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back to winning
ways, claims
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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Sadd stumble again as Arabi fight back late

Al Gharafa can move within a point of leaders Sadd if they beat Al Ahli today



Al Arabi's Isaac Lihadji is ecstatic after scoring against Al Sadd at the Khalifa International Stadium.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Sadd slumped to a second successive defeat as Al Arabi staged a late comeback to secure a 2-1 victory in the Qatar Stars League at the Khalifa International Stadium last night.

Despite the setback, Al Sadd remain top with 38 points after other results went in their favour. Al Shamal missed the chance to cut the gap to one point following a 3-1 defeat to Al Duhail, while Al Gharafa can move within a point of the leaders if they beat Al Ahli today.

Al Sadd were reduced to ten men late in the first half when Ahmed Suhail was sent off in the 41st minute for bringing down a charging Isaac Lihadji. The opening half ended goalless, though both sides came close, with Pablo Sarabia striking the post early on and Akram Afif hitting the crossbar. Two efforts from Rafa Mujica were also ruled out for offside, including one after a VAR review in stoppage time.

The breakthrough came ten minutes into the second half when Roberto Firmino headed home Afif's free-kick. However, the numerical disadvantage eventually

took its toll. Al Arabi mounted a strong late push and turned the game around in the final ten minutes. Sarabia equalised before Lihadji struck the winner to seal all three points, lifting Al Arabi to 28 points and fifth place.

In another match, Al Duhail came from behind to defeat Al Shamal 3-1 at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium. Al Shamal took the lead in the 40th minute through Baghdad Bounedjah after sustained early pressure. Al Duhail responded after the break, with Edmilson Junior equalising in the 51st minute following a move involving Krzysztof Piatek.

The match was decided late on, as Adel Boulbina put Al Duhail ahead in the 90th minute before Piatek added a third in stoppage time to secure the win. The result lifts Al Duhail to 27 points, while Al Shamal remain second on 34.

At Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium, Al Rayyan rallied from a goal down to beat Al Wakrah 2-1. Yusuf Abdurisag gave Al Wakrah the lead in the 29th minute with a bicycle kick, but Al Rayyan responded strongly after the break. Gregore equalised in the 69th minute with a long-range strike, before Roger Guedes headed the winner five minutes from time. Al Rayyan move to 31 points, while Al Wakrah stay on 23.

Meanwhile, Al Gharafa coach Pedro Martins stressed the importance of bouncing back when his side face Al Ahli.

"The upcoming match will be difficult because Al Ahli are fighting to avoid relegation," Martins said, adding that his team remain determined to compete despite their recent loss to Qatar SC. "We still have many objectives to fight for. There is no room for surrender and we will compete for every title."

Al Gharafa player Amr Serag echoed his coach's sentiments, saying preparations have been marked by focus and determination. "The match is very important for us at this stage of the league. It will not be easy, but we need a win to stay in the title race and make our fans happy," he said.

Al Ahli coach Younes Ali underlined the importance of the clash for his side. "Securing a victory and the points is crucial given our position in the standings," he said. "We will approach it like a final. There is no room for dropping points."

TODAY'S FIXTURES

Al Gharafa vs Al Ahli at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium; Umm Salal vs Qatar SC at Khalifa International Stadium; Al Sailiya vs Al Shahania at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium



Al Duhail came from behind to defeat Al Shamal 3-1 at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.

Newcastle must grow under Camp Nou pressure: Howe

Barcelona: Newcastle coach Eddie Howe called on his players to grow rather than shrink under the lights at Camp Nou when they face Barcelona in the Champions League last 16.

The Premier League club outplayed the Spanish champions in the last 16 first leg, but a late Lamine Yamal penalty to snatched a 1-1 draw last week on Tyneside.

Newcastle, aiming to reach the Champions League quarter-finals for the first time in the club's history, know the challenge will be different today at the home of the five-time winners. "I don't think they will be overawed), we've got an experienced group, we've got many players who have played in so many big games now we've become accustomed to it," Howe said.

"You almost want that size of the game to lift the players and to make us grow - certainly we can't shrink - but with many, many internationals within the squad I don't see that as an issue. It's just making sure from my side that we get the plan right, they've got a lot of dangerous players that we need to deal with."

Newcastle are ninth in the Premier League in a frustrating campaign, but Howe said the club are in their best moment of the season. "(The players) are the happiest they have been throughout the season, it's been one of a lot of change... early season we struggled to find our rhythm, our relationships in the team were new," continued Howe.

"Their confidence was affected slightly. We worked really hard to try and bring some stability to the team. In the last few weeks we've returned to a really good flow. It's been a much better feel, better individual performances in return, better collective performances."

Newcastle beat Chelsea 1-0 on Saturday with a strong defensive display, which Howe said the team would have to draw from against the likes of Raphinha and teenage star Yamal.

"You have to be optimistic and you have to be positive, and that's why the Chelsea result and performance was so important," explained Howe.

"We proved to ourselves that we can defend our goal really well... I think we're as good a place as we've been at any stage this season, both on and off the pitch. We had to be in this position to give ourselves the best chance, and now we're just putting it over the line."

Barcelona beat Newcastle 2-1 in the league phase at St James' Park before last week's draw, but Newcastle defender Kieran Trippier said his team were on a high heading into the clash against the La Liga leaders.

SPOTLIGHT

Mexico prepared to host Iran World Cup games, says president



AFF
Mexico City

Mexican President **Claudia Sheinbaum** said yesterday that her country is prepared to host Iran's first-round matches at the 2026 World Cup if needed due to the conflict in the Middle East.

Iran's participation at this summer's finals in the United States, Canada and Mexico has been in doubt since the war began last month, with President Donald Trump warning that Iranian players' safety would be at risk if they travelled to the US.

Iran's football federation has opened talks with FIFA about potentially relocating its matches from the United States, though the global governing body has so far maintained that the tournament's schedule remains unchanged.

Asked directly if Mexico was open to hosting the matches, and if the decision will purely come down to FIFA logistics, Sheinbaum told a press conference: "Yes. Mexico maintains diplomatic relations with every country in the world, therefore we will wait to see what FIFA decides."

Iran's place at the tournament was thrown into question after the US and Israel launched a massive offensive against the Islamic Republic, which responded with waves of missiles and drones targeting Israeli territory and American targets across the Middle East.

FIFA president Gianni Infantino initially said that Trump had given assurances that the Iranian team - scheduled to face New Zealand and Belgium in Los Angeles, followed by Egypt in Seattle - would still be welcome.

But the Republican president then triggered uproar last week after stating that

Iran's football team should not travel to the tournament "for their own life and safety". Iran hit back at Trump's comments saying that "no one can exclude Iran's national team from the World Cup".

Iran were the second Asian team after Japan to qualify for the World Cup, securing their place almost a year ago as they topped their qualifying group. On Monday, Iranian football chief Mehdi Taj wrote on social media: "When Trump has explicitly stated that he cannot ensure the security of the Iranian national team, we will certainly not travel to America. We are currently negotiating with FIFA to hold Iran's matches in the World Cup in Mexico."

Iranian football authorities "are currently discussing with FIFA whether it is feasible - since they were originally scheduled to go to the United States - to see if they can" move Iran's games to Mexico, confirmed Sheinbaum. "The matter is

under review and we will provide an update in due course."

When contacted on the matter, FIFA said it was "looking forward to all participating teams competing as per the match schedule announced on 6 December 2025". "FIFA is in regular contact with all participating member associations, including IR Iran, to discuss planning for the FIFA World Cup 2026," a spokesperson said.

The Iran team's base camp for the tournament is currently slated to be located in Tucson, Arizona. Abolfazl Pasandideh, Iran's ambassador to Mexico, on Monday denounced "the US government's lack of cooperation regarding visa issuance and the provision of logistical support" for the Iranian delegation ahead of the World Cup, in a statement published on the embassy's website. Should Iran not take part in the World Cup, it is not yet clear which country might replace them.

SPOTLIGHT

NZ's Conway, Santner lead series-levelling win over Proteas

Agencies
Hamilton

Hosts New Zealand levelled the five-match T20I series against South Africa with a dominant 68-run win at the Seddon Park in Hamilton yesterday.

After being put in to bat New Zealand relied on Opener Devon Conway's experience to post a challenging target.

Conway and his batting partner Tom Latham built an excellent opening partnership for New Zealand after they won the toss and chose to bat first.

The pair reached their score of 48 runs without losing a wicket which they achieved in 6.2 overs.

Latham scored 11 runs on 10 balls until Keshav Maharaj deceived him and dismissed him from the game.

The hosts reached 55-2 after Tom Robinson who batted third base was dismissed for one run to George Linde in the 7.2-over period.

Conway scored 60 runs from 49 balls to become the top scorer while hitting five boundaries and two sixes. He established a fast 37-

run partnership with Nick Kelly in order to build their third wicket stand. Kelly scored 21 runs from 12 balls during his time at the crease in the middle order.

Captain Santner contributed 20 runs to the team total while Cole McConchie scored 18 off 12 and Josh Clarkson chipped in with 26 off 9 to give late innings fireworks which enabled New Zealand to reach a total of 175-6 after 20 overs.

Wiaan Mulder from South Africa bowled effectively by taking two wickets for 14 runs in two overs while dismissing Kelly and Conway who scored well.

Linde, Maharaj, Ottneil Baartman, and new-ball pacer Gerald Coetzee each took one wicket for their respective teams.

South Africa started their chase successfully as they reached 29-0 after five overs with Mulder and Connor Esterhuizen batting.

The New Zealand team faced early losses when both players began their innings with aggressive batting which resulted in multiple boundaries. Ben Sears removed Esterhuizen before Santner dismissed Mulder soon after.

Number three Tony de Zorzi managed only a single before Mc-

Conchie tightened New Zealand's grip, reducing the Proteas to 31-3. Ruben Hermann scored 19 runs from 12 balls while Jason Smith scored 12 runs from 13 balls to create a 28-run partnership for the fourth wicket after their team suffered an early collapse.

The middle overs saw Santner and all-rounder James Neesham launch another attack which resulted in another team collapse. South Africa eventually folded for 107 in just 15.3 overs.

Linde provided the only bright moment for the visitors, smashing a quick 33 off just 12 balls.

New Zealand's bowlers performed strongly during the match. Fast bowler Lockie Ferguson cleaned up the lower order with three wickets, while Sears finished with excellent figures of 3-14 after claiming two late scalps.

Santner also impressed with 2-19, while McConchie and Neesham grabbed a wicket each during their combined three-over spell.

BRIEF SCORES: New Zealand 175 for 6 (Conway 60, Clarkson 26*, Mulder 2-14) **beat South Africa 107** (Linde 33, Sears 3-14, Ferguson 3-16) **by 68 runs.**



New Zealand's Devon Conway bats during the second Twenty20 match against South Africa at Seddon Park in Hamilton yesterday. (AFP)

CRICKET

All we wanted to do was go and win the Ashes: Pope

BATTER DENIES THE TEAM 'WEREN'T FUSSED' IN AUSTRALIA

AFP
London

Ollie Pope believes the idea England "weren't fussed" during their woeful Ashes tour of Australia was unfair on the squad but understands why the "mis-perception" became lodged in the minds of many fans and pundits.

Ben Stokes' tourists went down to a 4-1 series loss to Australia over five Tests in 2025/26, with the troubled campaign still the subject of an England and Wales Cricket Board review.

In addition to their poor on-field performance, concerns about the culture of the England squad emerged during a break in Noosa, an Australian resort, where there were reports of excessive drinking by players.

This was followed by revelations that vice-captain Harry Brook had had an altercation with a nightclub bouncer on the pre-Ashes visit to New Zealand.

Pope, however, insists England's were fully focused on re-gaining the Ashes and might have been more successful had they cemented an encouraging start to the first Test in Perth. "Going into that series, there was a lot spoken about the preparation of it," Pope told reporters yesterday.

"As a team, the misconception might be that we weren't as fussed as it came across."

The 28-year-old, speaking at county side Surrey's media day, added: "The tough thing for everyone in that first game (Test) was the nature of it. Had we won that,



and we'd done slightly better on day two, the idea is different.

"Of course we want to be a well-liked team, on and off the pitch, and unfortunately our performance didn't allow that to happen in Australia.

"I can understand why people felt that way, but at the same time the perception that we weren't fussed was probably the hard thing. All we wanted to do was go and win the Ashes...All anyone wanted to do was to win.

"And for us at times it was just trying to, in our minds, take the pressure off the actual Test match."

Even before the trip started, questions were raised about a lack of preparation in Australian conditions, which consisted of a three-day match against the second-string England Lions at Lilac Hill in Perth.

"As we've done over the previous years, we tried to treat it like a normal series to get the best out of ourselves," said Pope. "Unfortunately, it didn't quite go to plan."

He added: "I know what I need to be as ready as I can be. From a personal point, I felt as ready as I could have been for that first Test."

Pope was dropped after the third Test after averaging only 20.83 runs across the first three games, with replacement Jacob Bethell going on to score a century in the fifth Test at Sydney.

But Pope insisted he was determined to regain his England place, saying: "I still feel like my best batting years are to come."

The Surrey batsman was speaking after the England and Wales Cricket Board went back on a plan to stop its Ashes players speaking to the media ahead of the new county season while it conducts its review.

GOLF

Rahm's driving distance could be key in South Africa

Reuters
Johannesburg

LIV Golf is making its South Africa debut this week, and Jon Rahm of Spain isn't quite sure just what to expect on his first visit to the nation.

Except kikuyu grass at The Club at Steyn City, a Jack Nicklaus-designed course in Midrand, South Africa. It's a thick grass native to Africa, but it isn't uncommon in the United States, especially in warm-weather climates. It's tough to hit the ball out of the rough. And the fact the thick turf typically favors the long hitters - like Rahm - will play to his advantage.

"Off the tee, you're not going to expect a lot of roll; you can probably be aggressive," Rahm said.

"There's quite a bit of a margin of error off the tee, so hitting it long is going to be an advantage. Greens seem to be soft. It's going to be tricky to get them as firm as they probably want to.

"But that combination essentially gives the people that hit it the furthest an advantage. And I would say the same thing in desert golf; usually it's not as firm as it needs to be. Power and birdies is what you need. Not

that people that hit it a little bit shorter can't do it, but when you give some of the best players in the world that have distance free range off the tee, you're going to see a lot of birdies, and I think that's what's going to happen."

Power and birdies. That's the recipe for Rahm. So far this season, he is fourth in the LIV Golf League with a driving distance of 309.1 yards. He's first in greens in regulation (81.94%) and in birdies, averaging 5.69 per round.

"With the fantastic facilities they have here and the crew working on the course, if they can get it up to speed and firm, it could change a little bit, but I think as of now you're going to have to expect some low scores unless we get some really heavy wind just because at altitude it also plays a little bit shorter than the distance will say on the scorecard," he said.

After LIV Golf South Africa, the tour will take a break until LIV Golf Mexico City on April 16-19. That break, of course, is for the Masters Tournament.

Three of the four players on Rahm's Legion XIII team have qualified to play at Augusta National - Rahm, Tyrrell Hatton and Tom McKibbin. Caleb Sur-ratt is the only non-qualifier from the team.

Woods to miss TGL semi, McIlroy will play

Tiger Woods will not play in Jupiter Links' TGL semifinal game against Boston Common, meaning the 15-time major champion may not compete at all in the indoor league's second season. One of his TGL co-founders, Rory McIlroy, committed to playing for Boston Common yesterday after saying he had not decided following his tie for 46th at The Players Championship on Sunday. McIlroy has been dealing with a back spasm that forced him to withdraw from the Arnold Palmer Invitational two weeks ago.

Jupiter Links will be represented by Max Homa, Akshay Bhatia and Tom Kim, with the trio going up against McIlroy, Keegan Bradley and Adam Scott in the 9 p.m. ET match at the SoFi Center in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. That will follow the first semifinal match at 6:30 p.m. between the defending champion Atlanta Drive and Los Angeles Golf Club. Justin Thomas will sit out for Atlanta after playing consecutive tournaments on the heels of a four-month layoff following back surgery. Collin Morikawa, who withdrew before the first round of The Players with his own back injury, will be sidelined for Los Angeles.

FOCUS

I'm progressing well and comfortable with my game: DeChambeau

Reuters
Johannesburg

Bryson DeChambeau said he feels his game is rounding into form at a crucial time - that is, right before the Masters.

Fresh off a T3 finish in Adelaide and a playoff win in Singapore, DeChambeau will look to continue his strong play when he competes in LIV Golf South Africa in Midrand, near the city of Johannesburg. This marks LIV Golf's fifth of 14 events this season. "I feel like I'm progressing well and comfortable with my game, hitting it a lot better than I have in years past leading into major season, early

in the season for LIV Golf," DeChambeau said on Tuesday at The Club at Steyn City. "I practiced a little earlier this year, and it's starting to pay off."

DeChambeau forced a playoff against Richard T. Lee on Sunday with a birdie on No. 18, then saved par on the first playoff hole to win LIV Golf Singapore on Sunday.

Lee, a LIV wild card who qualified for the league by winning LIV Golf Promotions in January, missed a 2-foot putt for par as the duo played the 18th hole again, giving DeChambeau the win.

DeChambeau climbed eight spots to No. 33 in the Official World Golf Ranking with his victory in Singapore. He hasn't had much time to savor his fourth LIV

Golf League victory, however. He ventured from Singapore to South Africa, marking the first time LIV Golf will hold a competition on the continent. It marks an opportunity for DeChambeau - and others - to give kids from a different part of the world a chance to see golf played up close.

"Yeah, I think that's a part of our mission, becoming more global and influencing and giving people an opportunity to see what golf can do for communities and for people around the world," he said yesterday. "It's been done quite well in the States so far and now we're doing it internationally. It only improves, I would say, facilities and communities everywhere across the globe. I think that's a

part of our mission statement, that it's important to us. It's part of our identity now. Being here in South Africa, it's only - there's only one place we haven't gone yet, which is South America, and that would be another cool place to go.

"But being here in South Africa, I've always wanted to come here. Talking to Gary Player quite a bit and Ernie (Els) and Louis (Oosthuizen) and the whole Southern Guards team, obviously, they just rave how great it is obviously, and coming here and seeing how special the hospitality is, the people, the culture and the way that everybody conducts themselves, it's quite amazing," DeChambeau, 32, joined LIV Golf in 2022 after recording nine wins on the PGA Tour.



HORSE RACING

Aaneef Zakhir back to winning ways, claims Dibal Cup

JUNGLE MONARCH CLINCHES SECOND CONSECUTIVE VICTORY

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Aaaneef Zakhir returned to winning form with an impressive victory in the Dibal Cup, taking out the 1900m Local Purebred Arabian Handicap as racing resumed at Al Rayyan Racecourse on Monday night following a brief interruption.

The six-year-old bay, owned and trained by Osama Omer al-Dafea, was expertly ridden by Arnaud de Lepine, who secured his third win of the season.

Aaneef Zakhir was settled near the rear early on as Khaled Al Shahania set the pace, dictating proceedings through the opening and middle stages. Bakir and Burkan Zakhir tracked the leader closely, forming the main chasing group down the back straight.

Approaching the final bend, Aaneef Zakhir began to make steady headway. Turning into the straight, he gathered momentum to move into third behind Bakir and Khaled Al Shahania, while Amersun also produced a strong late run to join the leading contenders.

Inside the final 200m, Aaneef Zakhir showed determination to surge into the lead and open up a narrow advantage.

Bakir continued to challenge, but the eventual winner responded gamely under pressure to hold on at the line.

Bakir, representing Mubarak Ali al-Nuaimi and trained by Hamad al-Jehani, finished second under Alberto Sanna, a length and three-quarters clear of Amersun.

The latter stayed on well for Wathnan Racing, trainer Alban de Mieulle and jockey Youssef Lachhab to complete the podium.

The meeting featured a total of eight races and marked the 58th Al Rayyan Race Meeting organised by the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club.

Among the other winners on the night, Jungle Monarch powered clear to secure a second consecutive victory, while Afor Alghania burst away from the field to break his maiden in decisive fashion.

Lucia Molly finally got off the mark at the tenth attempt with a strong finish, as Awaayid swept clear to register back-to-back wins.

King Albahar returned to win-



Connections of Aaneef Zakhir celebrate after the six-year-old bay won the Dibal Cup. PICTURES: Juhaim



Jockey Arnaud de Lepine guided Aaneef Zakhir to the Dibal Cup win at the Al Rayyan Racecourse.

ning ways in dominant style, El Ghazi bounced back with a determined success, and Mared Al Jasra made every yard count to land an open race.

RESULTS
58th Al Rayyan Race Meeting - Dibal Cup
WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1 - Dibal Cup, Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (70-90) Aaneef Zakhir, Eng. Osama Omer

al-Dafea, Arnaud de Lepine
2 - Thoroughbred Handicap (45-65)
Jungle Monarch, Jassim al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento
3 - Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate
Afor Alghania, Maayouf bin Hashim al-Shamari, Salman Fahad al-Hajri
4 - Thoroughbred Maiden Plate
Lucia Molly, Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, Saleh Salem al-Marri
5 - Local Thoroughbred

Handicap (0-55)
Awaayid, Zuhair Mohsen, Faleh Bughenaim
6 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (55-75)
King Albahar, Dr. Fahad Salman al-Hajri, Szczepan Mazur
7 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (65-85)
El Ghazi, Jassim al-Ghazali, Faleh Bughenaim
8 - Purebred Arabian Open Race
Mared Al Jasra, Jassim al-Ghazali, Faleh Bughenaim

SPOTLIGHT

LA28 ticket registration nears deadline

Reuters
Los Angeles

Organisers of the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics said on Monday that registration for the first ticket draw will close on March 18, as the Games begin to take shape with the first baseball qualifiers confirmed and the soccer tournament schedule expanded.

More than five million fans from 197 countries and territories have registered at tickets.la28.org since January for a chance to buy tickets, LA28 said, underscoring strong early demand for the Summer Games, which are due to open on July 14, 2028. Fans who register by the March 18 deadline will be eligible for a lottery to receive a purchase window for the first ticket release, scheduled for April 9-19.

There will also be a local pre-sale running from April 2-6 for eligible residents in parts of Southern California and Oklahoma. Oklahoma City will host softball and canoe slalom.

LA28 said selected applicants



would be notified by email between March 31 and April 7. Fans picked for the first sale window will be able to buy up to 12 tickets for Olympic events, subject to availability, with a four-ticket cap for each of the opening and closing ceremonies.

The ticketing update comes as the first teams booked places in the Olympic baseball tournament through the 2026 World Baseball Classic.

The Dominican Republic and Venezuela secured qualification spots from the Americas, joining host United States in the six-team field. Baseball, one of the sports added to the LA28 programme, will return to the Olympics for the first time since the Tokyo Games.

ATHLETICS

Kerr 'frustrated' at sum owed to him by failed Grand Slam Track

AFP
London

Britain's Josh Kerr is "frustrated" by the six-figure sum owed to him by US athletics great Michael Johnson's failed Grand Slam Track project, but still believes that those behind it are "good people" who got themselves in a "horrible situation".

Grand Slam Track (GST) curtailed its inaugural 2025 season and then filed for bankruptcy in December, with millions collectively owed to athletes including Scottish two-time world champion Kerr - who has submitted a claim for \$218,750 (£164,150).

A court filing by creditors earlier this month also claimed that four-time Olympic champion Johnson was secretly paid \$500,000 when he was already aware that creditors would be left out of pocket.

"Of course I'm frustrated," said Kerr. "I'm owed a lot of money, so in any business anyone's going to be frustrated. I don't particularly know right now where to push those frustrations and where they should sit."

"I've had conversations with Michael, I've had information given to me by my agents on this stuff. I don't think these are bad people. I think this is a horri-

ble situation." Once a company files for bankruptcy in the United States, a committee of creditors called a UCC is often formed to represent their interests. This UCC filed the allegations against Johnson. "This claim is unfounded and false," said GST representative Alex Tourk.

"As was previously explained to the UCC, Mr Johnson advanced millions of dollars for GST's operating expenses, including athlete travel, accommodation and costs, only a portion of which was repaid through reimbursement.

"It is unfortunate that the UCC chose to ignore facts and is instead attempting to discredit the company and Mr Johnson through false statements."

Kerr, 28, has recovered from the calf tear he sustained during last year's 1,500m final at the World Athletics Championships in Japan.

This week in Poland, the 2023 world 1,500m champion will look to reclaim the world indoor 3,000m title he won on home Scottish soil in Glasgow two years ago, after injury and illness prevented the Edinburgh athlete from defending it last year.

"I believe I am the best athlete in the world at these distances," said Kerr. "There's no one in the world who can convince me otherwise."

TENNIS

Australia's Matosevic gets four-year doping suspension

Reuters
Los Angeles

Former tennis player and coach Marinko Matosevic of Australia has been handed a four-year ban after breaching anti-doping rules, the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) said on Monday.

Matosevic, 40, reached a career-high singles ranking of 39 in 2013. He retired from the sport in 2018 and has since become a coach, working with Australian players Chris O'Connell and Jordan Thompson.

"An independent tribunal determined that Matosevic committed five anti-doping rule violations between 2018 and 2020..." the ITIA said in a statement.

"... including use of a prohibited method through blood doping (while an active player) and



facilitating another player to blood dope, providing advice to other players on how to avoid positive tests, and use and possession of the prohibited substance clenbuterol."

In a statement published by Australian tennis website 'The First Serve' in February, Matosevic admitted he underwent a blood transfusion in Morelos, Mexico towards the end of his playing career.

"I was disgusted with myself, I retired the following week at the age of 32-and-a-half," he added.

"Shortly after I realised how precious life is and how serious

and reckless my decision was. I wasn't involved in tennis at all for almost two years and pro tennis for three.

"I am writing this confession letter firstly to warn other athletes against doing anything that may harm their health and put their lives at risk because there is a long life after an athlete's career."

In the same statement, Matosevic slammed the ITIA's methods, alleging that many of the claims against him were based on his text messages and saying that the anti-doping systems in tennis needed to be "dismantled".

"The tribunal also dismissed Matosevic's public allegations relating to the integrity of the ITIA's investigation process as without merit, and that the ITIA 'acted within the authority conferred by the (Tennis Anti-Doping Programme)," the ITIA said on Monday.

FOOTBALL

It's 'nonsense' to say players don't care about Spurs' plight: Van de Ven

AFP
London

Micky van de Ven is adamant it is "nonsense" to suggest Tottenham Hotspur players are indifferent about the threat of relegation from the Premier League.

Spurs are just a point above the bottom three and their season went from bad to worse with a 5-2 loss away to Atletico Madrid last week in the first leg of a last-16 tie in the Champions League.

Spurs did rally with a 1-1 draw at Liverpool on Sunday to provide fresh belief and Van de Ven, criticised for a red card against Crystal Palace earlier this month, has dismissed accusations some players have "checked out" in the battle to beat the top.

"The only thing I can say is it's not true," he told reporters yesterday on the eve of the second-leg tie with Atletico.

"It would be strange if a player was in the dressing room now and saying, 'I'm going to leave either way, or I don't focus about the situation because everything that's going to happen, it doesn't affect me', so I think it's just nonsense."

The 24-year-old added: "The



Tottenham Hotspur's Micky van de Ven talking to the media yesterday, ahead of the Champions League match against Atletico Madrid in London. (Reuters)

other day when we read something about one guy that said to everyone that he's probably going to leave and doesn't care about the situation they're in, and then someone reads this and we're just like, how does this come out? People are just making things up.

"It's just frustrating for us as well because it brings so much more trouble as well, because the fans are starting to believe this."

"Trust me all the people involved on the pitch, the staff, the players, everyone, they care so

much about the situation we're in right now. "We just want to turn things around and that's the most important, that's the main focus for everyone.

"I just want to stay fit and turn things around. Obviously, the last games from my side hasn't been the best and I know that as well. It's just most important that I keep showing to everyone that I always give 100 percent to this club. I will always do as long as I play.

"For me, the most important is that we turn things around right now."

RADUCANU TO SKIP MIAMI OPEN DUE TO ILLNESS

Former U.S. Open champion Emma Raducanu has pulled out of the Miami Open as she continues her recovery from illness, the WTA said on Monday. British number one Raducanu, who enjoyed a run to the quarter-finals in Florida last year, had been given a bye into the second round.

The 23-year-old has struggled with form and fitness issues since her only Grand Slam triumph as a teenager at New York in 2021 and has worked with a string of different coaches with little success. The Miami Open main draw begins on Tuesday and runs until March 29.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Sporting Lisbon thrash Bodo/Glimt to reach quarter-finals

AFP
Lisbon

Sporting Lisbon made an impressive comeback to hammer Norwegian giantkillers Bodo/Glimt 5-0 and reach the Champions League quarter-finals 5-3 on aggregate.

After a 3-0 last 16 first leg defeat last week north of the Arctic Circle, Sporting produced a ruthless display in Portugal to book a spot in the last eight for the first time since the 1982/83 season. Bodo/Glimt have drawn admirers across the world for their superb performances in this season's Champions League but once Goncalo Inacio opened the scoring, the Portuguese champions never looked back.

Pedro Goncalves and Luis Suarez netted to force extra-time and Maximiliano Araujo scored in the 92nd minute to put Sporting ahead for the first time in the tie, before Rafael Nel smashed home a fifth late on. Bodo/Glimt shocked last season's runners-up Inter Milan in the play-off round

and defeated Manchester City and Atletico Madrid in the league phase before that.

Those astonishing results were followed up by the first leg rout of Sporting at the Norwegians' 8,000-capacity Aspmyra Stadium, giving Kjetil Knutsen's side a tantalising sight of the last eight. Perhaps it daunted them, as they seemed to be playing with fear from the start in Lisbon.

The hosts dominated, racking up shots at nearly the same rate the Norwegian side were completing passes in the opening phases. Around 2,000 Bodo/Glimt fans made the long trek to Jose Alvalade stadium, where their dream was mercilessly crushed under the rain.

Knutsen selected the same line-up for the sixth Champions League match running, a competition record. Rui Borges's Sporting peppered the Bodo/Glimt goal, with Nikita Haikin saving from Colombian striker Suarez early on.

Kasper Høgh, who scored in the first leg, had a fine chance to send the visitors ahead against the run of play at the other end but dragged his shot a long way wide. Former

Barcelona forward Francisco Trincao's effort was deflected off-target, but he helped create the opener with a corner. Inacio rose highest to nod home and start Sporting's comeback.

Bodo/Glimt almost pulled back level but Odin Bjortuft headed against the crossbar, with the ball flying upwards and then dropping downwards onto the woodwork again, before Sporting were able to recover.

The Portuguese side forged their second goal just after the hour mark with Suarez racing in down the right and pulling the ball across for Goncalves to tap home.

The comeback was well and truly on and Suarez got in on the action himself with a penalty after 78 minutes, following a handball by Fredrik Andre Bjorkan.

Bodo/Glimt held on to force extra-time but after just two minutes of it Araujo fired home, drilling inside Haikin at the near post for Sporting's fourth.

Sporting wisely kept control through the rest of the additional period and wrapped things up at the death when Nel rifled into the top corner.



Sporting Lisbon's players celebrate their fourth goal scored by Maximiliano Araujo during the Champions League last 16 second leg match against Bodo/Glimt at Jose Alvalade Stadium in Lisbon yesterday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Slot vows to win back support of Liverpool fans

The Reds need to overturn a 1-0 first leg deficit against Galatasaray at Anfield

AFP
Liverpool

Manager Arne Slot insists he can win back the support of Liverpool's frustrated fans after admitting he "must have done a lot of things wrong".

Slot has come under fire throughout Liverpool's dismal Premier League title defence and the Reds boss will face increased scrutiny if his side crash out of the Champions League against Galatasaray today.

Liverpool were booed off after conceding a 90th-minute equaliser to struggling Tottenham on Sunday, leaving Slot to answer questions about his Anfield future when he faced reporters. While the mood on social media has been anti-Slot for several months, the draw with Tottenham marked the first time Liverpool fans had been so vocal in their criticism.

"It's never nice they are frustrated because usually fans are not frustrated after you win," Slot said.

"People told me when I came here that they will support the manager for such a long time, but if you are supposing something then I must have done a lot of things wrong. That's never a nice feeling to have because being in the club that's always so supportive for the manager, in good and bad times, then if they are not happy with me, then apparently I've done so many things wrong."

Slot led Liverpool to the English title in a superb first season in charge after replacing the beloved Jurgen Klopp. But the Dutch coach has been criticised for Liverpool's lack of cutting edge and defensive flaws in a turbulent second campaign. The Reds, who sit in fifth place in the Premier League, must overturn a 1-0 first leg deficit against

Galatasaray at Anfield to keep the pressure on Slot from building further.

"I did something wrong in the season that we won the league and I definitely did maybe make a few decisions that were not perfect in hindsight," Slot said. "But all the decisions I've made, I've always made for the same reason, for us trying to win the game. But I also know how the football industry works. Winning can change a lot. That's what we are trying to achieve tomorrow and we're completely ready for that."

Former Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher this week questioned whether Slot's players are unified and willing to fight for the club.

But Slot is adamant his squad remain fully committed to the Liverpool cause. "I should have seen why he said it, did he have examples? I agree with a lot of things Jamie has said throughout the season. This particular one I disagree with," he said.

"I need to go into details which I am not prepared to do. But it's not like we are playing like 11 individuals, if he meant that. I see a team that is fighting together. That is my opinion. A team that has given up, a team of individuals that doesn't work together doesn't show that resilience after our 120th setback this season. That's a bit exaggerating but we have had many."

Liverpool have lost twice to Galatasaray in Istanbul this season, but Slot hopes their first meeting on Merseyside will lift the gloom at Anfield. "The good thing for us is we have the support of our fans, which will be supportive again tomorrow because that is what they have always been and will always be for this club," he said.

For a club whose anthem is 'you'll never walk alone', Slot could be forgiven for feeling isolated by Liverpool fans lately. But he struck a hopeful tone as he said: "I've never felt alone since I've been here."



Kompany warns of complacency as injury-hit Bayern host Atalanta

Munich: Bayern Munich coach Vincent Kompany said his "biggest role" was preventing complacency as his undermanned side host Atalanta today sitting on a 6-1 first-leg lead.

Despite being without striker Harry Kane, the Bundesliga leaders thumped Atalanta in Bergamo last Wednesday in their Champions League last-16 opener, racking up three goals in each half. No team in European Cup history has ever overturned a five-goal deficit in a second leg but Kompany took the responsibility of ensuring his injury-hit side know the job is not yet done.

"That's precisely my biggest role in a situation like this," Kompany told reporters. "The crucial foundation from which we have to work is a willingness to work, a willingness to run, and the joy of playing football, which we will also show."

Bayern were reduced to nine men but dug deep to draw 1-1 at Bayer Leverkusen on Saturday and Kompany said the result would spur his men. "The result against Leverkusen was actually positive. It showed what kind of story our season could be. We don't have much room. I don't want to go into these games too laid back. But my greatest confidence is in this team."

The six-time Champions



League winners are odds-on to cruise into the quarter-finals but have been hard hit by injuries, particularly in goal. Jamal Musiala, Alphonso Davies and Hiroki Ito are all injured, while Joshua Kimmich and Michael Olise are suspended.

In goal, Manuel Neuer and Sven Ulreich are injured, while back-up Jonas Urbig is facing a race against time to return from a concussion sustained in Bergamo. If Urbig does not return, Kompany confirmed teenage debutant Leonard Prescott would be between the sticks.

At 16 years and 191 days, Prescott would become the youngest goalkeeper in Cham-

ions League history, beating the current record set by Maarten Vandevoordt by more than a year. But Kompany said the 2009-born "keeper was not showing any traces of nerves. "He's very calm," Kompany said, adding "if he plays tomorrow, he'll get our full backing, our full support."

Kane returned off the bench against Leverkusen after missing two games and is in line to start today.

In the Champions League, Bayern's big first leg win over Atalanta means that the club is on track for a meeting with Real Madrid or Manchester City in the quarter-finals of the Champions League.

FOCUS

Neymar left out of Brazil squad for World Cup warm-ups

Reuters
Rio de Janeiro

Neymar was left out of the latest Brazil squad named by coach Carlo Ancelotti on Monday for this month's friendlies, as the five-time world champions continue their preparations for the 2026 World Cup.

Brazil are set to play France on March 26 in Boston and Croatia on March 31 in Orlando ahead of the tournament in the United States, Mexico and Canada.

Neymar's absence comes after the 34-year-old missed a recent game for Santos FC due to muscle fatigue, a match which Ancelotti had planned to assess him in person during a scouting trip ahead of the squad announcement.

Neymar, Brazil's all-time leading scorer with 79 goals, has not played for the national team since suffering a serious knee injury in October 2023 and has struggled to maintain a consistent run of matches since returning to Santos last year.

"Neymar can be at the World Cup if he's 100%," Ancelotti told reporters on Monday after announcing his squad. "I didn't call him up because he's not 100%.



Neymar has to be training and playing."

Neymar, at a Kings League event in Sao Paulo on Monday, said that he was disappointed and sad about being left out. "But I remain focused, day after day, training session after training session, match after match. We will achieve our goal. The dream continues."

Ancelotti has called up 19-year-old Endrick, who re-

Argentina to play friendly against Guatemala following Finalissima cancellation

Buenos Aires: The Argentine national team will host Guatemala on March 31 in a friendly match that will serve as a farewell to its fans ahead of summer's World Cup, and following the 'Finalissima' cancellation, the local federation said.

The contest between European champions Spain and Copa America winners Argentina was scheduled for March 27 in Doha. However, the US-Israeli strikes on Iran have affected countries throughout the Gulf, forcing several sporting events to be cancelled due to safety concerns.

IRAN WOMEN'S TEAM ARRIVE IN TURKEY ON WAY HOME

The Iranian women's national football team landed at Istanbul Airport on Tuesday after several members of the delegation withdrew their asylum bids in Australia and decided to return home. The players arrived in Turkey via Oman and Kuala Lumpur, having left Australia where they were competing in the Asian Cup.

The players left Istanbul Airport under police escort and headed to a hotel in the city. They will return to Iran on Wednesday, the Turkish private news agency reported.

Seven members of the delegation had sought sanctuary in Australia last week after they were branded "traitors" at home for refusing to sing the national anthem at their opening Women's Asian Cup game.

Only two remain in Australia after the others changed their minds. Rights groups have accused Tehran of pressuring athletes abroad by threatening relatives with the seizure of property if they defect or make statements against the Islamic republic.

BRAZIL SQUAD:

Goalkeepers: Alisson (Liverpool), Bento (Al-Nassr), Ederson (Fenerbahce)

Defenders: Wesley (AS Roma), Alex Sandro (Flamengo), Douglas Santos (Zenit St Petersburg), Marquinhos (Paris St Germain), Gabriel Magalhaes (Arsenal), Bremer (Juventus), Danilo (Flamengo), Ibanez (Al-Ahli), Leo Pereira (Flamengo)

Midfielders: Andrey Santos (Chelsea), Casemiro (Manchester United), Danilo (Botafogo), Fabinho (Al-Ittihad), Gabriel Sara (Galatasaray)

Forwards: Endrick (Olympique Lyonnais), Igor Thiago (Brentford), Luiz Henrique (Zenit St Petersburg), Rayan (Bournemouth), Joao Pedro (Chelsea), Gabriel Martinelli (Arsenal), Matheus Cunha (Manchester United), Raphinha (Barcelona), Vinicius Jr (Real Madrid)