and not wait to decide, after Daniil Medvedev's dispute with Jack Draper sparked controversy at Indian Wells. Medvedev earned a late break in his 6-1 7-5 victory after a contentious hindrance call from chair umpire Aurelie Tourte, who ruled via video review that Draper's raised arm distracted the Russian. The review was requested once the point ended. Draper insisted he had not caused a major distraction but the umpire stuck with her decision to award Medvedev the point, prompting jeers from fans. According to the video review procedures for Indian Wells, as listed by the ATP and WTA,

reviews can be sought after point-ending shots or if a player immediately stops play. "What I think is really awkward is you can finish the point and then ask for that," Sabalenka told reporters on Friday. "Because if you really got bothered, then you should stop immediately and ask for the video review ... if he would have won the point, he wouldn't probably ask for the video review, right? I don't really think that's the way it should be. If he got bothered, (he should) ask for the video review straightaway." Video review technology has been available on all courts at the nine ATP Masters 1000 tournaments since February last year, allowing players to challenge umpiring decisions on foul shots and hindrances among other issues.



Elina Svitolina of Ukraine (left) shakes hands with Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan after their semi-final. (AFP)

GOLF

# Niemann, Westwood take lead at LIV Singapore

Reuters  
Singapore

**D**efending champion Joaquin Niemann shot a 66 to surge into a third-round tie for the lead at LIV Golf Singapore yesterday.

The Chilean mixed seven birdies and two bogeys to tie Lee Westwood of England atop the leaderboard at 10-under-par 203 for the tournament, one stroke ahead of second-round leader Bryson DeChambeau and Richard Lee of Canada.

Westwood made birdies on three of the final four holes to finish with a 68 at the Sentosa Golf Club, which played tougher than it did in the first two rounds.

"I would say it's a major championship-style golf course. It's very demanding," Westwood said. "Even though the rough isn't that thick, it asks you to hit a lot of fairways, and it's difficult to score from the rough. You don't have as much control on the golf ball."

Niemann agreed about the challenge the course presents. "I've been hitting the ball really good. I think that's the key," Niemann said. "It's a really stressful golf course, I'll say. There's a lot of danger off the tee, a lot of water on second shots. One way or the other, I feel like I've been kind of like stress-free after I hit the shot. Once



Joaquin Niemann in action at the Sentosa Golf Club, Singapore, yesterday. (Reuters)

I get on the tee, there's some pressure there, and then once I hit the ball, it goes right where I'm seeing with my eyes, so it feels satisfying." DeChambeau followed his second-round 65 with a one-over 72, but he wasn't dismayed despite bogeys at holes 8, 10 and 12.

"I played really well. The greens on 8, 9, 10, 11 got really slow," he said. "For some reason, there wasn't as much wind around

there and I guess the greens got slower in that area and I three-putted a few of them and that cost me some momentum. Other than that, I played great golf. I almost played just as good as yesterday, just things didn't line up."

Lee, a LIV Golf wild card, birdied the final hole to record a 69 and tie DeChambeau.

Spain's Jon Rahm shot an even-par 71 to stay within striking dis-

tance of the leaders, three strokes off the pace. Marc Leishman of Australia (71) stands alone in sixth place at 6-under par.

In the team competition, 4Aces are atop the leaderboard. Captain Dustin Johnson's round of 68 sent the team to 16-under, two shots ahead of Ripper GC and Legion XIII, and put Johnson in a tie for seventh place with six others at 5-under.

SPOTLIGHT

# Aberg grabs two-stroke lead at PGA Players Championship

Reuters  
Miami

**L**udvig Aberg fired a nine-under par 63, one off the course record, to seize a two-stroke lead after Friday's second round of the PGA Players Championship.

The 26-year-old Swede made two eagles and six birdies against a lone bogey to stand on 12-under 132 after 36 holes at TPC Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida.

Aberg answered his first bogey of the week at the par-four 15th with birdies at the par-five 16th and par-four 18th for the lead.

"It was good, fought all the way to the end," Aberg said. "It was nice to birdie 16 and 18. Overall very pleased."

Xander Schauffele, the 2024 PGA Championship and British Open winner, was second on 134 after a 65 on Friday with fellow American Cameron Young third on 135 plus Canada's Corey Conners and American Justin Thomas fourth on 136.

"For the most part I felt like I was in control and felt like I was attacking the golf course versus playing defensive," said Schauffele, who found every fairway. "It's always easy to be aggressive from the fairway here."

Aberg, the 2024 Masters runner-up, seeks his third PGA Tour title after the 2023 RSM Classic and last year's Genesis Invitational.

Aberg, third last week at Bay Hill, matched his lowest career 36-hole score to par, helped by two eagles on the front nine.

He birdied the first hole from just inside four feet, eagled the par-five second from just inside 15 feet, sank a 10-foot birdie putt at the par-three third and curled in a 23-foot chip to birdie the fourth.

"I got off to a really nice start, made some nice putts and even chipped in on four," Aberg said. "It was a good day. It was nice to see those things show up."

"Even though I felt like middle-round-ish I struggled a little bit off the tee, I thought I came back into it and hit some really nice tee balls



Ludvig Aberg plays his tee shot on the 15th hole during the second round of The Players Championship at Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, USA. (Reuters)

coming down the last few holes?" Aberg, standing in a bunker, chipped in from 34 feet for eagle at the par-five ninth for only the third front-nine 29.

"I knew it was an aggressive play getting a 3-wood up there," he said. "I felt like I would have a chip from somewhere up there. It's always a bonus when those go in."

Aberg birdied the par-five 11th from just outside four feet but stumbled at 15, missing the green on his approach and sinking a testy bogey putt from just inside eight feet. He responded by dropping his approach inches from the hole at the par-five 16th for a tap-in birdie and finished with a birdie putt from just inside eight feet.

**No McIlroy back pain**

Top-ranked Scottie Scheffler fired a 73 to stand on 145, one stroke in-side the cut line.

World number two Rory McIlroy, the defending champion, fired a 71 to also stand on 145 and was not hampered by a back injury that forced him out last week at Bay Hill.

"I didn't really feel anything, I woke up this morning felt fine," McIlroy said. "It feels pretty much there. Not all the way there, but I feel like it's just progressively getting better each and every day."

**Charlie Woods in last place, 31 shots back at Junior Invitational**

**Graniteville, South Carolina:** Charlie Woods, the son of 15-time major champion and golf legend Tiger Woods, shot 83 (11 over) in the third round at the Junior Invitational at Sage Valley in Graniteville, South Carolina, on Friday. Woods, 17, a junior at the Benjamin School, a private school in Palm Beach Florida, will enter the final round at 18 over - last place in a field of 36. At 13 under, Tyler Watts leads the tournament. Woods' third round started rough with a double bogey, and he finished with

a triple bogey, seven bogeys and one birdie for the day. Woods, who won the AJGA Team TaylorMade Invitational last May, committed last month to play golf at Florida State in 2027. The Junior Invitational tournament has established an accomplished list of champions in less than two decades of competition. Among past winners of the Junior Invitational are current World No. 1 Scottie Scheffler (2014), Austin Eckroat (2016), Joaquin Niemann (2017) and Akshay Bhatia (2018).



## SERIE A

# Livid Inter's title bid hit with Atalanta draw

REIGNING CHAMPIONS NAPOLI BEAT LECCE 2-1 IN NAPLES

AFP  
Milan

Inter Milan suffered another wobble in their bid to reclaim the Serie A title after yesterday's 1-1 draw with Atalanta, who bounced back from Champions League humiliation against Bayern Munich.

Nikola Krstovic earned a point for Atalanta by scoring in the 82nd minute at the San Siro, cancelling out Pio Esposito's angled drive after 26 minutes for the hosts who had looked to be extending their league lead to 10 points. But Inter coach Cristian Chivu and his players were livid at Krstovic's goal being awarded after what they saw as a push on Denzel Dumfries by Kamaldeen Sulemana, whose saved shot led to the leveller.

Chivu was sent off for his vehement protests against the officials in a heated end to what had up to that point been a humdrum affair in soaking wet Milan.

Dumfries held his head in his hands when referee Gianluca Manganiello pointed to the centre circle to give the goal which handed AC Milan the chance to move to within five points of their local rivals.

Home fans were again outraged moments later when Davide Frattesi went down looking for a penalty under a challenge from Giorgio Scalvini, who tapped his Italy teammate's foot and was cleared of committing a foul.

No-one from Inter spoke to media after the game in protest at the decisions. Milan, who prevailed in their local derby with Inter last weekend, travel to Rome to take on Lazio on Sunday night and can reignite a title race which looked as good as over a week ago.

A fighting point for Atalanta came after Tuesday's humiliating 6-1 defeat by Bayern in the Champions League, a competition for which they are just about in contention to qualify for this season.



Atalanta's Nikola Krstovic (right) celebrates scoring a goal against Inter Milan with team-mate Berat Djimsiti. (Reuters)

Atalanta, who have to face Bayern in Munich on Wednesday, are four points behind Como and Roma who are separated by goal difference in fourth and fifth and face off on Sunday.

"I really liked the reaction of the team, it's very easy to still be affected as it was only four days ago that we played Bayern," said Atalanta coach Raffaele Palladino.

"But the team played like men, like the good players that they are."

#### MCTOMINAY BACK

Juventus, a point behind Roma and Como, can move into the top four with a win at Udinese in late match. Reigning champions Napoli trail Inter by nine points in third place after coming from

behind to beat Lecce 2-1 in Naples where Scott McTominay made his return from injury.

Rasmus Hojlund and Matteo Politano goals overturned Jamil Siebert's surprise early opener for Lecce as Napoli consolidated their top-four position, eight points above Roma and Como.

More good news for coach Antonio Conte, who has had to deal with a raft of injury problems all season, came in the shape of McTominay who made his first appearance in over a month as a half-time substitute. Scotland midfielder McTominay has become a huge fan favourite at Napoli since arriving from Manchester United, and his return came as Kevin De Bruyne and Andre-Frank

Anguissa continued their comebacks from injury.

De Bruyne replaced Anguissa at the break and looked in decent nick in his second appearance since tearing his hamstring while scoring a penalty against Inter in October. There was a worrying moment late on when Lecce attacker Lameck Banda had to be rushed from the field with the Stadio Diego Armando Maradona in hushed silence after he fell to the turf.

Broadcaster DAZN reported that he was receiving treatment in an ambulance and was conscious after a fall which was reminiscent of Edoardo Bove's on-pitch heart attack while playing for Fiorentina last season.

## LIGUE 1

## Lens suffer blow to title hopes with Lorient loss

AFP  
Paris

Lens missed the chance to move top of Ligue 1 and put pressure on Paris Saint-Germain as they slipped to a 2-1 loss at Lorient yesterday.

Pierre Sage's side were aiming to go two points clear of PSG at the summit, with the reigning champions not playing this weekend so they can rest for Tuesday's Champions League last-16 second leg at Chelsea.

But Lens, targeting a second Ligue 1 title and first since 1998, fell to a costly defeat and have now won only one of their last four league matches.

Bamba Dieng put Lorient into an 18th-minute lead, bundling in from close range at the second time of asking after Lens failed to deal with a corner.

The visitors hit back, though, shortly after half-time, as Ousmane Edouard collected the ball inside the Lorient half, carried it to the edge of the box and unleashed a low shot into the bottom corner to score his 10th league goal of the season.

Lens had the momentum and went close to taking the lead shortly before the hour mark when Florian Thauvin headed a corner narrowly over.

But Lorient regained the advantage in the 65th minute, as Aiyegun Tosin stabbed the ball in from almost on the goal-line after just about controlling Arsene Kouassi's cross. Lens piled on the pressure late on with a series of set-pieces but could not force another equaliser. Lorient climbed to eighth in the table, just four points behind sixth-placed Lille, who visit fifth-placed Rennes today, in the race for European qualification.



Lorient's Aiyegun Tosin (left) celebrates with team-mate after scoring against Lens at the Stade du Moustoir in Lorient. (AFP)

### Celtic heap pressure on Hearts with Motherwell win

Celtic came from behind to beat Motherwell 3-1 and cut the gap on leaders Hearts to two points ahead of their trip to Kilmarnock later yesterday. Fourth-placed Motherwell were on the fringes of the title race themselves prior to last weekend's defeat at Dundee and dominated Celtic when the sides last met in December.

The visitors were on course for back-to-back wins over the Scottish champions when Elijah Just fired in after Reo Hatate had been robbed at the edge of his own box on 32 minutes.

However, the roles were reversed just six minutes later when Celtic this time won possession inside the Motherwell box and Yang Hyun-jun slotted in an equaliser.

The decisive moment came 19 minutes from time when Emmanuel Longelo was adjudged to have pulled down Daizen Maeda from a corner. A VAR intervention saw a penalty awarded and a red card shown to Longelo.

Tomas Cvancara, who scored the winning penalty to beat Rangers in a bad-tempered Old Firm showdown last weekend, coolly converted from the spot. Yang then raced through to fire home his second of the afternoon and seal a vital three points for Martin O'Neill's men.

Rangers are now four points behind their Glasgow rivals ahead of Sunday's trip to St. Mirren.

## BUNDESLIGA

## Nine-man Bayern come from behind to rescue 1-1 draw at Leverkusen

AFP  
Leverkusen

Leaders Bayern Munich held on for a 1-1 draw at Bayer Leverkusen despite finishing with nine men in an eventful Bundesliga clash yesterday. Second-placed Borussia Dortmund's comfortable home win at Augsburg drew their nine points behind reigning champions Bayern with eight games to play.

Alex Garcia's goal gave Leverkusen the lead and Bayern striker Nicolas Jackson saw red before half-time. Luis Diaz levelled things up but picked up a second yellow card for diving in the box. Bayern held firm to grab a point, even as Leverkusen had two efforts chalked off in stoppage time.

Bayern also had strikes from Jonathan Tah and substitute Harry Kane ruled out by VAR for handball in a sometimes manic match at the BayArena. "It was a poor performance from the referee," Bayern coach Vincent Kompany told DAZN. "Why he (Diaz) gets a red card, nobody in the stadium knows anymore, it's insane..."

"Someone needs to explain to me why that's a yellow card at that stage of the game."

"It's a huge blow and he'll be out for the next game."

Garcia finished off a fluid team move to put Leverkusen ahead six minutes in, the Spain midfielder collecting a Patrik Schick pass and chipping the ball over third-choice Bayern goalkeeper Sven Ulreich, playing with Manuel Neuer and Jonas Urbig out injured.

Former Leverkusen centre-back Tah looked to have levelled things up midway through the first half



Bayern Munich's Nicolas Jackson is shown a red card by referee Christian Dingert after a VAR review during the Bundesliga match against Leverkusen in Leverkusen yesterday. (Reuters)

when he found the net from a corner, but VAR intervened. Bayern's hopes took a further hit when Jackson saw red for sinking his studs into Martin Terrier's ankle just before the break.

With 30 minutes left, Bayern brought Kane on as a substitute after his recent absence with a calf knock and the England captain thought he had scored just 47 seconds later, but again VAR spotted a handball. Diaz finally grabbed Bayern a leveller when he guided a pin-point Michael Olise pass in with 69 minutes gone. Chasing a winner, the Colombian went down in the box under light contact from Leverkusen 'keeper Janis Blaswich and was shown a second yellow for diving. Down to nine men for the first time since 2001, Bayern dug deep despite their numerical disadvantage in the dying stages to cling on for a point.

#### Dortmund inch closer

Dortmund moved two points closer to Bayern with Karim Adeyemi

and Luca Reggiani both getting on the scoresheet in a 2-0 home win over Augsburg.

"We really enjoyed it today. We controlled the game," Dortmund's Felix Nmecha told DAZN. Adeyemi gave Dortmund the lead in the 13th minute, turning in a Maximilian Beier pass from close range.

Stodgy and uninspired in beating a 10-man Cologne last week, Dortmund showed fluency in attack, although Adeyemi and Beier took turns in hitting the crossbar before the break as Augsburg stayed in the game. But just before the hour mark, 18-year-old centre-back Reggiani headed in a Julian Ryerson corner for his first Bundesliga goal. The victory took Dortmund to 58 points, one more than their final total last season.

Elsewhere, Arnaud Kalimuendo scored as Eintracht Frankfurt beat lowly Heidenheim 1-0. Wolfsburg's bid to beat the drop took a hit in a 1-1 draw at Hoffenheim which left them stranded in the relegation zone.

## LA LIGA

## Molina stunner seals derby victory for Simeone's side

AFP  
Madrid

Atletico Madrid scraped a 1-0 win over Getafe in La Liga yesterday, with the visitors reduced to 10 men when Abdel Abqar was sent off for touching Alexander Sorloth in a sensitive area.

Nahuel Molina's thunderbolt from distance helped third-place Atletico cut the gap to the top two, but the bizarre incident early in the second half involving Getafe defender Abqar was the biggest talking point.

The Moroccan, who insisted he did not mean to touch the Atletico striker's crotch, appeared to pinch the Norwegian, who threw him to the floor angrily. "It was not my intention to touch the player in this area," Abqar, who was dismissed after a VAR review, told Movistar.

"You see it in very game, and in football, we're touching,

clashing and everything, but I never thought about touching him in that area..."

"I don't know what the referee saw but you can see it clearly and I swear that I never thought about touching him there."

Abqar explained he was trying to touch Sorloth's stomach, "as you do sometimes to know where your opponent is".

Atletico coach Diego Simeone rotated his line-up ahead of Wednesday's Champions League last 16 second leg trip to Tottenham, but was still able to secure a sixth win in the last seven matches across all competitions.

The Rojiblancos, third, moved within six points of second-place Real Madrid, who host Elche later on. League leaders Barca, fourth points clear of Los Blancos, host Sevilla Sunday.

Defender Molina's superb strike, lashed into the top corner from over 25 yards out after eight minutes, was enough to split the teams at Atletico's Metropoli-

tano stadium. It was a more taxing clash than their rollicking 5-2 victory over Tottenham in midweek. Sorloth could have doubled Atletico's lead but nodded Alex Baena's cross against the post at the end of a razor-sharp counter-attack.

Getafe's afternoon took a turn for the worse 10 minutes into the second half when Abqar was dismissed for seeming to grab at Sorloth's groin.

"These are things that happened 30 years ago, the referee was right to sent him off," said Atletico goalkeeper Juan Musso. "Before you could do this (in football), now there is no place for these things."

Despite Atletico's numerical advantage the visitors had the better of the second half and created good chances to equalise.

Mauso Arambarri fired narrowly over when in on goal and Musso made a fine late save to push away Adrian Liso's header in stoppage time.



Atletico Madrid's Nahuel Molina Lucero (centre) celebrates scoring a goal against Getafe at Metropolitano Stadium in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)